

The Veterinary Physical Exam

Susan Wilkinson

"Hmmmmm, I just have to chime in on this one as it's one of the things I feel (cough, cough) that I do quite well in practice and it's a bit of a pet peeve of mine as my licensing body deems it to be professional misconduct to administer a vaccine without first performing a full physical exam -- yet I'm pretty sure that the el cheapo clinics that undercut everyone else certainly don't take the time to perform that exam

The physical exam (PE) to me begins with reading the animal's past history -- previous concerns, illnesses, reactions etc. Often I have the luxury of having my registered veterinary technician go in the exam room first to bring in the client and obtain the vitals of pulse, temperature and respiration, checks for external parasites - she also takes a brief history and will trim the nails if necessary. I usually take this time to review the patient file in the computer (we're paperless). When the technician comes out she goes over her findings with me and any concerns the owner has. I go in and greet the owner and just as importantly, greet the pet. If they're new to the practice (as a lot are these days with a new clinic), I spend extra time questioning past medical history and the lifestyle of the pet - including other pets, diet, exercise, travel history etc. Usually during this time I'm actually performing some of my PE, even tho' the owner and the pet aren't aware of it. I'm petting the animal and running my hands over them feeling for lumps. Over the years I've developed a standard routine for my "formal" PE which takes me from head to toes -- I do this with every pet in the same order so that nothing gets overlooked. I learned early in my career not to focus on the perseved complaint (i.e. sore ears), and risk missing something more major. I start with the head, flip the ears have a look/smell inside -- anything amiss I mentally note and will investigate further after completing the PE -- check the eyes, more senior pets I routinely pull out the ophthalmoscope & check the fundus (the back of the eye), flip the lips on both sides to look at the teeth, run my hands down the jaw line & neck to feel the lymph nodes, hands back along both sides feeling for lumps/palpating abdomen etc., check the knees, feel the lymph nodes in the hind limbs, check under the tail (tape worms -- URG!, or anal gland issues), general body condition (usually need to discuss diet here!) and condition of the skin/coat. Then out comes the stethoscope and I listen to all 4 quadrants of the heart and lungs on both sides -- I love when the tech has already done the counting for me for the pulse & respiratory rate, so all I have to do is concentrate on what I'm hearing. The entire time my hands are moving over the animal I make sure I communicate with the owner what I'm actually doing, as it often appears I'm just giving the animal a massage - it's important they're aware that they're getting value for that exam fee we're charging them! That's my basic PE -- from there I further investigate anything that may have been amiss and discuss with the owner --

cytology on a yucky ear, estimate prepared for dentistry, diet plan drawn up, offer further diagnostics -- wellness testing, parasitic blood screening, radiographs etc. We discuss vaccine protocols and what may or may not be appropriate. Of course fractious animals sometimes don't/can't receive the whole routine, but we do our best!!

I only vaccinate healthy pets -- raging ear infections, allergic skin conditions, those pot-bellied never been dewormed puppies & kittens, etc have their outstanding medical conditions treated first and then we'll consider what's appropriate for vaccines. It always amazes me the number of sick animals that are brought in and the owners will ask for them to get "their shots" at the same time - even tho' the poor critter has a blazing fever or huge hot spot Yesterday's aggressive dog that had put his foot through the glass window and was squirting blood all over the clinic from the severed artery (as he lunged uncontrolled at us!) -- sure enough, the owner asked me to give him his rabies vaccine!!! NOT! (I did however, neuter the beast while we had him anesthetized -- figuring that greater good outweighed the lesser).

off my soapbox for now"

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