

# Lack of Oral History

Dental care can be a driver for many practices, but data points to a lack of training on oral health issues at the nation's teaching schools

Oral health issues are one of the primary reasons pet owners visit their veterinarian, yet many veterinary students receive little training on oral health and dental disease.

"We are lacking in veterinary dental education in all four years of the veterinary curriculum," says Gary Goldstein, DVM, FAVD, Dipl. AVDC, clinical professor in the Veterinary Clinical Sciences Department, University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine and section chief of the Dentistry and Oral Surgery service. True, dental distributors fill the gap somewhat with wet labs and instructional seminars for practicing veterinarians. And that's good. "But for veterinary medicine to reach the next level, we need a bigger push for dental education."

In 2013, Goldstein and Dr. Jamie Anderson – a veterinarian from Northern California who is double-boarded in internal medicine and dentistry and oral surgery – in conjunction with the University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine, surveyed all the North American veterinary teaching hospitals to determine the breadth and scope of veterinary dental education in all four years of the veterinary curriculum. Thirty schools responded to the detailed questionnaire.

The researchers' findings were not surprising. They found, for example, that a large percent of students receive fewer than four hours

of lecture in dentistry or in a wet lab experience; and nearly a quarter don't rotate through a fourth-year dentistry rotation that is run by a board-certified veterinary dentist. What's more, skill sets performed in fourth-year rotations are low.

These data prove the point that veterinary dental education is lacking in the nation's veterinary teaching hospitals, says Goldstein, who spoke on the state of veterinary dental education in North American veterinary teaching hospitals at last fall's Veterinary Dental Forum in New Orleans.



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## What's the problem?

That lack of training is a problem for a number of reasons, says Goldstein. "Periodontal disease is the No. 1 diagnosis we see in clinical practice, so we need to be prepared for it." Second, periodontal disease can be prevented, and preventive care is a focus of the American Veterinary Medical Association and the American Animal Hospital Association. "When we talk about preventive care, dentistry falls into that."

High-quality dental care isn't just good for pets' health, it's good for the health of veterinary practices, adds Goldstein. "Twenty years ago, vaccinations drove visits to the hospital, but that has gone by the wayside." Likewise, flea products have, to a large extent, moved away from the veterinary hospital to over-the-counter and online outlets.

## Dental education survey: Preliminary observations

- About a quarter of students don't rotate through a fourth-year dentistry rotation.
- Skill sets performed in fourth-year rotation are very low.
- Only 12 American Veterinary Dental College diplomates provide teaching in North America.
- Only eight programs offer a full-time dentistry service.
- Only seven provide full-time residency programs.
- A total of 14 residents are currently enrolled in university dental residency programs.
- A large percent of students get fewer than four hours of lecture in dentistry.
- A large percent of students get fewer than four hours of wet laboratory experience.

**Source:** The State of Veterinary Dental Education in North American Veterinary Teaching Hospitals: A descriptive study," University of Minnesota College of Veterinary Medicine

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“However, retailers, feed stores and lay people cannot provide veterinary dentistry, including professional dental cleanings or dental radiographs,” says Goldstein. “Today, the logical and appropriate driver of clients to veterinary hospitals is dentistry.” Pet owners need to take their pets to their veterinarian annually for examinations and professional dental cleaning. “It will be better for the patient and the client.”

### Hopes for the future

Goldstein and Anderson hope that, once the survey data is published, schools around the country will address the issue of dental education more urgently. “We have data to show that only four or five teaching hospitals are way above the [average] level of teaching, from a quantity standpoint. We hope this will be a reason for other teaching hospitals to not only increase teaching, but also improve the overall clinical service and ultimately improve their programs.”

Veterinary hospitals have many competing demands, he acknowledges. For that reason, Goldstein would gladly accept “a slow increase” in the number of hospitals that offer full-time veterinary dentistry and oral surgery services, and that have board-certified veterinary dentists as faculty. Already, since the survey was completed, at least two teaching hospitals have beefed up their dental programs, he says.

Drs. Goldstein and Anderson hope the deans, associate deans and department chairs will see this data, understand the importance of veterinary dentistry, and then make financial commitments and decisions to increase dental education in all four years of the veterinary curriculum.

Few pet owners know that board-certified specialists in dentistry even exist, or that they can get specialized dental care for their pets, says Goldstein. But that could change, as the quantity and quality of dental-related education in teaching schools increases, and as more veterinarians become board-certified in veterinary dentistry. ■