



# The Real-Life Rewards of **Virtual Care**

How to Turn Your Hospital into a Digitally  
Connected Practice with Telehealth



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This booklet is a joint effort of the AVMA and AAHA, and much of the content draws from the AVMA's Telehealth Resource Center, which has been developed as a resource providing practical information for veterinarians and their teams. It can be found on the AVMA website at [avma.org/telehealth](http://avma.org/telehealth). You can visit the AVMA's Telehealth Resource Center for more in-depth information on any of the topics covered here. Meanwhile, this booklet is the perfect primer to get you started on the path to becoming a fully equipped, digitally connected, telehealth-ready veterinary practice.

# Welcome

## to the **real world** of virtual care.

Virtual care is one of the greatest opportunities—and challenges—facing medicine in this digital age. Using telemedicine in the delivery of veterinary medical services offers benefits for clients, patients, and the profession. However, those veterinary services must be provided with professionalism and adhere to a high standard of quality, whether delivered in person or through electronic means.

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) are committed to the adoption of virtual care in the veterinary profession and to ensuring access to the convenience and benefits afforded by telemedicine while promoting the responsible provision of high-quality veterinary medical care.

This booklet outlines the case for virtual care in the veterinary profession and answers your questions about how to turn your hospital into a digitally connected practice. It addresses questions such as these: What exactly *is* virtual care? How does it relate to telehealth? Where does telemedicine fit in, and what's the difference? Most important, what do you need to know to get started?

## Read on.

### This booklet will do the following:

- ◆ Help you navigate the vocabulary of virtual care and understand the differences among the sometimes confusing thicket of telehealth terms that all seem to start with *tele-*, as well as how they relate to each other and their place in the broader scheme of virtual care.
- ◆ Explain what is perhaps the single most important part of the virtual care equation—the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR)—and why it's the difference between practicing telehealth and practicing telemedicine.
- ◆ Describe various virtual care service models and give a few examples of telemedicine provider platforms that can enable your practice to become digitally connected easily, affordably, and profitably.
- ◆ Show you a case study of how one practice decided which service model was right for them, and how they successfully partnered with a telemedicine provider to become a digitally connected practice.
- ◆ Provide you with an easy-to-follow virtual care implementation guide outlining the steps your hospital can take to integrate virtual care seamlessly into your current veterinary practice.



Before we can talk about why and how you should incorporate virtual care in your veterinary practice, it's important to understand the vocabulary of virtual care.

One of the challenges of virtual care is trying to figure out exactly what virtual care *is* and how it relates to both telehealth and telemedicine. How these latter two terms are defined often depends on whom you ask—and some people use the terms interchangeably. And don't forget all those other *tele-* terms, like *teleconsulting*, *teleadvice*, *telemonitoring*, and *teletriage*.

If it sounds a little confusing, there's a reason: A 2007 study identified more than 100 different peer-reviewed definitions of *telemedicine*.

Today, things are simpler. We have settled on several definitions that are becoming widely accepted within the industry. As everyone gets on the same page, talking about virtual care becomes a lot easier. And telehealth becomes a lot easier to understand.

Check out the definitions on the next two pages and the accompanying graphic. Once you get acquainted with the vocabulary of virtual care, we'll talk about the *why* in the next section.



# Telehealth Terms

## Virtual Care

Virtual care is an extension of veterinary practice that includes any interaction among clients, patients, and their circle of care that occurs remotely, using any form of technology, with the goal of delivering quality and effective patient care. Think of it as an umbrella term that encompasses all the different terms that follow.

## Telehealth

*Telehealth* is the overarching term that encompasses all uses of technology to deliver health information, education, or care remotely. Telehealth can be divided into categories based on who is involved in the communication.

For communications between veterinarians and animal owners, there are two important categories that are distinguished by whether a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) has been established: Telemedicine, which is client facing, includes the delivery of information specific to a particular patient and is allowable only within the context of an established VCPR. Non-client-facing models involve the delivery of general advice, telemarketing, and advertising.

## Telemedicine

Telemedicine is a subcategory of telehealth that involves the use of a tool to exchange medical information electronically from one site to another to improve a patient's clinical health status. Examples include using Skype or a mobile app to communicate with a client and visually observe the patient for a postoperative follow-up examination and discussion. Telemedicine is a tool of practice, not a separate discipline within the profession. The appropriate application of telemedicine can enhance animal care by facilitating communication, diagnosis, treatment, client education, scheduling, and other tasks. Practitioners must comply with laws and regulations in the state in which they are licensed to practice veterinary medicine. Telemedicine may only be conducted within an existing VCPR, with the exception that advice may be given in an emergency care situation until a patient can be seen by or transported to a veterinarian.

(This is a critically important concept to the practice of telemedicine, and we'll talk about it more in a later section.)

## Teleconsulting

Teleconsulting is a subcategory of telehealth in which a general-practice veterinarian uses telehealth tools to communicate with a veterinary specialist to gain insights and advice on the care of a patient.

## Telemonitoring

Telemonitoring is the remote monitoring of patients who are not at the same location as the healthcare provider. This could range from the use of a portable glucose monitor to the employment of a wearable monitoring device that captures the patient's vital signs and other behaviors.

## Teletriage

Teletriage is the safe, appropriate, and timely assessment and management (immediate referral to a veterinarian or not) of animal patients via electronic consultation with their owners (or another responsible party). In assessing patient condition electronically, the assessor determines urgency and the need for immediate referral to a veterinarian, based on the owner's (or responsible party's) report of history and clinical signs, sometimes supplemented by visual (e.g., photographs, video) information. A diagnosis is not rendered. The essence of teletriage is to make good and safe decisions regarding a patient's disposition (referral to a veterinarian or not), under conditions of uncertainty and urgency.

## E-prescribing or Electronic Prescribing

E-prescribing, or electronic prescribing, is the digital-based electronic generation, transmission, and filling of a medical prescription, taking the place of paper and faxed prescriptions. Requirements for prescriptions can vary from state to state and also depend on whether they involve controlled substances. In general, veterinary prescriptions should be handled in the same way, whether on paper or in a digital format. Veterinarians interested in e-prescribing should check both state and federal requirements.

### mHealth or Mobile Health

mHealth, also called mobile health, is a subcategory of telehealth that employs mobile devices. Some mHealth applications and wearables are designed to augment animal healthcare within VCPRs, while others are designed for and marketed directly to consumers for their education and animal monitoring without clinical input (no VCPR).







It's clear that virtual care is emerging as an inevitable part of modern veterinary practice. With more and more people going online or consulting “Dr. Google,” the role of the veterinarian can seem in danger of being marginalized. So, how can offering virtual care through the practice of telemedicine within a digitally connected practice keep that from happening?

Because when your clients can reach you through an app on their smartphones and connect with your practice at the touch of a button, there's a good chance they'll call you instead of consulting the internet.

## Telehealth Is a Tool

Start by thinking of telehealth as a tool that helps you practice better medicine. Like any tool, it's not intended to replace your practice—it's intended to augment the care you deliver already.

And think of adopting the technology necessary to practice telehealth as if you were buying any other tool you'd need to practice better medicine, like a new ultrasound machine.

It's a tool that offers benefits for clients, patients, and your practice. The practice of telehealth, when done right, can enhance animal care by making communication, diagnosis, treatment, client education, scheduling, and other tasks within your practice easier.

One of the first questions you should ask yourself about telehealth is, “What do I plan to do with this new tool?” There are lots of ways to implement it, and we'll give you some examples in the Service Models and Platforms for the Practice of Telemedicine section.

## Virtual Care Is a Perk

Virtual care can be a great perk for employees. It offers veterinarians the opportunity to work remotely, whether it's from home or while out of town on a working vacation. That added flexibility can make it easier to attract talented associates, especially those looking for a less traditionally structured work environment and better work-life balance. Virtual care allows them to work outside traditional office hours and still generate income for the hospital while providing a valuable service to your clients.

That kind of flexibility improves personal and professional satisfaction for everyone in the practice—associates, practice managers, veterinary technicians, and, of course, practice owners.

But first, let's discuss some other excellent reasons you should consider practicing telemedicine.



## The Biggest Reason: Millennials

There are roughly 80 million millennials in the United States alone, and each year they spend approximately \$600 billion. Many have careers, are raising kids, and live in their own homes. And they're just getting started. By 2020 their projected spending in the United States will grow to \$1.4 trillion annually and represent 30% of total retail sales.

And millennials love their pets. Which means they'll have a major economic impact on veterinary care.

Two separate studies of millennials, one by the market research firm Wakefield Research and the second by the US Chamber of Commerce, compared their lifestyle choices, spending habits, and attitudes toward technology to those of baby boomers. Their findings have big implications for the veterinary profession:

- ◆ Millennials think of pet ownership as a lifestyle choice. They believe it improves their mental and physical health and their overall quality of life.
- ◆ They are putting off marriage and having children later than previous generations. Not only are they turning to pets to help them fill that void, 56% were single when they got their first pet.

## As Long as We're Talking Tech Savvy, Don't Forget Generation Z

Born 1995 or later, they make up 25.9% of the US population. By 2020 they'll make up a third and contribute \$44 billion to the American economy. They grew up with smartphones and the internet, and most don't know what life is like without them.

Virtual care will seem like a no-brainer to them.

- ◆ They view pet ownership as “practice” for starting their own family, and 82% agree that getting a pet is part of preparing to have a family.
- ◆ They are tech savvy. More than two-thirds of millennials say they would be likely to use technology to keep track of their pet. Think pet monitors, apps, and so forth.
- ◆ They are more likely than baby boomers to report that a telemedicine option is “extremely or very important.” In fact, 40% of millennials report that telemedicine is an “extremely or very important option.”
- ◆ Millennials who don't own pets are 39% more likely than baby boomers to own a dog or cat in the future, and they are 77% more likely than any other generation to get a dog or cat while unmarried and not a parent.
- ◆ They are five times more likely to adopt technology than any other age group, and 60% support the use of telehealth options.

In other words, millennials are becoming pet owners earlier in their adult lives while simultaneously putting off other, more traditional life changes. They have the disposable income to lavish care on those pets. And they're digitally connected.

That's a powerful combination—and an incredibly attractive potential client pool for veterinarians.

The best way to connect with those digitally connected potential clients is to go where they live: online.

And the best way to do that is through a digitally connected veterinary practice.



## Meeting the Consumer's Needs

In the end, the best client care is all about meeting the consumer's needs, and the needs of their pets, our patients. Incorporating telemedicine into your practice is about addressing the consumer's needs and our patients' needs. And make no mistake—the consumer is driving the shift to virtual care.

And it's not just millennials and Generation Z.

All age groups want affordable care, all consumers want convenience, and all pet owners want to be able to get in touch with their veterinarians whenever they need them.

Your clients, current and potential, are busier than ever with their hectic lives. They want convenience, and they're used to having everything at their fingertips via their smartphones. They'll find the convenience they're looking for through virtual care. And they'll build trust and loyalty through multiple virtual interactions.

If you have a digitally connected practice, they could be having those interactions with you.

## And the Best Reason to Practice Telemedicine: You're Already Doing It!

Surprised? Just consider these questions:

- ◆ Do you or your practice team have follow-up conversations by phone, text, or email to evaluate progress or check up on patients after you have seen them for an office visit or procedure?
- ◆ Do you ever speak to a client about a concern they're having and advise them on whether they should come in for an exam or seek emergency treatment?
- ◆ Have you ever had a client send you a photo of a post-op incision or a skin condition and then provided some direction to them?
- ◆ Has a client with whom you have a VCPR ever called or emailed and asked for your advice about their pet when they were on vacation?
- ◆ How about when *you* were on vacation?

Those are all examples of the practice of telemedicine, examples of times when you've had an established VCPR and provided virtual care to your clients and patients.

The fact that you're already doing it is the good news.

The bad news is, if you're not getting compensated, you're undervaluing your services—too many practitioners give the gift of free advice and free consultation to their clients over the phone as part of their regular service.

The great news is, by employing new telehealth tools, you can provide that same professional advice and timely consultation, whether by phone, text, or videoconference, and actually be compensated for your services. By thinking of the services you already provide via telephone and text as facets of telemedicine, you can reframe the way you practice medicine and keep up with the changing veterinary care landscape.

Plus, you'll get paid for it.

Imagine delivering excellent patient care, providing great customer service, and getting compensated for your professional services, all at the same time.

Those are the real-life rewards of virtual care. Later, we'll show you how easy it is to get digitally connected. But next, we need to talk about the VCPR.

Some veterinarians worry that telehealth is going to replace veterinary medicine as we know it. Some worry that the ease that communication technology offers might blur the lines of the VCPR by blurring the line between teleadvice and telemedicine.

That's not likely to happen anytime soon.

The VCPR requirement states that, as a licensed practitioner, you have to make sure that you have established VCPRs if you're going to engage in the art, science, and lawful practice of veterinary medicine, with the possible exception that advice may be given in an emergency until that patient can be seen by a veterinarian.

And that includes the practice of veterinary telemedicine.

We can't stress this enough: A VCPR is critical to ensure you are practicing telemedicine appropriately.

Most states and the Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) require a VCPR for a veterinarian to diagnose, prescribe medication for, or otherwise treat an animal. Federal law also requires a VCPR for prescribing drugs extralabel for animals and issuing Veterinary Feed Directives.

Without a VCPR, the most you can do via electronic communication is give advice or triage. And that would be either teleadvice or teletriage, respectively.

**That's a critical distinction, because having that VCPR is typically the difference between practicing telehealth and practicing telemedicine.**

And, equally important, you can't establish a VCPR via technological means—not by telephone, text, Skype, or any other electronic means. State veterinary laws generally prohibit it. To establish a VCPR for a small animal, you must see the patient in person.

The AVMA and AAHA are committed to making sure that veterinarians who practice telemedicine understand how vitally important it is that they practice it in an appropriate legal environment.

We recognize that future legal and regulatory policy can change as we learn more about the impact of telemedicine on access to care and patient safety. But in today's environment, the importance of having an established VCPR in place whenever practicing veterinary medicine, whether in person or remotely through telemedicine, cannot be overstated.



## A VCPR Is Present When All of the Following Requirements Are Met:\*

- ◆ The veterinarian has assumed the responsibility for making clinical judgments regarding the health of the patient, and the client has agreed to follow the veterinarian's instructions.
- ◆ The veterinarian has sufficient knowledge of the patient to initiate at least a general or preliminary diagnosis of the patient's medical condition. This means the veterinarian is personally acquainted with the keeping and care of the patient by virtue of a timely examination of the patient by the veterinarian or medically appropriate and timely visits by the veterinarian to the operation where the patient is managed.
- ◆ The veterinarian is readily available for follow-up evaluation or has arranged for the following: veterinary emergency coverage and continuing care and treatment.
- ◆ The veterinarian provides oversight of treatment, compliance, and outcome.
- ◆ Patient records are maintained.

\* Required components vary by state.

Many states have adopted this definition of the VCPR, or a very similar one, as a component of their state veterinary practice act. In addition, federal law requires a VCPR for extra-label drug use in animals and for issuing a Veterinary Feed Directive. How a state defines the VCPR, the congruence of that state VCPR with the federal VCPR, and whether a VCPR exists in a given situation based on those definitions must be guiding principles in deciding what services can be offered.

**With an established VCPR:** A variety of telehealth and telemedicine service models are available to veterinarians and veterinary hospitals. Client-facing telemedicine services may include the use of tools that allow the veterinarian to gather essential veterinary medical information from the animal owner or other caretaker remotely, access the patient's medical records, and conduct a virtual evaluation of the patient through real-time video or by attached pictures.

**Without an established VCPR:** The veterinarian may provide general advice and triage but must stay clear of diagnosing, providing prognoses for, or treating patients. Any advice given should remain in general terms and not be specific to an individual unless provided in the context of triage. Nonclient electronic communications should be in the nonclinical realms of general advice, mHealth, web content, and other generalized messaging.

You'll find examples of both in the next section on telehealth service models.





# Service Models and Platforms for the Practice of Telemedicine

Telemedicine is not a one-size-fits-all proposition. Veterinarians interested in offering telemedicine services can customize a program that fits the unique needs of their individual practice and clients. A variety of service models already exist to make this easier.

Virtual care that connects veterinarians with animal owners can be divided into two categories, based on whether there is a VCPR already in place.

**Without a VCPR,** telemedicine should not be practiced outside of emergencies. Any advice given to an animal owner should be general, not specific to an individual animal, diagnosis, treatment, etc. Such teleadvice communication should be in the nonclinical realms of mHealth, web content, and other generalized messaging.

**Once the VCPR is established,** veterinarians can look to a range of established and emerging technologies to augment service offerings, improve client communication and patient care, and better serve patients and communities.



# Clinical Scenarios for Applying Telemedicine

What might telemedicine services look like for your clinic? They could take many forms, depending on the needs of your current and potential clients, and their level of interest and comfort with remote communication. Here are some possible scenarios to consider as you decide how telemedicine might fit into your practice.



### Postsurgical Care

Good postsurgical care is critical for successful outcomes, and telemedicine services can enhance continuity of care for postsurgical patients. Just a few examples include visually monitoring an incision site to evaluate healing, monitoring the patient's gait and overall mobility, and seeing the patient's general demeanor and return to normalcy after surgery. All of these can be accomplished via texted photographs, recorded videos, or live video calls.



### General Wellness Advice

Veterinarians already offer advice to established clients over the phone and via text and email. Often, this advice is provided free of charge. Telemedicine services provide an opportunity for veterinarians to be compensated properly for their expert advice and can also provide unique opportunities to attract new clients looking for the added convenience and ease of access that telemedicine services can provide (once you've established a VCPR with those new clients).



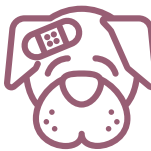
### Hospice Care

When the stress of a trip to the hospital might exacerbate a pet's already-deteriorating health, telemedicine provides a convenient way to check in on senior patients or other patients under hospice care. This is especially helpful for feline patients or patients with impaired mobility when clients might otherwise forego a veterinary hospital visit. A telemedicine evaluation allows you to get a general sense of the pet's overall wellbeing and determine whether treatment plans should be adjusted or an in-person exam is needed.



### Expanding Access to Veterinary Care

Despite all the advances in veterinary medicine, there are still clients who struggle to access routine veterinary care for their pets. Today's high-quality telecommunication tools and software applications can provide almost seamless remote communication between clients and veterinary healthcare teams, making it easier for clients to access your veterinary expertise. If you have clients—or potential clients—for whom a trip to the veterinary hospital serves as a deterrent to accessing veterinary care, consider customizing a telemedicine offering that makes your services more convenient for them to use. Again, in the case of potential clients, you would have to establish a VCPR before you could offer them those services.



### After-Hours Care

Clients want and expect 24/7 services, including veterinary care. In some cases, access to after-hours care means leaving a message with an answering service and waiting for the veterinarian to call you back. Clients often want more. Telehealth services can help meet client expectations and patient needs while also allowing veterinarians to manage their work-life balance.

## Technology Options

Client-facing telemedicine models exist that allow the veterinarian to gather all essential veterinary medical information from the animal owner (or other caretaker), access the patient's medical records, and conduct a virtual exam of the patient through real-time video or by attached pictures. How extensively you want to incorporate these technologies into your practice is up to you, as long as there is a VCPR in place. Depending on your unique situation (including confidentiality requirements on the exchange of information, the expectations and needs of your clients, and the needs of your patients), telemedicine services offered to clients could include the following:

- ◆ Telephone or video (e.g., Skype) consultations
- ◆ Standalone or app-based texting
- ◆ Email consultations
- ◆ Web-based chat consultations
- ◆ Smartphone app storage and sharing of medical records

A growing variety of vendors offer services to help veterinarians implement and extend telemedicine offerings. But choosing among the providers can be daunting. A helpful checklist for practitioners to assess telemedicine service providers can be found on the AVMA website.

## The Structure of “Advice”

While neither the AVMA nor AAHA currently endorses any particular online telehealth services, we do want to help you understand how they work.

In the current telehealth space, there are non-VCPR companies such as Whiskerdocs<sup>®</sup>, ask.vet<sup>™</sup>, and PetCoach (which is owned by Petco<sup>®</sup>) that basically answer pet owners' questions.

And in this day and age, what do we all do when we have questions about things? We search online. That's essentially what non-VCPR telehealth services are doing, too. When a pet owner contacts them with a question, the service searches databases for information related to that question, then relays that information to the pet owner. That's teleadvice. What they're doing is providing the caller with some information to help them figure out what they should do next.

It's not diagnosis, prognosis, treatment, or prescribing. It's advice.

A lot of those companies are intercepting a pet owner who's asking questions, usually online somewhere, via either a web app or a phone app. They're answering questions for pet owners seeking information about their pet's care, and through that consultation, and depending on the advice, the pet owner may or may not end up going into a veterinary practice.

Essentially, a pet owner is saying, “I have a question about my pet's health. Should I go to an actual veterinarian and seek advice about this?” And the reality is a lot of those questions can be answered by general advice. But as soon as it crosses the line and becomes a situation in which the service goes from answering a question to something that looks like making a diagnosis, that conversation needs to end, and the question needs to be turned over to the veterinarian who has—or can establish—a VCPR so they can manage that conversation going forward.

Even if the telehealth service has licensed veterinarians on staff to answer pet owners' questions, those veterinarians can only dispense information and general advice. They cannot diagnose or suggest treatment, unless in an emergency situation.

**Remember, having a VCPR is the difference between practicing telehealth and practicing telemedicine.**

It's a pretty clear distinction.



## Companies That Help You Practice Telemedicine

Some companies give pet owners access to a video consultation with their veterinarian. The key words being “their veterinarian.” In this case, that would be you: the veterinarian with the VCPR.

Examples of companies that work on behalf of veterinary practices to help them provide healthcare services for which they can be compensated include Petzam and TeleVet. They provide a VCPR-compliant, internet-based service that allows you to have a consultation with your client about your patient via a website portal or mobile phone app.

Practitioners can direct their clients to download the mobile app, which is often customizable to the individual hospital, and when the client needs a consult, they simply type in their information and see whether their doctor is on call and available to do a video consult. Say you're in your office between appointments or doing paperwork. You can go online, pull up the telemedicine platform, and click a button to indicate that you're available for a consult. Now any client looking to talk to a veterinarian can open the app, see you're available, and immediately request a video consultation.

You click yes, and within minutes you'll be using telemedicine to deliver quality care on demand.

That makes for great continuity of care for pet owners.

Equally important, you're now being compensated for your services.

See the case study later in this booklet for an example of how one forward-thinking hospital successfully transformed itself into a digitally connected practice.

## The Teleconsultation Model

Some virtual care companies never communicate with the client at all. They only communicate with you. That's teleconsultation. Vetnow™ is an example of a company providing teleconsultation in the specialty space. You can do a video consultation with a specialist when you've got the patient in your exam room.

## Beyond the Hospital Walls

In short, when a hospital uses a telemedicine service, it allows the hospital to extend its own services beyond the walls of the practice and use technology such as video consultation, telephone, or texts. Texting is especially popular. Millennial pet owners in particular like to text information back and forth to their doctors.

And here's a key to the successful practice of telemedicine: When you're looking into possible telemedicine providers, look for one that allows the information gathered by the use of their apps and services to be recorded and tracked in your practice management software. Some of them do, but not all.

That way, virtual care automatically becomes part of the permanent record.

## If You're a Practitioner, You're Probably Thinking, That's All Great, but How Do I Get Paid?

Models of compensation vary. For example, some virtual care companies offer backend technology services for a flat monthly fee. Others provide compensation based on actual services provided.

Irrespective of model, telemedicine solutions provide a means for the veterinarian to decide what their prices should be. You normally charge a certain amount for a physical exam in the hospital that takes 20 minutes. Should that be the same as the video consultation fee? Just as you adjust your office calls based on the complexity of the visit, you can adjust fees for video consults that reflect the nature and length of the consultation. The bottom line is: you decide.



Telemedicine can improve patient triage and clinical outcomes, and benefit patients, animal owners, and the veterinary practice—when implemented properly.

Follow these steps to implement telehealth successfully in your practice.

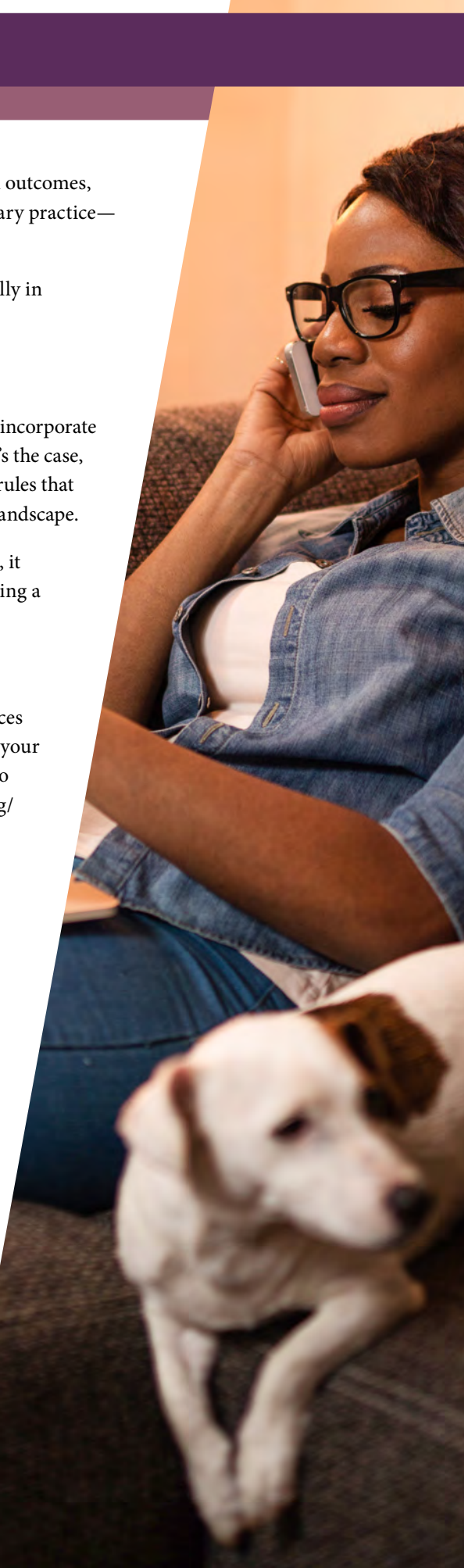
## Know the Rules

You might already have ideas about how you'd like to incorporate virtual care into your veterinary practice. Even if that's the case, it's critical that you first familiarize yourself with the rules that govern telehealth, including the legal and regulatory landscape.

Not only will this help protect you and your patients, it also will ensure you don't spend valuable time pursuing a program that will not be legal in your locality.

### Start here:

1. Review your state, territory, and federal resources to learn the rules and regulations that apply in your area, especially related to the following (links to the first four of which can be found at [avma.org/telehealth](https://avma.org/telehealth)):
  - ◆ Veterinary Practice Act
  - ◆ Pharmacy Act
  - ◆ Licensure
  - ◆ Record retention
  - ◆ Patient confidentiality
2. Familiarize yourself with the AVMA Policy on Telemedicine. You'll find it on the AVMA website ([avma.org/telehealth](https://avma.org/telehealth)).
3. Understand basic definitions and get answers to common questions. For the basic definitions, reread the section on the vocabulary of virtual care at the beginning of this booklet. For the answers to common questions, check out the Frequently Asked Questions section at [avma.org/telehealth](https://avma.org/telehealth).







“You have to create that bond with the client where they understand what you see, what you’re going to prescribe, where we’re going with the treatment plan, you want to have some connection with all of that.”

—George Robinson,  
DVM, MSPH,  
CEO of Heartland  
Veterinary Partners

## Define Your Service Offering

Once you understand the rules and regulations that apply to telemedicine, you’re ready to decide on the types of service you want to implement. You might consider ways to improve your clients’ experience for after-hours care, improve follow-up care for postsurgical rechecks, or make it easier to check in on patients receiving hospice care.

## Check Your Liability

In most instances there are no additional liability coverage requirements for veterinary practices that offer telehealth or telemedicine services. But it’s wise to check with your professional liability carrier for any additional recommendations pertaining to telehealth services.

## Evaluate Technology and Service Providers

Different telemedicine services require different levels of technology and back-office support. You might be comfortable adding some services on your own and tracking and billing them manually. Or you might want to use a third-party partner to simplify and expedite the process. When evaluating service providers, it is important to understand their capabilities and limitations. The AVMA developed a practical Service Provider Evaluation Checklist to help you with this assessment. You’ll find it at [avma.org/telehealth](https://avma.org/telehealth).



## **Train Staff, Market Your New Services, and Engage Clients**

As with any new product or service, you need to let both existing and potential new clients know about the new telehealth services you are offering. Put together a communication plan to get the word out and create excitement!

This will include both marketing externally and training your hospital staff so that every one of your team members understands why and how you are offering these services for your clients and patients, as well as what specific services you are offering.

- ◆ Consider developing a script for your healthcare team to use when communicating with clients. For example, “Our doctors are now available whenever you need them, no matter the time of day. Our telehealth services include . . .”
- ◆ Create marketing materials to advertise and promote your new services, both to existing clients and to others in your community. These can include in-hospital displays, an email to all existing clients, digital displays for your practice website, and promotion via your social media channels. Even in-person conversations with friends and colleagues can help you spread the word.
- ◆ If clients ask (or if you feel awkward) about why you’re suddenly charging for services you used to give them for free, like phone consults or after-hours phone calls, tell them that by getting compensated for those services, you’ll be available to provide an even wider window of availability to them and their pets, which means better access to care and greater convenience for them.

It’s easier than you think; remember, you’re already practicing telemedicine. It’s just a matter of building on what you’re already doing!

Up next, you’ll find a case study of how one veterinary practice successfully incorporated virtual care into its practice.

Busy schedules can make it difficult for clients to comply with requirements for follow-up exams, and clients with elderly or terminally ill pets sometimes hesitate to transport their animals to the hospital for hospice checks. The veterinary team at Coastal Animal Hospital in Encinitas, California, has expanded access to care by offering telemedicine services for these types of consults.

Brian Evans, DVM, founder of Coastal Animal Hospital, explains why and how his team incorporated telemedicine services into their practice's service offerings in the following case study. (This and other case studies can be found at [avma.org/telehealth](http://avma.org/telehealth).)

## Coastal Animal Hospital Uses Telemedicine to Expand Access to Care

### *Business Challenge*

Low compliance with follow-up exams. Busy schedules hindered clients' ability to comply with quick but necessary recheck appointments.

### *Solution*

Coastal Animal Hospital utilized a third-party service that conducts streaming video consultations to assist with postsurgical rechecks and hospice care.

### *Results*

Increased adherence and satisfied clients. Coastal Animal Hospital's use of telemedicine allows the staff to elevate the quality of care while at the same time reinforcing their commitment to deliver a great client experience.

**“Telemedicine is a pathway to make it easier for clients to adhere to their medical care instructions while allowing the clients to better manage their time. Our use of telemedicine allows us to meet high consumer expectations while enabling the healthcare team to provide patients and clients the highest level of care.”**

**—Brian Evans, DVM, founder of Coastal Animal Hospital**



## *Background*

The healthcare team at Coastal Animal Hospital, led by Evans, recognized their clients' desire to do what is best for their pets but also heard concerns that busy schedules made it difficult to attend the follow-up exam after a spay or that clients had difficulty bringing in elderly or terminally ill pets for a recheck appointment. The hospital wanted to expand patient care and make it easier for clients to access care for their pets.

## *Implementation*

Coastal Animal Hospital chose two specific areas in which to offer telemedicine services: postsurgical rechecks and hospice care. The hospital team looked to third-party telemedicine vendors and selected Petzam to help them connect to clients through a streaming video consult. On surgery day, the healthcare team explains the necessary follow-up care to the client and lets the client know that they can utilize a complementary telemedicine consult for their postsurgical recheck. Evans and the team emphasize that this service to clients is an extension of, not a replacement for, the services they provide at the hospital. Hospice care is one of the specific service areas where Evans was able to apply telemedicine consultations immediately. Clients who are concerned or anxious about their aging and ailing pet often find it difficult to get the pet in their vehicle for transport to the hospital. In addition to providing house calls, Evans uses telemedicine to conduct remote consults. In both cases, Evans establishes a baseline assessment of the patient during an in-person examination. From that point forward, he can assess the pet's general condition by using a video consult and, through expanded dialogue with the client, determine any necessary adjustments to their at-home care or, if needed, recommend a hospital visit so that he can further evaluate the patient.

## *The Impact*

The team at Coastal Animal Hospital determined that offering these telemedicine consults enabled them to gather client input on a more frequent basis and get a more accurate read of how patients are doing in their home environment, elevating quality of care while reinforcing their commitment to deliver a great client experience. Clients appreciate the flexibility of a telemedicine consultation that provides them peace of mind that their pets are getting the care they need when they need it. Clients are more responsive to the telemedicine consult because they don't have to take time off work or arrange for childcare to make the in-person visit to the hospital. Evans emphasizes that telemedicine isn't about replacing visits to the hospital. It's about complementing those services and establishing a means to monitor patients and communicate with clients using modern telecommunication tools. Evans takes the time to reinforce to clients that they are always welcome to visit the hospital at any time and finds that his clients appreciate the flexibility of a telemedicine consultation when appropriate.

## *Results*

Increased adherence and satisfied clients. Coastal Animal Hospital's use of telemedicine allows the staff to elevate the quality of care while at the same time reinforcing their commitment to deliver a great client experience.

Many veterinarians ask, What are the real benefits of using telemedicine services?

The fact that the pet population is the highest it's ever been, while the number of hospital visits is flat or even falling, is cause for concern in the industry. That could indicate an issue with access to care.

If it is such an issue, telemedicine services can help the profession address that.

Whether it's one technology or another, one platform or another, in the end, virtual care is about three things: It's about access to care. It's about continuity of care. And it's about an excellent experience for both client and patient.

## Can virtual care help your practice deliver all that? Absolutely.

### Telemedicine A Right Way and a Wrong Way

Lori Teller, DVM, DABVP (canine/feline), CV, has seen firsthand what telemedicine can do to improve a hospital's bottom line.

Teller is on staff at the Meyerland Animal Clinic in Houston. She and her clinic were early—and enthusiastic—adopters of telemedicine. She said it was easy: "We started with lots of email and texting."

Teller said that telemedicine can be used well, and it can be used badly.

She used an orthopedics case involving a dog with intermittent lameness as an example of good usage: "The dog comes in [for an exam] and acts perfectly normal here," Teller said. "There's no trace of a limp. "But the client says, 'She was doing it at home.'"

The client's frustration is apparent; it's as if she's afraid the veterinarian might not believe her.

But once the dog is back home in a more natural environment, Teller said, she might relax enough to reveal the limp. Now the client can take a cellphone video that shows the dog limping and send it to Teller. And now Teller has two sources of information: her earlier,

hands-on examination and the client's video. Using both, Teller said, "I can make my diagnosis."

And there are instances when telemedicine would not be a good choice.

Imagine a case in which a dog is brought in exhibiting severe abdominal pain, Teller said, "a case where it can go south quickly if not done right." The dog's belly is tender to the owner's touch, the dog won't eat, and the owner's likely thinking, not surprisingly, that the dog is in severe gastrointestinal pain.

But it turns out the problem isn't related to the abdomen.

"The dog has a blown disc in his back," Teller said. So he's experiencing referred pain in his abdomen every time the owner picks him up. If the owner texts the veterinarian instead of bringing the dog into the hospital, "it's very easy to miss the diagnosis of intervertebral disk disease, and potentially confuse it with pancreatitis.

"That would be a case where telemedicine is inappropriate," Teller said.

And this is of particular importance to the veterinary profession.

It used to be that when it came to companion animal care, the veterinary professional was *the* reference source. Today, in many cases, we are *a* reference source. This is because, in the digital age, pet owners look for information in all sorts of places. They check their social media feeds, they talk to friends and family, they talk to their cousin who works in a veterinary practice, and, of course, they go online, where the answer to seemingly every question is at their fingertips.

It may not be the right answer, but it's an answer.

As veterinarians, we want that consumer to find the *right* answer, which means we need to make the veterinarian an integral part of that digital scenario.

Many clients are reluctant to return to a hospital for rechecks if they think their pet is doing OK. Virtual care will greatly improve your ability to get that recheck. You might catch something on a quick Skype consult that the client—and their quick internet search—missed. That improves patient outcomes, which in turn improves client satisfaction.

A digitally connected veterinary practice is part of the answer. When a client's pet suddenly falls ill and the client can contact their veterinarian as easily as, or easier than, they can Google PetMD, just by firing off a text or accessing a phone app, whom do you think they'll reach out to? They'll reach out to the trusted pet care professional they have a personal relationship with.

**They'll reach out to you.  
Because they can.**

## **Virtual Care = Access to Care**

We believe that a primary challenge in our industry is this: How do we continue to make the veterinarian relevant in the digital age?

People will continue to use more and more technology to make their lives easier, and they won't wait for veterinary medicine to catch up. There are plenty of companies out there offering all kinds of virtual care options, so it's imperative that veterinarians stay central to that process.

When you have a consumer who's sitting at home with three or four screens in front of them—between the TV and the laptop and the iPad and the iPhone—what's going to keep the veterinarian relevant in that scenario?



**The answer is the digitally connected practice.**





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