



All the Stats, Stat!

Electronic records save time, improve accuracy and increase revenue—why haven't you switched over?

by Jen Reeder

In the past 5 years, AAHA practice consultants have increasingly seen animal hospitals making the transition from paper to electronic records in order to “go green” and stop wasting paper. But in addition to benefiting the environment, switching to electronic health records has a plethora of advantages for the practice itself.

AAHA practice consultant Laurie Miller said the number-one comment she hears from animal hospitals that have gone electronic is how much time it saves. “It’s time they didn’t even know they were wasting,” she said.

According to Miller, time savings often results during the inputting of data for records because staff members can use so many templates. Time is also saved by not having to search for lost charts.

She added, laughing, “Of course, it will cost them [practice owners] money because they’ll have to buy a gym membership, since now people won’t be running around looking for charts.”

Accuracy

Legibility is another commonly cited advantage of electronic health records. Computer-generated records and prescription scripts and labels leave no room for doubt, as opposed to their handwritten counterparts.

This makes the treatment plan clear to clients and colleagues, and can offer protection during litigation, according to Becky Jones, hospital director at



©Depositphotos/Yuri_Arcurs

“The accuracy is phenomenal. It’s something that allows us to respond to the clients’ questions in a timely manner, and an informed manner.” —James Clarkson, DVM

AAHA-accredited North Florida Animal Hospital in Tallahassee, Fla. That practice switched from paper to electronic health records in September 2010.

“Your medical records look much more professional if they’re computer-generated instead of handwritten,” Jones said. “It gives you pride in your practice.”

James Clarkson, DVM and owner of AAHA-accredited Westarbor Animal Hospital in Ann Arbor, Mich., bought his practice in 1993 and began transitioning to a paperless office in 1994. He agrees that legibility is a big advantage to electronic records, along with eliminating the transcription backlog. Because any lab results are automatically uploaded to the records, X-rays are digitized and even phone communications are immediately typed into the files, the records are

“[Going wireless] is a big investment. . . so I would recommend doing a trial run before you commit to one system or another.” —Kym Mitchell, DVM

always up to date—and the histories are easily tracked.

“If the dog or cat has had 12 different chemistries, you hit the button and it logs the results in chronological order so you can see trends, and then you can push another button and it creates a graph of what the enzymes have been doing over time, if you’re tracking that. So that’s a big benefit,” Clarkson said.

“And then you can hit a button and print it and give it to the client and say, ‘This is how your dog’s been doing on a platelet level’ if you’ve been following an autoimmune disease and are trying to track the results to compare how your treatment plan is going.”

Another benefit is that veterinarians can take a digital photo of a condition, such as a corneal ulcer or skin lesion, and input it directly into the records instead of having to write a long description.

“Then the next doctor can look at a picture instead of trying to figure out a description made by another doctor,” he said. “The accuracy is phenomenal—it’s something that allows us to respond to the clients’ questions in a timely manner, and an informed manner.”

Clarkson’s practice has more than a dozen computers throughout the hospital so that employees never have to wait to use one. The default screen shows the daily schedule to help keep staff organized. And the information can also be accessed remotely, which can be crucial in an emergency.

“Any veterinarians who are workaholics can have full access to the whole system from home,” Clarkson said. “That’s a big one, and increases the amount of service we can give.”

Though it can be expensive to upgrade computers every few years, Clarkson feels the costs are easily retrieved in patient care and client relations.

“I can’t even imagine practicing like I

used to 25 years ago.... it’s been the hallmark of our practice,” Clarkson said. “It allows the practice to run so much more smoothly, and the winner is the client. In the end, if they’re winning, the practice is winning.”

AAHA practice consultant Rhonda Sayle, RVT, acknowledged that though there are many advantages to going paperless, practices often have a tough time eliminating paper altogether. She suggests allowing for a transition period to get used to the computers and software, and to focus on the advantages, such as the time it will save to compile data by doing a computerized search.

According to Sayle, computer searches are great, for example, “If you want to see how many Dobermans in your practice have Von Willebrand disease, or you want to see how many ACL surgeries you’ve done in the last year... or from a marketing standpoint, if you’re grabbing the information on how new clients are finding you.

“All of that can be calculated, and if you had to stop and do all of that yourself, imagine the time and effort and labor you would have into it.”

Going wireless

Kym Mitchell, DVM and co-owner of Montrose Pet Hospital in Montrose, Calif., said the practice opened in April 2011 and immediately went paperless—in fact, wireless. The veterinarians and technicians have lightweight Mac iBooks or MacBook Airs that they carry around the hospital.

“We’re wireless, so whatever we type in our computer automatically goes to everybody else’s computers,” Mitchell said. “It’s like a lot of office computer systems where coworkers can access shared documents.”

After working for 18 years at another animal hospital, Mitchell and her



**“You will never regret the switch [to electronic records],
and you will find your revenue increase.”**

—Cristy Fisher, DVM

business partner knew they wanted to start their practice completely paper-free for environmental reasons. They also knew that they wanted to use a Mac-based program. Luckily, different companies allowed Mitchell to use their systems for a couple of days while she and her partner were deciding which one to invest in.

“It’s a big investment and something you’re going to use all day long, so you really want to make sure that you’re comfortable with how it works; I would recommend doing a trial run before you commit to one system or another,” Mitchell said.

Cristy Fisher, DVM and co-owner of AAHA-accredited Pine Creek Veterinary Hospital in Colorado Springs, Colo., said her practice started off using electronic records when it opened in August 2008. While she also extols the main advantages of a paperless practice—no lost charts, readily accessible records, legibility, ease of transmission—the practice is even enhanced by the screen savers on the computers in exam rooms. They have a PowerPoint presentation that shows

fun pet facts, educational materials and upcoming hospital events that clients can watch while waiting for the veterinarian.

“Clients love it and often schedule appointments for their pets based on the information provided in these presentations. It’s a great revenue-builder and free advertising for us,” she said.

Fisher urges animal hospitals considering a switch from paper to electronic health records to take the leap. “The only advice I can offer is: don’t wait.”

Fisher added, “You will never regret the switch, and you will find your revenue increase, your medical recordkeeping become much more accurate, and your clients will appreciate your interest in keeping up with modern times and modern medicine.

“It may seem like an insurmountable task to switch to electronic health records, but once you implement the new system, both you and your staff will wonder how you ever survived without it.” ■

Freelance journalist Jen Reeder writes frequently about pet issues from her home office in Durango, Colo.