



TOO MANY CHOICES!

If you are like many of our clients, you are sometimes frustrated or overwhelmed with too many choices when you visit us. You need to choose which vaccinations your pet will receive, what flea or heartworm preventatives you will use and what tests you want your pet to undergo, whether for wellness screening or because your pet is ill. Before surgery is performed you are asked whether you want a pre-anesthetic ECG, a nail trim, a microchip or laser surgery. As

medicine gets more complicated and more choices are available the discomfort about all these options is only going to get worse.

Twenty or even ten years ago we didn't have the knowledge, equipment or medications that we have now. If your Dachshund slipped a disc in his back, the only test available to diagnose which disc had slipped was a myelogram. Now you have to choose between myelogram, CT and MRI. We didn't have lasers or microchips so you didn't need to worry about whether you wanted them when you had your dog spayed. Bench top chemistry machines weren't available, so we did a lot less blood testing – now some of these units are so small that they don't need a bench, you can hold them in your hand.

As more technology became available, not only did we have more choices but the standard of care became increasingly more complicated. It is now standard for patients to be on IV fluids during surgery and for declaws in cats to be done with a laser. That means that if your pet dies under anesthesia or has complications after declaw surgery, and IV fluids or laser were not used, under a new Wisconsin law the veterinarian is liable in a malpractice suit if he or she did not offer them to you. Every year the bar gets a little higher and the world of veterinary medicine gets a bit more complex – and costly.

Last fall the state of Wisconsin passed an informed consent bill regarding veterinary care. Since November 1st 2008 statute **VE 7.06** has read: **Unprofessional conduct.** Unprofessional conduct by a veterinarian is prohibited. Unprofessional conduct includes:

(23) Failure to inform a client prior to treatment of the diagnostic and treatment options consistent with the veterinary profession's standard of care and the associated benefits and risks of those options.

VE 7.01 Definitions defines "standard of care" as "diagnostic procedures and modes of treatment considered by the veterinary profession to be within the scope of current, acceptable veterinary medical practice."

The intent of this legislation is to inform and protect you, as

the consumer of veterinary services. You have the legal right to understand all the options available to you and to know the benefits and drawbacks of each one. It has long been my philosophy that if your pet dies from a disease for which I had a preventative or a treatment that I never told you about, that pet's death becomes my fault. Now this has become the rule in my profession. If the pet might be better served by seeing a specialist and you aren't referred to one, that's no longer OK. If your dog or cat dies under anesthesia from an undiagnosed heart condition and I didn't offer you the pre-anesthetic ECG screen to look for evidence of heart disease, I am at fault.

Here at BFVC we have been giving you this information for years but even we are having to make a few adjustments to our consent forms and admission procedures to meet the new standards. Although the new rules protect you, they have their drawbacks for both you and us. Doing a surgery admission can be a bit of a hassle now, for example. We

used to allow 10 minutes for that appointment but it's now twenty or more. The veterinarian is now required to speak personally to the client about the risks and benefits of your options, so somewhere along the way, even though our technicians do our surgery admissions, a doctor has to give you your options.

This holds true no matter how many times you have consented to the same procedure. For example, if you have several pets, and each has undergone one or more dental cleanings in the past, a veterinarian still must explain to you each time you have dental work done on a pet exactly what the

procedure entails and what the risks and benefits are for each option you are offered.

The cost of all these options can become overwhelming, too. Most people cannot afford to do absolutely everything that might be of benefit to their pets. The emotions we see when all these options are presented range from anger and dismay to guilt or embarrassment over not wanting or not being able to afford everything available.

It is never our intent to pressure anyone into doing anything but it sure can make both us and you uncomfortable.

Negotiating over a beloved family pet in a tight economy is not at all the same as deciding whether you want fries with your Big Mac. It's stressful and often emotional, and has the added risk of you sometimes having to divulge personal financial information. I'm sure you often feel that we are judging you as pet parents based on the decisions you make, though this is never our intent. We have budgets and car repairs and kids needing braces, too. We don't expect every client to do every test or treatment and we know that we will usually have to help you pick and choose.

All this new information we are throwing at you means that your pets have the opportunity to lead longer, healthier lives than ever before.

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It can be a challenge for us when you ask which of several options is the most necessary. There is so much variation from pet to pet, breed to breed or in age or lifestyle. For example, if I am offering laser, microchipping and hip x-rays at a spay admission for a 6 month old golden retriever, I would probably advise choosing the hip x-rays if I had to pick just one

item. If we see signs of hip dysplasia and start the dog on a glucosamine supplement early in her life, we can probably buy her a year or two of comfort before her arthritis makes her sore years down the road.

If the dog is a boxer or Doberman, however, it's the ECG that's most important, because these breeds are very prone to heart problems. If the pet is a toy poodle or a Shetland sheep dog taking care of any misaligned teeth is the biggest priority, not the heart or the hips. It's the same with wellness testing – do we do the glaucoma testing, the dry eye testing or the urinalysis when the dog has breed risks that make all three tests advisable and the client only has \$40 to spend?

When it comes to making decisions, our clients fall into three groups. Some people want us to tell them exactly what they should do. Their question is usually "What would you do if it were your pet?" Others want us to give them information but they want to make the decisions.

(Unfortunately, some clients want to make the decisions without listening to the options. Legally, this isn't really possible any more because we are required to explain all the options, whether a client wants to hear them or not.) The third group of clients wants to collaborate – to discuss the options and decide together.

Having these discussions about options can be tricky. We don't always know what your preferred decision making style is, or a husband and wife may have completely different styles or needs. We may not know whether you are one of those people who wants to do absolutely everything for their pet or one who wants only the basic services. We may not have had enough interaction with a client to build trust and rapport, which may make a client more hesitant or less trusting when decisions need to be made. In an emergency a pet owner may be forced to make very difficult decisions very rapidly without even having met the veterinarian before.

A recent study showed that clients who felt they had good rapport with their veterinarian followed his or her recommendations 71% of the time, while clients who didn't feel that way only complied 49% of the time. I'm sure this is true in human medicine as well, with patients who are

unsure of their physician being less likely to follow recommendations and more likely to seek a second opinion.

In a practice like ours that has several doctors and technicians, it's a challenge to schedule appointments such that you can have enough interactions with the same doctor or technician to build that trust and rapport. Yet without doing so, it's much harder for you to make decisions regarding advice or recommendations we have given you.

To add to the mix, we also are now required to ask every client what members of the family are authorized to make decisions about a pet's care. You cannot have your 17 year old son or daughter drop your pet off for surgery because they cannot legally make decisions or sign the paperwork for a procedure. A boyfriend, parent or pet sitter can't ask us to perform a procedure on a pet if they have not been pre-authorized by you to do so. (We need a signed consent from you to authorize a pet sitter to sign for you.) If you bring a pet with you into a marriage does your new spouse have the right to bring the pet in and ask us to euthanize it? If you get divorced who then has the right to make the pet care decisions? We will now be asking you when you update your client information to designate who you want to authorize to make those decisions.

As the world becomes increasingly more complicated and confusing, it's useful to keep in mind that the choices we are making nowadays are about services and procedures that we didn't used to have available. Our typical patient lives twice as long as pets did in the 1960's because of advances in vaccines, medications, anesthesia, nutrition and parasite control. All this new information we are throwing at you means that your pets have the opportunity to lead longer, healthier lives than ever before. It's a wonderful world of possibility, a chance to learn more about your pets and to be able to provide them with care that was unavailable just a generation ago. For a household pet these days life is good!

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