

# How to Implement Veterinary Telemedicine in Your Practice

## Frequently Asked Questions.....

Veterinary telemedicine is a valuable tool amid the COVID-19 pandemic. With the right platform, you can quickly offer telemedicine to your clients.

Here are some critical questions and answers to assist you in getting started. Thanks to Dr. Aaron Smiley, IVMA President, for providing this important information.

1. **I want to get started right away with telemedicine. What do I do?** According to Dr. Aaron Smiley, choose a platform.
  1. Here is a [link](#) to the AVMA's list of telemedicine providers. Dr. Smiley uses Medici, but it is important that you choose a platform **that fits your needs**.
    1. Medici's unique features (for example):
      1. \$1M malpractice insurance
      2. Ability to set your own telemedicine fee for clients
      3. Secure and encrypted
      4. VCPR compliant
        1. Each veterinarian has her own account. She can be added to a clinic or group, but doctors are the only individuals able to diagnose and prescribe
    2. Have staff members use the platform – they are a key component to your success.
    3. Ask each staff member to send you a hypothetical telemedicine case as if they were a client. This will increase their comfort and understanding of the platform.
    4. Create a script for your reception team to inform every client that calls the clinic that you offer telemedicine.
      1. "Thank you for calling ABC Clinic. This is 'Pam'. We offer telemedicine for remote care of your pet. How can I help you?"
    5. Start engaging with clients on your telemedicine platform.
    6. Telemedicine is not new. Veterinarians are very experienced at telemedicine and most, if not all of us, have been caring for our patients remotely since the day we graduated. Continue to use the same medical judgment that you did prior to introducing the telemedicine technology.
2. **Does practicing telemedicine increase my liability exposure?** Telemedicine, inside of a secure technology, reduces liability in three ways. First, a picture or video is worth a thousand words. A veterinarian who only offers telemedicine via a telephone has to rely on the owner to accurately describe the problem. If, on the other hand, the veterinarian can obtain a picture or a video of the same problem, he or she can now form a more independent and accurate opinion, resulting in a better medical decision for her patient. Second, a conversation about a patient with a client requires documentation in the medical record. When I previously used SMS text messaging to communicate with

clients, I did not always get the conversations into the medical record because it was difficult to export. At that time, I wasn't always compliant with state requirements for veterinary medical records. Now I use a platform that will easily export the entire conversation to be preserved in the medical record. Third, telemedicine platforms offer liability insurance in addition to your existing malpractice insurance. I use a platform that provides \$1 million in malpractice insurance. It is more than I need but I am glad to have the peace of mind.

3. **Does veterinary telehealth generate revenue?** Since I began offering fee-based telemedicine via [Medici](#), I have generated an additional 2% in revenue per month. I believe this number will continue to grow as clients become more aware of the service. Approximately 60% of our clients that engage with fee-based telemedicine on Medici use the service again within 12 months. This is a strong signal that clients like the service. The only additional cost is the subscription fee, because the owner is paying for my professional service. Eventually, my goal is to handle all simple cases via telemedicine, with the potential to use virtual care on up to 30% of my cases. By seeing more patients remotely, I'll have a greater amount of time to spend on more complex cases and wellness exams that require in-office visits.
4. **Will clients pay for virtual care?** This myth is deeply embedded in the veterinary profession because we have offered free telemedicine for more than 100 years, but it is not true. I have found that clients are willing to pay for telemedicine if two requirements are met: First, free telemedicine is offered with veterinary technicians/nurses and second, the cost of telemedicine is less than an in-clinic exam. Clients appreciate the lower cost and convenience of telemedicine. Dr. [Matthew Salois](#), AVMA chief economist, reports that pet owners do not seek veterinary care due to cost. Even 20% of clients who earn income of more than \$100,000 annually are concerned about the cost of veterinary care. When we explain fee-based telemedicine to our clients as being characterized by "more convenience and less expense," most are eager to try it.
5. **Will offering virtual care options for my clients ruin my work-life balance?** Fee-based telemedicine has reduced my workload and allowed me to work from home on Saturday mornings. The time I would otherwise spend calling owners back is streamlined with texting through Medici. As a result, I don't have to play phone tag and almost all my consults occur during the work week. Initially, I was worried that I would get messages all hours of the day and night but after approximately 1,700 cases, I have found that clients do not send messages in the middle of the night. I attribute the lack of calls during the night to four factors. First, I can turn Medici off. Second, people are more respectful of me when there is a value placed on the interaction. Third, if the animal is having an emergency that requires immediate in-person care, the client takes the animal to the ER clinic. Fourth, I am interacting with VCPR-compliant cases. These are people who know me and choose me to care for their pets. After handling a telemedicine case, the most common response I get from clients when I let them know that I am going to charge them for the visit is "Thank you!"

6. **How do I know when a physical exam is required?** The short answer is to use your medical judgment. You are the doctor and you are the expert. The longer answer is each veterinarian will have a different level of comfort with what conditions can be diagnosed remotely. Currently, there is not an official guideline of best practices with regards to remote diagnostics, but veterinarians have been offering telemedicine for over 100 years. This deep well of veterinary telemedicine experience is important to use when determining what to diagnose remotely. One rule of thumb I use is I ask myself, "Would I diagnose this problem remotely for my sister-in-law's dog?" If I can answer yes, I typically feel comfortable diagnosing remotely in one of my paying clients. Also, consider that telemedicine allows the client to more easily reach out to you if anything changes. I typically end my remote consults by asking the owner to send me another message if the animal does not improve or starts to worsen. This affords me the flexibility to diagnose more conditions remotely because I can do a physical exam or refer the patient if my initial diagnosis was incorrect.
7. **What is definition of "recently seen" with regards to a valid VCPR?** The short answer is this - Doctor's discretion. There is no specific time listed in Practice Act. The long answer is this - the veterinarian will have to defend her definition of "recently seen" to the Indiana Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners if the Board decides to hear a complaint that has been brought against her. The Board is made up of veterinarians that know "recently seen" is not the same for all species. For example, an adult Great Dane's medical needs are more likely to change than an adult Shetland pony over a three-year span of time. This means the members of the Board might be comfortable with three years fulfilling the definition of "recently seen" for the pony but not the Great Dane. Practically speaking, most veterinarians consider "recently seen" as one year as a reasonable standard of care, but this is not a hard and fast rule.
8. **How do I introduce telemedicine to my clients?** You can send an email out to your clientele letting them know of this new and convenient option to access veterinary care to keep their pets healthy and safe. Additionally, post on all your clinic's social media channels and provide handouts and information in your clinic when clients are in.

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