

By Deborah Stone, MBA, CVPM

# I Want My Records... **NOW!**

Deborah Stone owns Stone Veterinary Practice Management (StoneVPM.com) in Austin, Texas. She consults with veterinary practices to help identify their goals and provide tools to help those goals become a reality.

Mrs. Sullivan has been a frequent visitor to the practice for 20 years, picking up medication or food for one of her pets, or just stopping by to deliver her famous chocolate chip cookies! Today she has brought in her 12-year-old schnauzer, Benson, to have a tumor removed.

The procedure went well, so the receptionist is more than a little surprised that Mrs. Sullivan is extremely unhappy with the \$875 invoice that covers the surgery, histopathology, diagnostic testing, pain management, and the dental cleaning that Benson received. Mrs. Sullivan demands a copy of her records and says she will not return because the practice has become “too expensive.”

## **This isn't the Mrs. Sullivan you know. What happened?**

### **Nurture Existing Relationships**

Clients today have increased options and will often decide where to have their pet treated based on their perception of receiving the best value for their dollar. Consumers in general are willing to pay for services if their expectations were met or exceeded.<sup>1</sup>

Over the 20 years Mrs. Sullivan has been a client, the practice team developed a very informal relationship with her. Whenever presented with a medical plan and cost estimate, Mrs. Sullivan's response has always been, “I don't need to know, just do whatever you need to.” Since the relationship with Mrs. Sullivan has been so positive for so long, the practice never forced the issue to review and sign the medical care plan.

Eventually, like today, Mrs. Sullivan's agreement was assumed rather than solicited. While it's great to be friendly with clients, it is important to practice effective communications consistently, including presenting medical care plans, consent forms, and providing client education to help eliminate assumptions and frustrations.

More than 90% of unhappy clients just go away and do not return to a practice,<sup>2</sup> so having a record request and client complaint process in place provides an opportunity to discuss dissatisfaction with clients *before* they walk away. In addition to

losing the unhappy client, the client may continue to discuss their negative experience with others. Studies report that dissatisfied clients tell eight to ten people and one of five angry clients will inform up to 20.<sup>3</sup> Word of mouth is an important marketing component as it seems to have a powerful impact on client behavior. In today's business environment, word of mouth has a larger capacity for outreach and impact by posting their experiences on the Internet.<sup>4</sup>

It is estimated it costs up to 5 times more to gain a new client than it does to keep an existing one satisfied. In this scenario, the practice had a medical record request process in place that was immediately set into motion. The receptionist advised Mrs. Sullivan that Gwen, the practice manager, would call her when Benson's records were ready. The next day, Gwen reviewed the client's entire history, her recent experience with Benson, and spoke with all team members involved. Next, she requested a face-to-face meeting with Mrs. Sullivan; a 20-year relationship is worth taking the time to reach out.

Mrs. Sullivan was gratified that someone wanted to discuss the recent visit and accepted the invitation. She appreciated the opportunity to be “heard.” Mrs. Sullivan told Gwen how things had

