

CALL BACKS

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Callbacks are one of the most important tools we have for communicating a caring message to clients. They are also a great teaching and learning tool, and making these calls will help you to become more polished and professional-sounding. Callbacks also help you to develop your medical skills because you learn a lot about what can go wrong, such as whether you should have sent home more pain medication, or given more explicit directions or more reasons why or why not to do something for the pet. It's amazing how many times you think you've communicated clearly to the client – but you didn't because they aren't doing what you recommended.

Talking to the clients also can reveal what the client's perception is of how the pet is doing, and that may be very different from your own. You may think the obese cat did fine for his dental cleaning but he may have soaked up so much anesthetic that he goes home and sleeps for three days. The client's perception will be that he did horribly afterwards. Sometimes you can never convince them to repeat something they thought was unpleasant for the pet, no matter how important it is to the pet's health. The better job you do at explaining what the pet is going to look and feel like when it goes home the less likely you are to get a surprise when you call them back.

There are other calls students can make as well, including updating the pet owner while the patient is still in the hospital or the patient's regular veterinarian. Referring doctors often feel frustrated with the lack of communication between the VMTH and them. They also would feel that they were getting better customer service if they were contacted more frequently. In private practice, we often call clients or send e-mails to remind them to do things such as give the next dose of dewormer or bring in a urine sample for recheck.

The usual time frame for calling clients is 1-2 days after the pet has returned home. Sometimes you will need to make daily contacts for a few days in a row to monitor a patient's recovery from a serious illness (i.e. recovering blocked cats, vomiting patients etc.). The sicker the pet, the more frequently the owner should be contacted.

It may be necessary to leave a message on an answering machine or voice mail if the owner is not home. You may not want to leave a message right away on a really early attempt, but instead try again later, to increase our odds of talking directly to the owner. Some clients are really good about calling us back with updates, but most are really terrible about it! In other words, when we leave a message, chances are we won't find out how our patient is doing, which is not a good thing. So if you want to leave a message when you call really early during the day, you can. Just phrase your message like this. "Hi, this is Debbie from the VMTH, just checking up on Sophie today to see how she's doing. If you get this message, we would really appreciate you giving us a call to update us on how she's doing today. Otherwise we'll try calling again a little later today to see if we can reach you. Our number is 375-3629. Thank you."

This way, we make a contact and if the owner gets the message they may call us. If they don't, we can try again later that evening. If the second attempt to reach the owner fails again that day, you or the closing person can leave another message that says something like this: "Hi this is Mike from VMTH, I was just calling to check up on Sophie again to see if she's any better. When you get this message, we would greatly appreciate an update call as soon as you get a

chance. Please try to call us tomorrow if you're not able to reach us tonight. We open at 7:30AM and close at 6:00PM. Our number is 375-3629. Thank you." This technique really demonstrates our concern for their pet and hopefully will urge them to call us.

Not every callback needs to be handled like this. Use this especially for a very ill patient that is vomiting or off feed, and that may need blood tests or hospitalization. For calls to check more minor problems such as ear infections, call once that day, preferably after 4 o'clock or at the time the client's contact information indicates they are most reachable, to increase our odds of talking to the owner. If we're going to call them and its only 3:30 and their info sheet indicates they'll only be home after 5:00, we are wasting our time. Call when the chances of talking directly to the owner are the greatest. If we have to leave a message at that time then, so be it. Generally, the hours between 4 o'clock and 7 o'clock are the most successful times to speak to clients.

Leaving a message to check on routine elective surgeries on the first attempt is acceptable. For all other callbacks, every attempt should be made to talk to the owner. Leave a message on the owner's answering machine or voice mail concerning a sick patient but try again later if you can. Some clients are easier to contact via e-mail or text message, which is fine, too.

Callbacks are most successful when contact is actually made with the owner, so that any problems or medication reactions can be dealt with immediately. Whenever you call a client, give your name first so they know right away you are not a solicitor! "Hi, this is Julie, the student in charge of Fluffy at the VMTH. Is this Mrs. Jones?" Not "Is this Mrs. Jones?"

First, ask how the pet is feeling, or how it is doing in general. Then you can ask specific, targeted questions, such as "Is he leaving the sutures alone?" for a urinary tract problem you would be asking about urinary symptoms, for a GI problem about vomiting or diarrhea, etc. Then you might want to ask compliance questions, e.g. make sure the client is able to give medications or apply the ear ointment or whatever they are supposed to be doing at home. Make sure they are giving pain meds even if they think the pet "doesn't seem painful." Failure to give pain medication, either because the client fears the drug may cause side effects or because they don't perceive the pet is painful, is very common. The whole point is for the pet to not act painful but clients often don't seem to grasp this and they certainly don't understand the concept of preemptive pain medication or multimodal therapy, unless you are careful to explain those concepts. A handout on signs of pain is a great tool to send home with the client, or even teach them to pain score.

Next, make sure the pet is eating the right food in sufficient quantity. This is especially important for cats, pocket pets, rabbits and very young patients. Pets don't get better without adequate nourishment.

Lastly, ask if the client has any questions or concerns. If they want to know something you can't answer you must get the information they need and get back to them. Nothing blows a caring image faster than leaving someone hanging. Thank the client before hanging up.

All notations in the medical record about callbacks should be brief, but complete.