

Striving for “Lexus” Dental Care

Today’s Scrimping Can Increase Long-Term Costs

by Carolyn C. Shadle, PhD, and John L. Meyer, PhD

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A LEXUS and a Kia? With Lexus, like with any high-end product, there’s a degree of implied good quality. But beware, imitators are never far away—such as South Korea’s Kia vehicles, meant to compete with Lexus products but at much cheaper prices.

When it comes to their pets, owners want to know where to find good quality care. With pet care considerations, it is not a matter of luxury versus cost savings—it’s about prevention of health problems and service that is competent and thorough. An imitation carries risks.

Given the increasing costs of quality veterinary care, clients are always looking for ways to save. This is particularly true in the area of dental services, which can be both expensive and hard to understand, yet this is not a place to scrimp and save. Besides being painful, diseases of the oral cavity can contribute to local and systemic diseases. This is the time to look for Lexus-style service.

Dental Services Are Relatively New

Understanding the importance of veterinary dental care can be difficult, perhaps because pet owners’ childhood pets may not have ever encountered such care. Dental services for pets only came onto the scene in



the 1980s, but they now encompass the art and science of prevention, diagnosis, and treatment of conditions, diseases, and disorders of the oral cavity, the maxillofacial region, and its associated structures.

Dental services has become one of 20 veterinary specialties recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association, with the American Veterinary Dental College being the specialist organization.

Even in human dentistry, it has only been in the last 30–40 years that dentistry has been tied to overall health. Today, both human dentists and competent veterinarians acquaint their clients with the importance of dental care and its relationship to heart, kidney, and liver health.

Search for Quality Dental Care

It is understood that most clients don't want a dog with halitosis slobbering all over them and their guests. But now, the word has gotten around that bad breath on the part of pets may suggest a larger problem. With that understanding, pet owners begin to look around for dental services, trying to understand what is entailed and the costs. They talk to their friends, search on sites like Yelp, hopefully talk to their veterinarians, and probably read about the services on the web.

It can all be quite confusing when they learn that they have some choices. As with shopping for a car, clients want to compare the Lexus style with that of the Kia. In reality, however, dental services represent a wide continuum of services depending, at least, on the age, size, and breed of the pet. To the client, however, it often comes down to three types of service:

- anesthesia-free dentistry
- a basic dental service using anesthesia, which might be called the Kia level of service
- a higher-quality service, which might be called the Lexus level of service

Anesthesia-Free Dentistry

Some clients are drawn to anesthesia-free dental cleaning because they believe it will be cheaper for them and safer for their pet.

Some providers suggest that this service is recommended for geriatric animals or pets that have a chronic disease or condition, when dental services under general anesthesia could possibly result in the death of the patient.

Clients must understand, however, that without anesthesia, the pet must be physically restrained, some at higher levels than others, in order for the provider to access the animal's teeth. Unlike with human dentistry, the pet is being restrained for a lengthy period of time, with no ability to understand why or what is happening to them.

Clients must also understand that in order to clean the teeth, the veterinary dentist will be using a sharp instrument to remove plaque from the visible part of the tooth or scaling the crown of the tooth. Just as with humans, this process may cause discomfort or pain to the pet.

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Anesthesia-free dentistry is in direct opposition to the positions of both AAHA and the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC). AAHA made anesthesia and intubation for dental procedures a mandatory standard several years ago. The AVDC says that at the end of the anesthesia-free dental procedure, the outside surfaces of the pet's teeth may appear whiter, but there is more to it than meets the eye. With no anesthesia, there

is no ability to clean beneath the gum line, where the bacteria that causes periodontal disease occurs and causes extensive damage to tooth roots and supporting bone structure. White teeth do not mean a clean and healthy mouth.

As for the geriatric patient, Tony Woodward, CVM, AVDC, owner of Animal Dental Care in Colorado Springs, Colorado, says, "Age is not a disease." Age should not be the deciding factor in determining the safety of general anesthesia for any patient, Woodward says.

Pre-anesthesia testing can help determine the risk associated with general anesthesia and aid in the decision of whether or not to perform a dental procedure.



Competent veterinarians acquaint their clients with the importance of dental care and its relationship to heart, kidney, and liver health.

Kia Level of Dentistry Service

Basic, or so-called Kia, dental care is a service provided by many veterinarians who inspect the mouth of the animal under anesthesia. However, compared to the Lexus level of service, the inspection is quite cursory.

Debbie Boone, BS, CCS, CVPM, of 2 Manage Vets Consulting, says that her definition of a Kia service would be one in which there is little or no probing, no dental radiography, and the only charting done is noting loose or damaged teeth in the patient history.

Her view is that periodontal disease is not found without probing, and issues like cysts and tooth resorption are not discovered, because they are only visible on radiographs. The pet gets a band-aid—his teeth look better and perhaps his breath improves—but there is no treatment for periodontal disease or underlying issues.

In her visits to various practices, Boone said that she found that untrained assistants are performing some of the cleanings. She said, “Just last week I learned that instead of using the correct hand piece to clear tartar,

one of the assistants was using the drill. This was literally eating the enamel off the tooth.”

Lexus Level of Dentistry Service

To provide top-quality dental care, general practices have several sources to guide them. But because of advances in understanding, the guidelines and standards represent a moving target—they are much different today than they were 20 years ago.

Being aware of legal issues is important. Bonnie Lutz, an attorney with Klinedinst in Santa Ana, California, with extensive knowledge of the California Veterinary Practice Act, points out that regulations must be observed in order to not be accused of offering care that is below the standard of care.

Even then, it's not always clear. From a legal standpoint, Fraser Hale, DVM, FAVC, DAVDC, of Hale Veterinary Clinic in Guelph, Ontario, says that “the yardstick may be the way peers would act.”

Beyond regulations, practices striving to offer quality dental care will benefit from the *2013 AAHA Dental*

Care Guidelines for Dogs and Cats, which were generated by board-certified dentists who, by and large, agree on good standards.

In addition, there are position statements presented by the American Veterinary Dental College. They are not as encompassing as the AAHA guidelines, but they offer excellent advice.

Taken together, these regulations, guidelines, and statements can lead the general practice to embrace a Lexus level of service, which is generally seen as that in which the animal is put under anesthesia and a thorough charting and probing of the mouth is done. This involves taking measurements on each tooth for gum disease and, usually, full-mouth radiographs—important since 70% of all dental pathology is found below the gumline. While some serious general practices propose doing less than full-mouth radiographs—probably to cut costs—others will caution against missing something without them. Hale recommends full-mouth radiographs, at least as a “baseline.”

The AAHA guidelines advise that, before any procedure takes place, the practitioner perform a physical examination based on the species, age, health status, and temperament of the animal. Furthermore, anesthesia is required, monitoring equipment must be available, and trained staff must be present to monitor the pet while under anesthesia.

AAHA also outlines the facility and equipment requirements: appropriate ventilation and anesthetic scavenging systems, plus an operating table that allows for drainage and is constructed of impervious, cleanable material. It’s pretty clear that the Lexus practice has up-to-date, sharp, and properly stored cleaning and radiography equipment.

In addition to quality service for the animal, the Lexus practice is concerned for the safety of its staff. The AAHA guidelines note that pathogens and debris,

such as calculus, tooth fragments, and prophy paste, are aerosolized during dental procedures. Using radiographic, oral, respiratory, skin, eye, and ear protective devices should ensure the safety of the operator.

At first glance, the Lexus service does, indeed, cost more. It is often said, however, that the Kia service may, in fact, increase costs down the line by increasing the risk of undetected periodontal disease. As Hale says, inferior care sold as “affordable care” is “money down the drain.”

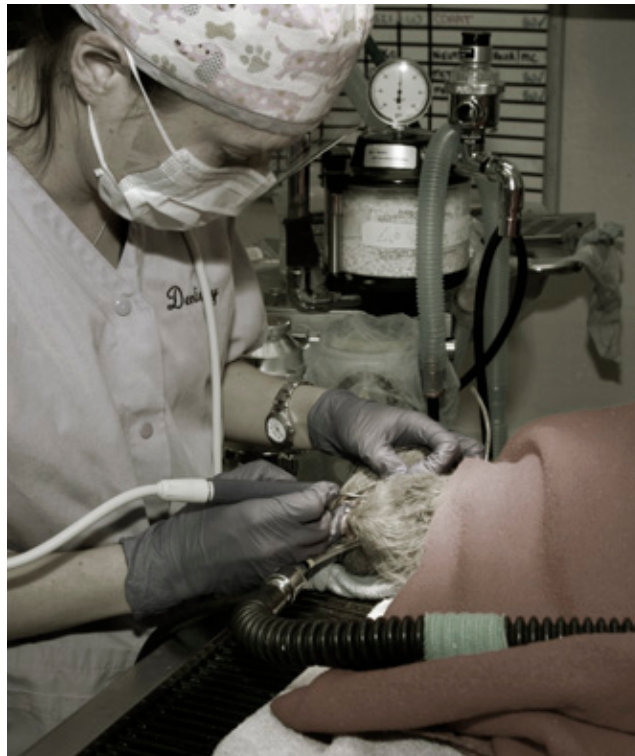
How to Attain a Lexus Level of Care

The general practice that wishes to offer excellent dental services faces several challenges: training its staff,

obtaining high-quality equipment, and gaining the understanding of clients.

Training Staff

There is so much to pack into veterinary education that



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it remains true that little dental training is available in veterinary school. At best, there are only a few courses, often as electives. There are, however, many opportunities for training.

The annual Veterinary Dental Forum involves three days of high-quality programming, with presentations in several tracks to suit anyone from the beginner to the expert. Wendy Hauser, DVM, of Peak Veterinary Consulting in Parker, Colorado, says that when she was first exposed to dental service training, “this program was the most impactful continuing education meeting I ever attended.” In a few short days, between lectures and wet labs, she left sold on the importance of dental care. She also left with specific knowledge to get started, including such details as how to chart and how to manage X-rays.

Diplomates of the American Veterinary Dental College also make training available. For example, Hale provides a plethora of training information for other veterinarians on his website, and Woodward offers dental training classes for veterinarians and veterinary technicians at his facility. Woodward says that in two days of lecture and wet lab, veterinary staff can learn all the techniques needed to solve 90% of the dental problems encountered in a small-animal practice.

As a consultant with experience as a practice manager and dental technical specialist, Mary Berg, BS, RLATG, RVT, VTS (Dentist), is currently a consultant and trainer with Beyond the Crown Veterinary Education in Lawrence, Kansas. She likes to offer her training onsite, using the practice’s equipment to take the service to the next level—to the Lexus level, perhaps.

Veterinarians wanting to offer dental care services and/or upgrade their service should also check out labs at national conferences, such as that of AAHA.

Obtaining High-Quality Equipment and Facilities

Berg says to be prepared to invest at least \$20,000–\$25,000 for equipment expenses plus the time and costs of training. The equipment estimate includes about \$16,000 for an X-ray system, along with the cost of such items as a drill, compressor, and scaler. She says that in her experience, a general practice, with proper charging, can pay off the investment within 18 months. She reminds her clients, however, that this is not just a

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“Studies showed that two-thirds of pet owners do not provide the essential dental care that is recommended by veterinarians.”

—DEBBIE BOONE, BS, CCS, CVPM

financial consideration—offering quality dental services is better medicine.

Educating Clients

To help clients appreciate the importance of dental care, there are a number of resources available. For example, AAHA Press publishes pet health brochures such as “Your Pet’s Dental Health” and “Dental Anesthesia,” which can be handed out to clients.

Veterinary Dental Specialties & Oral Surgery outlines “Common Pet Dental Problems” in a handout with photos and easy-to-read descriptions of common dental problems.

Woodward provides a useful website page, “Information About Veterinary Dental Care for Your Pet,” wellpets.com/pet-owner-information, where he addresses client concerns, including payment, anesthesia, and pain management.

The Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians is another helpful resource. Its publication, *Today’s Veterinary Technicians*, which is an official journal of the North American Veterinary Community, has published an excellent article that educates both practices and clients: “Increasing Clients’—and Your Own—Dental Awareness from the Exam Room to the Dental Suite,” by Patricia M. Dominguez, BS, LVT, VTS (Dentistry), covers everything from getting started to concerns and myths.

Another useful website is Veterinary Partner (veterinarypartner.com), created by Jan Bellows, DVM, DAVDC. This website provides a section called “The Dental Care Series,” which includes several articles on such topics as halitosis, stomatitis, and periodontal disease that help pet owners understand and subsequently take better care of their pets’ oral health.

A Google search turns up even more resources. Craig Spinks of Quadrid Productions, Inc., for example, has created charming and motivating videos for

veterinarians to share with clients, telling the story from the dog’s point of view.

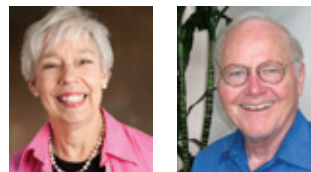
AAHA Press also publishes the book *Healthy Mouth, Healthy Pet: Why Dental Care Matters*. Pictures of dental conditions and descriptions that clients can understand make this a useful resource.

Another source of educational materials for both staff and clients is Greenies, which makes available free client education tools, technical articles, and online educational seminars for veterinary staff. One of the articles, written by Boone, outlines how your hospital can host an event to build the dental practice.

Clearly, there is no shortage of resources to help every general practice offer a Lexus-style dental service.

Boone says that she finds it strange that “US pet owners spent \$32 million in 2010 on clothing for their pets, yet we still struggle to get them to comply with dental cleanings, radiographs, and home care. In fact, studies showed that two-thirds of pet owners do not provide the essential dental care that is recommended by veterinarians.”

In the end, Berg advises that veterinarians do even more than educate their clients about the importance of dental care. Besides recommending dental care, they need to prescribe it, with admonitions like, “We need to get your pet in for dental X-rays.” ※



Carolyn C. Shadle earned her PhD degree from the State University of New York at Buffalo in interpersonal and organizational communication. John L. Meyer earned his PhD degree from the University of Minnesota in communication studies and speech arts. They both write and train through ICS, Inc. (icsworkplacecommunication.com). They have trained at numerous veterinary conferences, including AAHA, ICCVM, OAVT, and WVC.