



There are a few distinct problems associated with dentistry in the veterinary field. The first is that our patients don't respond well to "sit still, relax and open wide."

This, of course, means that it is not all that easy to do a thorough examination and assessment of our patients' dental health without the marvels of chemical restraint!

The result of this impediment is that often the worst of the pathology is only evident once our patients are safely anaesthetised. This makes quoting accurately for a dental procedure somewhat difficult, if not impossible. Most clients are mature enough to grasp that our estimations are at the very best a guesstimate, but there are the odd hardliners that are beyond reason.

"You said X amount, Doc., I don't care that it took you two hours and not twenty minutes! I would never have agreed to it, had I known it would cost extra!"

I'm still not sure how one deals with that kind of attitude! I often wonder how they'd react if told "There were way more problems than I at first thought during our initial consultation but, don't worry, I left all those diseased teeth in there so as not to go over the quote. Fido is in considerable pain still, but you can bring him back another time to do the rest. If you want to!"

The other great problem with dental disease in the veterinary context is convincing the owner that there is, in fact, a serious health issue that needs attention. The reasons for this are many. Our patients can't talk and, even if they did, I'm not sure that they would really be of much help. Why? Dogs and cats don't like to let on when they're in pain! It's an instinct that does them no favours in the soft world of domesticated bliss.

Serious and often irreversible damage has to occur before the dental problem is so "in your face" that the owner simply can't ignore it anymore. Good examples of this scenario would be the Death Breath that can pole-axe a seasoned bog dweller at 5 meters. Another is the carnassial tooth (that's the one that is shaped like Peak Formosa) root abscess that is so far gone that it swells the eye shut or causes a pus eruption just below the eye. Not a pretty sight! You can just imagine what that must feel like!

There is another rather peculiar reason why dental disease in animals progresses from mild reversible calculus builds up (necessitating a quick descaling and polishing) to lengthy (and costly) dental surgery. This week I happened to be chatting to a client in reception who had popped in to attend to an unrelated matter. She had her faithful companion under arm as usual. I invited her to take advantage of our free dental check up, seeing as he was with her. Her response took me completely by surprise.

"Oh no, Doc. I don't want you to check in case he needs something done. I can't afford it!"
As if by not looking the problem would just go away!

This week also saw us attending to a much loved eight year old German shepherd with advanced, severely debilitating periodontal disease. Our recommendation of a descaling and polishing more than two years ago was declined "until the finances would allow". Sadly, the consequences of that delay multiplied the extent of the veterinary intervention necessary. This came at a hefty price; most of her teeth and a lot of the client's money. Five times the cost of a descaling and polishing, in fact! A stitch in time indeed!

The "GOOD": give your pets things to chew that will assist in teeth cleaning EVERY DAY, such as dental kibbles, rawhide chews and the like.

The "BETTER" refers to either DAILY rinsing with a specially formulated pet dental rinse or daily application of oral gel.

The "BEST": DAILY brushing with veterinary approved toothpaste remains the most effective method of dental health care intervention. Failing this, a timeous descaling and polishing by your vet will avoid the need for more costly surgical interventions down the line.

Until we vets do come up with a miraculous, cheaper alternative to our current option of extracting teeth under general anaesthesia to cure periodontal disease, the ball is firmly in the court of the primary pet care giver. That would be you.