

Trends

magazine

Open Hospitals

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Open-Door Policy





Why Inviting Pet Owners to Go Anywhere Their Pet Goes Could Be a Boon to Your Practice

by Jen Reeder

STACEY BORRMANN NEVER COMPLAINS ABOUT HOW MUCH MONEY she spends on veterinary care for her 11 dogs. In fact, the renowned Akita breeder drives nearly an hour from her home to AAHA-accredited Adobe Animal Hospital in Los Altos, California, because she is such a fan of the practice's "open hospital" policy: Pet owners are welcome to accompany their animals anywhere in the hospital, even to observe surgeries.

Blood draws, vaccinations, and other routine procedures happen right in the exam room while she's present. Additionally, Borrmann has watched emergency Cesarean sections, blood transfusions, hotspot treatments, and even an emergency spay when her dog Beastie's uterus was tearing. She likes being able to comfort her dogs in the recovery room after surgery.

"We spend a lot of money there on veterinary care, but I'm not going to balk about it because I know I'm getting my money's worth," she said. "I've seen with my own eyes how hard they work."

The concept of an open hospital or "open-door" policy might strike terror into the hearts of many veterinary professionals—indeed,

open hospitals in North America are exceedingly rare. But proponents say there are myriad benefits to allowing pet owners access throughout the hospital. These include building trust with clients, strengthening communication skills among the veterinary team, boosting revenue and positive word of mouth, and encouraging compliance, leading to better medicine overall.



Summer Burke-Irmiter, MBA, with her dog, Sugaree, courtesy of Abode Animal Hospital

Source of Growth

Summer Burke-Irmiter, MBA, hospital administrator and owner of AAHA-accredited Adobe Animal Hospital, which has two locations in California's Bay Area (Los Altos and Los Gatos), said the practice has been "open" since it was founded in 1964. The policy stemmed from valuing efficiency—instead of a technician running back and forth between the emergency table and lobby to update clients, the team could talk to the client during surgery and ask questions about the pet if necessary.

"We always get the question, 'What if something goes wrong?' Honestly, I would rather an owner be there when something went wrong than not," she said.

She credits the open-door policy for the brand's continued growth. In 2010, Adobe moved its 24-hour emergency room and general practice from a 6,000-square-foot facility to one with 15,000 square feet of space. Within three years, they had hit capacity, and they opened a second location in Los Gatos. The practice sees 300 new patients a month as a result of positive word of mouth and maintains long-term client relationships.

While Adobe's prices might be higher than many of their competitors', clients typically see the value an open

hospital offers, Burke-Irmiter said. "Owner-to-stay" dentals, in which the owner watches the entire process, are a prime example.

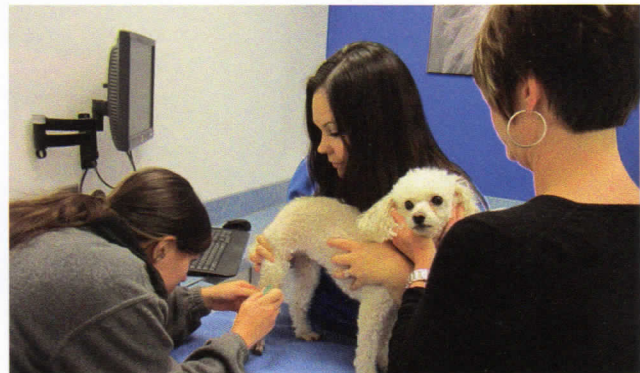
"We all know that effect when we call a client and say 10 teeth have to be removed from their baby Yorkie," she said. "When somebody's nervous about a procedure, they can be there and watch. I have never, ever had an owner complain about the price, or the medicine, or the number of teeth that needed to be pulled when we did an owner-to-stay dental."

Adobe created a special staff position, Hospital Experience Manager, to be the point person for clients watching procedures and to offer tours to new clients and prospective employees. Cindy Biby, RVT, brings 19 years of experience as a registered veterinary technician with a passion for pets and people to the role.

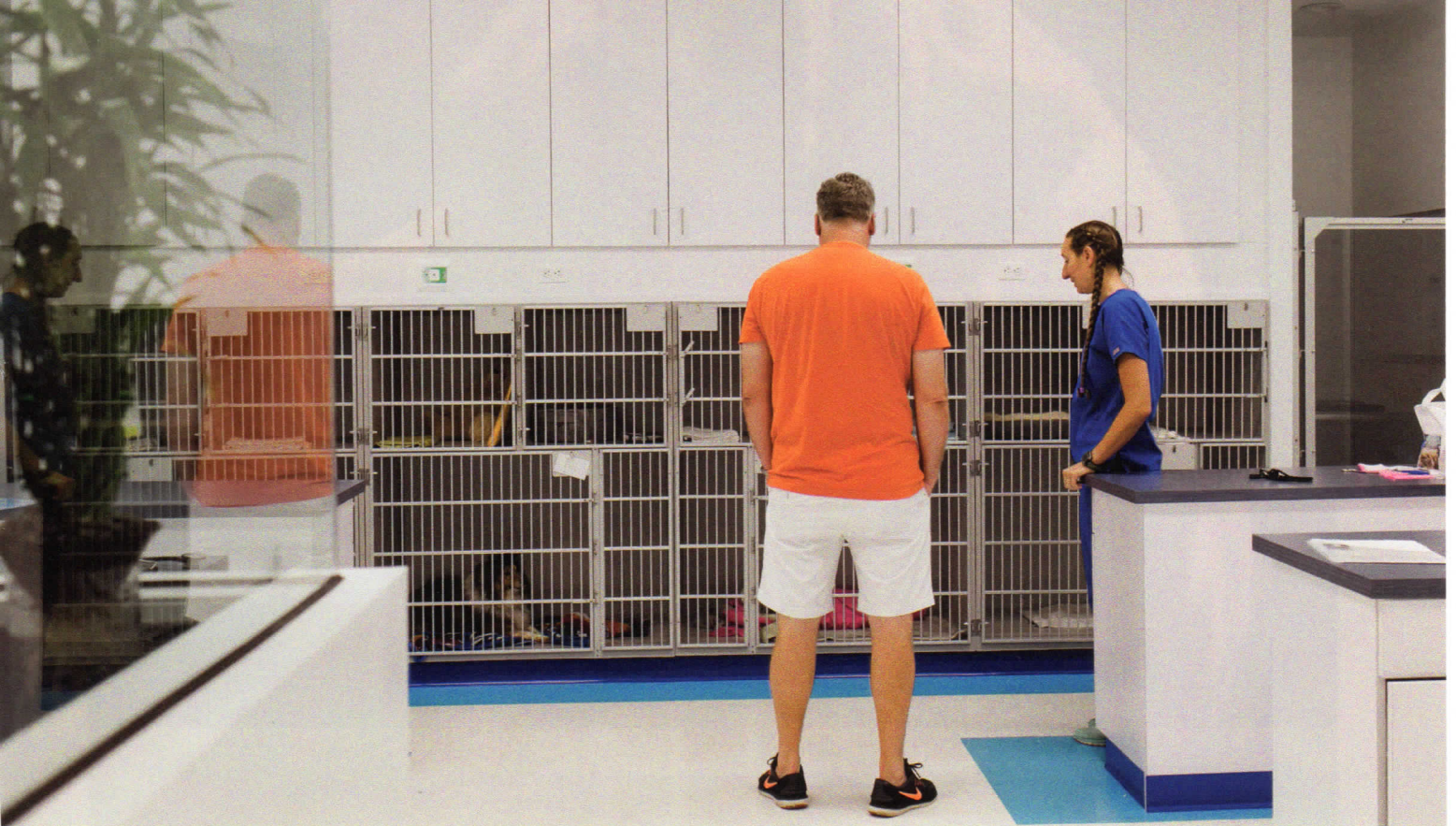
"It's really, really important to us, being an open hospital, that our clients are happy with their experiences and enjoying themselves," she said, "and making sure that our employees are doing well and having good experiences as well."

Pets are often comforted by the presence of their owner and allow the veterinary team to do procedures that might otherwise have required sedation, such as bandage changes after a mass removal. Biby said the open-hospital policy also increases compliance.

"We can have conversations about home care and care going forward," she explained. "The client really feels a part of the actual care of their pet. For them to see what's



Courtesy of Caring Hands Animal Hospital



Courtesy of Caring Hands Animal Hospital

happening and what we're doing, it's easier for them to understand why they have to do the necessary things at home and why it's important."

While some clients excuse themselves because they worry their anxiety will transfer to their pet, most clients prefer to be involved.

"I think a lot of people will compare it to children," she said. "I have a daughter, and it would be very awkward for me for someone to tell me what it is that they were going to do and then take her away from me. . . . I would be stressed. I would be worried. I think it's the same thing. Being able to be there with your loved one, whether a pet or a human being, is crucial."

Biby leads prospective employees on tours of the practice and discusses the open-hospital policy before starting the interview process to make sure it's a good fit for everyone involved. She recently hosted representatives from an animal hospital in Australia who are interested in creating an open hospital of their own. She hopes other practices—both here and abroad—adopt the policy.

"Are there some things that are challenging? Of course. When you have clients around, you have to make sure

that you're paying attention to things," she said. "But I don't think any of us mind that very much. We really enjoy having them. It's really fun."

Communication Builder

Jamie Holms, RVT, worked at Adobe Animal Hospital for about eight years before moving from the area and becoming administrative manager for doctorandyroark.com and the Uncharted Veterinary Community. Now she's finding it challenging to adjust to practices that take her dogs Biscuit and Iron Dog into the back for vitals when "I know the stethoscope works in the lobby just as well as it works in the back room."



Animal Hospital of Rowlett, courtesy of Mikell Media



Caring Hands patient Barley, courtesy of Katie Dumpert

She said working at an open hospital felt right because there wasn't pressure to just hurry up and get the work done. Instead, having clients present resulted in improved team communication, handling techniques, and the overall quality of medicine.

"You can't make snotty comments from across the treatment room, so you learn how to have constructive communication and focus on what matters. And you have to have better communication with the client because you're having a conversation about the X-ray you're looking at as a doctor. You're talking to them as a technician about why you're positioning in a certain way for the X-ray and what the objective is, and that reminds you of why you're there and what you're doing it for," she said. "I think it helps the profession as a whole."

Christen Lynch, practice manager at AAHA-accredited Animal Hospital of Rowlett Veterinary Clinic in Rowlett, Texas (a suburb of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex), said it's been an open hospital since 1996, but clients are increasingly wanting to accompany their animals into the back.

"Pets have become more of [a] family member versus the backyard dog, so we definitely have more clients that take advantage of it now than we used to," she said.

The layout of the hospital helps promote the open-door policy, since clients can move freely from the lobby to the rear of the practice to reach the acupuncture room, comfort room, and some exam rooms. Everyone can see the treatment area from exam rooms, where most basic procedures occur. The surgery room is encased in glass so that clients can stand outside and watch.

"For us, it builds trust with the client," Lynch said. "I think they like knowing they can go anywhere in our hospital at any time they want and that there's no scary, secret place that we take the animals to give vaccines and that kind of thing."

Lynch said the practice promotes the open-hospital policy on social media—for instance, asking a client sitting with a pet in the intensive care unit if it's OK to take a photo and share it online—and in emails to new clients with appointment reminders.

Compliance Booster

Michelle Vitulli, DVM, founder and owner of AAHA-accredited Caring Hands Animal Hospital in Centreville, Virginia, and co-owner of seven other locations in metropolitan Washington, DC, said she designed the first hospital in 1997 with the core philosophy of being as open and transparent as possible. (She's quick to note it's an idea she got from her mentor,

Bill Swartz, DVM, when she worked at AAHA-accredited Clocktower Animal Hospital in Herndon, Virginia.) She even trademarked the hospital's name and tagline: "Keeping you a part of your pet's care." All eight practices are open hospitals.

She said the staff was initially so concerned that clients might faint from seeing blood draws and vaccinations in exam rooms that they kept smelling salts handy. But it hasn't been an issue. Now she even performs cytocentesis on cats in the exam room because the patient will be better behaved without being transported to the treatment room.

"Our clients are very compliant with annual bloodwork, and I wonder if part of it is because they are present and part of that whole process," she said. "And doing the appointment in the room with the client doesn't take longer. It holds you more accountable because the client is watching everything. So I think it's good medicine."

Most clients decline to go into the back to watch surgeries, but she thinks having the option gives them peace of mind. They also greatly enjoy tours of the practice and seeing the equipment and the team in action.

"It really does bind the clients to the practice," she said. "Very rarely will they have that opportunity."

Tips for Becoming an Open Hospital

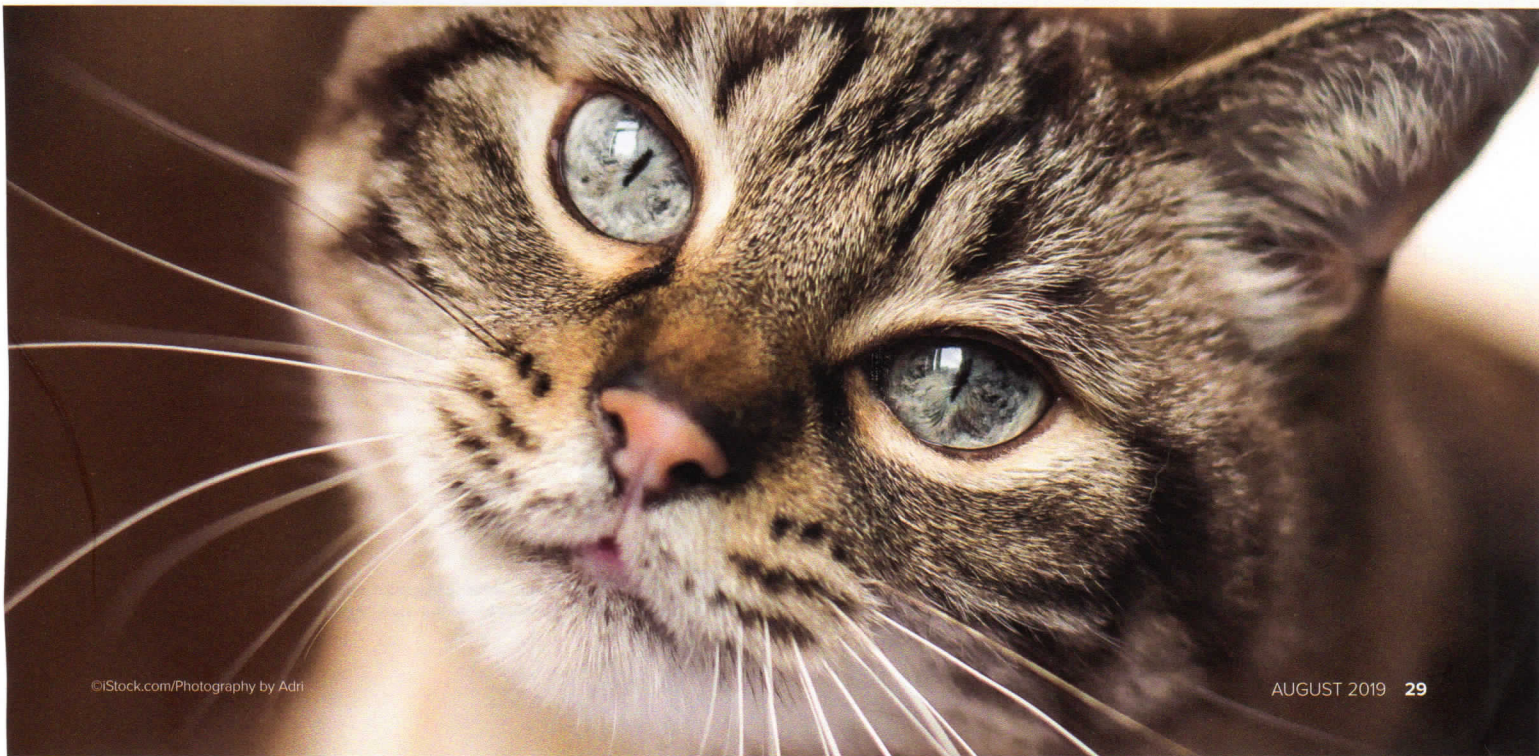
If you'd like to make your practice an open hospital, it's important to remember the transition doesn't have to happen all at once. Summer Burke-Irmiter, MBA, hospital administrator and owner of AAHA-accredited Adobe Animal Hospital, suggests taking small steps initially.

Start by asking your staff what they think would help them do their job more easily if a client were around. Then consider opening your visiting hours for client observations for one to two hours on a day when you're well staffed.

She advises allowing clients to observe something simple, such as nail trims. Then check in with the staff about how everything went.

"I will say a lot of people are a little scared at first when you bring up the idea," she said. "Taking those little steps and then getting feedback really helps."

For more information, visit: adobe-animal.com/why-adobe-the-open-hospital/.



Caitlin Smith, LVT, at the Centreville location of Caring Hands, said having clients watch her work on their pets was a little stressful after she first graduated in 2018, but it's ultimately built confidence in her abilities.

"I'm more comfortable with it now," she said. "Most of the clients that do want to come back are pretty engaged."

Rachel Ray, CVPM, director of marketing and strategy at Caring Hands Animal Hospital Support Services, adds, "This should not be considered a luxury. There is no reason this shouldn't be commonplace."

Virginia resident Valerie Colley has taken her Labrador retrievers, Barley and Porter, to the Centreville location since 2010 because she trusts the open hospital. Previously, she had a terrible experience at an unrelated practice with her Labrador retriever Buddy, who went in for a dental and was never the same afterward, needing help up the stairs for the rest of his life. Now she realizes he might have been handled roughly while he was under anesthesia, which aggravated the arthritis in his spine to the point that the nerves in his back never recovered.

In contrast, her experiences at Caring Hands have been terrific. She's seen her dogs get their teeth cleaned—no rough handling—and watched Barley get neutered. The best part of the open hospital, she said, is that there's a large kennel in the recovery area where she can comfort her recovering pet.

"I love that when my dog is waking up from their procedure that I am right there to comfort them when they're most likely confused and disoriented," she said. "It just gives me comfort knowing I can see everything that's happening to my dog and that they're so willing to let me be there. I love Caring Hands. I recommend them to all my friends." ✨



Courtesy of Caring Hands Animal Hospital



Award-winning journalist Jen Reeder hopes to find an open hospital for her beloved dogs, Rio and Peach.