



# Veterinary Wisdom®

for practice teams

## 8 Tips to Help Pet Parents Make Decisions

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It's the "exam-room sweat syndrome"—a pet needs veterinary care, but your client isn't sure which course of treatment to choose. Surgery now or 'watch and wait' with possible surgery later? Diagnostic tests that may lead to a referral to veterinary specialists? Preventative diet change? Expensive chemotherapy?

As they ponder their options, your veterinary team awaits their decision. Beads of nervous sweat gather on your client's forehead. You know your client's heart is pumping a bit faster. It's probably hard for them to concentrate, hard to breathe...they're seized by anxiety!

Experts who study how humans think say there are several ways you can help clients use their brains to make better choices. Here are 8 tips to help them consider when they must make decisions for their pets.

### Remove the Pressure

It's hard to make a decision when people are staring at you, waiting for you to direct their next moves. It's also difficult to digest new information when you haven't had time to sort through it in your own mind. If your patient's condition is not an emergency, give clients some time to consider their options. Encourage them to leave the exam room and even the veterinary clinic, if necessary. Schedule a time later that day or the next when you will either meet again or speak over the telephone to confirm their decision.

### Gather Other Points of View

If your client seems hesitant to accept your treatment recommendations, you may want to suggest they seek a second opinion. A confirmation of your diagnosis and treatment plan can reinforce the trust your client has in you. You can also encourage them to talk with other family members or friends who know their pet and can help them think objectively about their options.

### Do Your Homework

Urge clients to investigate their pet's disease or condition, but caution them to use trustworthy and credible sources. There are many websites, blogs, and articles on the internet claiming to offer veterinary medical information and advice. Yet, each pet and each illness or injury is unique in some way. What worked for another may not work for your patient. If you feel your client needs more in-depth information, offer to lend your own resource material.

### Answer More Questions

Many clients don't understand the 'whys' or 'hows' of your recommendations, but don't ask for clarification. Offer to repeat information as many times as they need you to and do it without medical jargon.

### Consider Finances

Just because you *can* do something for a pet doesn't mean you *should*. Your client's financial situation is important to consider when making treatment decisions for a pet. Reassure them that you realize that their ability to pay has nothing to do with the love they feel for their pet. Likewise, remind them that your commitment to provide quality care requires you to charge a fair price for your services.

### Be Realistic about Post-Treatment Care

Sometimes the post-treatment care for a pet may be very difficult or time-consuming for your client and/or their lifestyle. Be sure you have provided a thorough understanding of their pet's home care requirements BEFORE you ask for their decision about treatment. Explain your expectations regarding their pet's confinement, exercise requirements, and follow-up appointments, as well as the medications or medical procedures they will need to manage during their pet's post-treatment care.

### Pay Attention to Emotions

Our conscious thoughts are only a small portion of what goes on in our brains. According to Jonah Lehrer, author of How We Decide, "at any given moment, the unconscious is taking in vast amounts of information that we're not even aware of and processing it all very quickly. Based on its conclusions, the brain generates emotions." Lehrer suggests we pay attention to these emotions as they are our own 'supercomputer' telling us what to do. Ask clients what their 'gut' or intuition is telling them to do.

### Challenge Memories and Personal Preferences

Our own 'likes' and 'dislikes' can limit our decision-making process. Beliefs like *expensive treatments are more likely to work* or *an older vet knows more about this condition than a younger one* aren't necessarily true. Separate values and beliefs from the reality of a pet's treatment options.

Recent research shows that memories may also be surprisingly inaccurate. Thus, they may not be the most reliable basis for a conclusion concerning a pet's care. For example, if your client experienced an extreme reaction to one or more of the treatment options for their pet, they may be remembering the details and emotions of a past experience as more negative than they truly were, now 'overcompensating' by leaning toward the opposite extreme.

So, if they reject an option, it may be due to a decision they made about it in your past. Yet, *this* pet and *this* pet's condition might be best served by the very treatment they are rejecting. And *you*, their current veterinarian, may conduct the procedure more skillfully and sensitively than the one from their past.

Open the conversation to a discussion about your client's past experiences. With this one conversation, you may be able to uncover the roadblock that could prevent your patient from obtaining the most appropriate care.