



Seeing Is Believing

Teaching microscopes aid compliance, staff training

by Jen Reeder

There's no question that a microscope is an essential piece of equipment for animal hospitals. But many veterinarians have found that upgrading from a traditional binocular microscope to a teaching microscope—which has at least one additional head that allows multiple people to view a slide simultaneously—is a worthwhile investment.

Investing a little extra money in a teaching microscope has numerous advantages, including improving client compliance and education, helping train staff and generating new business.

“I don't know how I would practice without a teaching microscope,” said Paul Linnemann, DVM, owner of AAHA-accredited Park Lane Veterinary Hospital in Norman, Okla. “That microscope is of more benefit to this clinic, I feel, than the ultrasound, than the cardiac monitor—they're all important, but this is something that we use every minute of every day that we're open.”

Benefits for clients, staff

Linnemann has been using the teaching microscope at the practice since he bought it from a medical school in 1983. He keeps it in an exam room and encourages pet owners to look through the viewfinder at slides while he uses a built-in pointer to explain what they're looking at.

“You show them an ear mite, and they're like, ‘Oh my gosh, how gross—we've got to treat this thing,’” Linnemann said.

He also finds it useful for showing



Photo courtesy of Nancy Hayes, DVM

clients such things as demodectic mange, parasite eggs and, above all, cytology slides. He's found showing a client a cytology of a malignant tumor helps drive home the urgency of the situation. He will pull out a textbook or a slide from the practice's library to show what a normal cell looks like so they can contrast it with the cells taken from their pet. He said it almost always motivates them to green-light surgery to remove the tumor.

“They might have some financial reservations at the time, and I've even had people say, ‘Can we think about it overnight?’ or whatever, and a few days later, it turns up on your surgical schedule.”

Linnemann said that explaining medical conditions to clients with the help of his teaching microscope has led to positive referrals. New clients have cited his use of the special scope with friends as the reason for choosing his practice.

He also uses the teaching microscope to train his staff and keep their skills sharp.

Nancy Hayes,
DVM, and the
hospital's other
veterinarians use
their teaching
microscope
frequently with
clients.

"I think [the teaching microscope] gives [clients] an appreciation of what they're paying for when you charge them . . . and you can show them the parasites in the stool because you can take a picture of the eggs."

—Melani Poundstone, DVM

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't sit down with my techs and we can go over parasite recognition: Here's what a roundworm looks like, or here's what a hookworm egg looks like."

Cost-effectiveness

Melani Poundstone, DVM and co-owner of AAHA-accredited Hampden Family Pet Hospital in Englewood, Colo., bought a teaching microscope for her practice in 2009 after practicing for more than 20 years without one.

She said it was an obvious choice since the teaching microscope cost around \$1,200 and a binocular microscope was around \$900.

"Basically, the cost wasn't that much more than a regular scope, and it allowed us to download photographs of the images that we're seeing to the patients' files," Poundstone said.

"The other nice thing is you can put it up on the little viewing screen, so if you're seeing something and you want another doctor to look at a cell, you can actually point to what you're looking at. Sometimes when you used to switch places, things would get bumped or they [the other person] wouldn't know what you were looking at."

Poundstone takes a still image of the slide, adds a digital copy to each patient's electronic records and prints out a hard copy for the client to take home after the visit.

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"I've got documentation of what I'm seeing," Poundstone said. "I think it gives them [clients] an appreciation of what they're paying for when you charge them for a cytology or you charge them for a fecal path, and you can show them the parasites in the stool because you can take a picture of the eggs. I think they appreciate that more."

DIY scope

Scott Buchanan, practice coordinator at Neel Veterinary Hospital in Oklahoma City, Okla., said his practice needed a microscope system that enabled information sharing at this large, 24-hour hospital that has about 85 employees.

Always cost-conscious, he created a custom teaching microscope by buying a generic trinocular microscope for about \$300 on eBay and attaching a video camera specially made to attach to a microscope (which he also bought on eBay). The camera now projects the activity on the microscope slide through a 28-inch flat-panel TV, which is mounted on a wall behind the workstation.

"Since it's video instead of a still camera, you can see live on a screen what's going on," Buchanan said. "The image quality on it is great."

The customized system has been helpful when veterinarians want to share unusual findings or train staff. They can also take a still photo of a slide and insert the digital image into the client's electronic file. The practice is paperless.

Sometimes veterinarians at Neel will use the teaching microscope to help curious clients really understand a medical issue. They can either take the client back into the laboratory room or bring the slide images up remotely onto a computer in the exam room with the remote-controlled virtual network computing (VNC) software.

Buchanan said the system is easy to set up, and the camera even comes with its own software. "Anybody that has reasonable computer skills is going to find it pretty easy," he said.

Reaching out to kids

AAHA-accredited Whitney Veterinary Hospital in Peoria, Ill., already had a teaching microscope when Nancy Hayes, DVM, joined the practice in 1987 (Hayes is now the owner and medical director). She and the hospital's other veterinarians use the teaching microscope frequently with clients, whether involving fertility issues in breeding animals or parasites on a family pet.

"From a client perspective, I think it's most helpful for creepy-crawly things. It can definitely drive home the point because it creeps them [clients] out," Hayes said. "It's like with flea control: If they can see a flea, they want to get rid of it. So if they see an ear mite or can understand yeast or a severe bacterial infection, I think it does help."

Hayes also encourages children to look into the teaching microscope because it's fun for them, helps plant the seed of responsible pet ownership and can spark an enthusiasm for science and veterinary medicine.

"I personally feel very strongly that children should be part of the pet-care equation," she said. "I will say for my own personal part that I was included by a veterinarian when I was a kid, and it's part of what sparked my interest in knowing more about my pets and so forth. And obviously it grew into a career. I'd like to make that same impression on young people now."

She said the teaching microscope is also useful in training staff and for in-house cytology when two doctors can share the scope to form opinions. Ultimately, a teaching microscope opens up lines of communication between everyone involved in a pet's care.

"It sort of brings the whole practice into team play," Hayes said. "It's not just the doctor seeing it—the technician sees it, the owner sees it. Everybody can look at it and be in on the treatment plan." ■

Jen Reeder writes frequently about pet issues from her home office in Durango, Colo., which she shares with her husband and their Lab mix, Rio.