

The High Costs of Cutting Corners in Veterinary Care

Two patients limp into two different medical clinics with the same symptoms. Both are having trouble walking and appear to require a hip replacement. The first patient is examined within the hour, has an x-ray taken and is scheduled for surgery in a few days. The other patient sees his family doctor after waiting two weeks for an appointment and waits eight more weeks to see a specialist. An x-ray is taken, which isn't reviewed for another week, and finally his surgery is scheduled six weeks from the date of diagnosis. Why the different treatment for these two patients? The first was a Golden Retriever seen by his family veterinarian, and the second was a senior citizen with a good insurance plan. I am sharing this story to remind everyone that veterinary medicine is still the greatest value in healthcare in the United States.

Tough economic times cause people to think carefully about how they spend their money. It is important to compare apples to apples when deciding where to spend your dollars budgeted for the veterinary care of your pets. Locally, we have seen a large number of advertisements lately for "vaccine clinics" at locations that range from pet stores and auto part stores to parking lots at local gas stations. These clinics usually set up in one location for a few hours, and then they are gone. Most of them are operated by people from out of the area. They do not meet the same standards as a regular veterinary hospital and do not get inspected by state agencies since they are on the move and generally operate during off hours, such as weekends.

When something seems too cheap to be true, it usually is.

There are 180 vaccines listed for use in dogs and cats in the United States, but if you polled 1,000 veterinary hospitals, you would hear the names of the same vaccines that are being used again and again. That is because they are the most up to date and safest vaccines that are on the market. There are companies still manufacturing - and some "clinics" still using- vaccines that were developed more than 40 years ago. They may cost a few dollars less, but older vaccines can cause many problems, including reactions that may leave pets with large oozing raw sores on their bodies or even cause fatal, anaphylactic reactions. Of course, by the time the reaction occurs, the veterinarians at these "cheap vaccine clinics" are long gone and cannot help you or your pet.

Veterinary hospitals are required to have protective and lifesaving equipment, including oxygen, autoclaves to sterilize instruments, and refrigerators in which to store vaccines properly. I have seen "vaccine clinics" using vaccines pulled out of coolers and plastic storage bins. In addition, a thorough physical examination should be performed before any vaccination is given to a pet. The quickie, cheap clinics operate like an assembly line with no time or instruments for a proper examination. These factors combine to make the situation ripe for problems. The pet owners who thought they were saving a few bucks potentially may end up with large emergency bills. What is even worse to me is that a pet has suffered needlessly.

I would urge pet owners to forge a relationship with a local veterinary hospital and veterinarian that will be there when you need them. Pick a practice that looks and smells clean when you enter the door and where it is

obvious that the staff puts a premium on excellent customer service. You want a veterinarian that listens to you and answers all of your questions by explaining things to you and, after making sure you understand the recommendations, lets you be a part of the decision-making process. Look for a vet that puts an emphasis on preventative medicine, but also knows how to diagnose and quickly treat any problems to make your pet feel better quickly. It is better to get it right the first time and help your pet immediately than to have an issue drag out over multiple visits because of what I call "trial and error." The life and health of your pet is one area where quality counts. Remember that your family veterinarian can offer you the best of care just like healthcare for people, but much more quickly, more efficiently and at a much lower price than you even can get for your own medical care!