

Taking your practice management system with you

James de Wesselow looks at the unique technological needs of the large animal practitioner.



Though not yet in wide use throughout Ireland, mobile veterinary technology available today is a major breakthrough for the large animal vet.

Practice management systems on the market today provide features galore for the companion animal practice. From the minute a client enters the reception area with Fido or Fluffy to the second the client pays the invoice, systems can now effectively track clinic activity, treatment protocols and related charges. Thanks in part to technology efficiency, pets receive better, faster care and clients leave with a sense of wellbeing – and an invoice that not only details services rendered, but reminds them of when the next wellness check is due.

But is the large animal vet served as well with the technology of today? Are the special needs of the vet who spends the greater portion of his or her day in the field being met? Let's take a look at where things stand and what lies ahead.

Unique needs of the large animal practice

Veterinarians who serve the large animal population have particular administrative and management challenges, among them:

- Booking and tracking appointments – a simple process at the local companion animal clinic is more

challenging when most of those appointments are made and carried out in the field.

- Viewing patient information, recording visit activity and printing invoices in the field – then ensuring that data is updated in the main practice system. Field visits open up an entirely new realm of technology and practice management challenge not experienced by the clinic-based veterinarian.
- Customising records to specific species requirements. It's one thing to record the basic profile of a dog or cat, but the large animal vet has a greater need to customise records to specific species requirements. For example, equine practices might want to record diverse information such as sire, dam, proper name, racing name, date of last dental, follicle or pregnancy test, date of last drench, etc., while the vet treating cattle would need to record a completely different yet equally detailed set of specifics.
- Recording and tracking medications taken to the field and administered individually or to herds. Veterinarians are faced with increasing regulatory requirements and technology must be up to the

challenge. For example, the recording of batch numbers and expiry dates on certain products is now a legal requirement in Ireland and across Europe. Veterinarians are fully accountable for tracking the movement of medication from the time a product hits the shelf through to identifying the specific animal to whom the medication was administered. Records are subject to audit, and technology must help practices meet this growing challenge in ways that are both practical and auditable.

Taking your system with you

The central issue underlying all of these needs comes down to one word: mobility. The vet serving large animals is not stationary in a clinic. He or she is on the move all day, travelling from one farm or stable to the next, and practice management technology needs to follow suit. So, where does technology stand today, both in terms of mobility and the ability to meet the other unique needs of the ambulatory vet?

With the advent of the laptop computer, it became possible for a veterinarian to take the entire client and patient database to the field, and some vets have done just that. The drawback of course, is that if there is staff back at a clinic location, they'll be unable to enter any payments, counter transactions, drug sales or even access up-to-date patient histories whilst the vet is away. To overcome this issue, some practice management system vendors have developed a mobile 'add-on' to main system software, which enables vets to take an up-to-date copy of the database with them on field calls. They can access patient records, client details, financial information, medical histories, lab results, images and any other attached documents relating to the client or patient. They can establish records for large animals with as many species variables as needed. They can record all visit activity, including drug usage and professional fees. If the same treatment is given to a number of animals, treatment details can be easily duplicated from one patient record to the next – a feature that saves immense time yet ensures record accuracy and compliance with regulations when mass treatments such as herd vaccinations are underway. By using a portable printer, field-based vets can also immediately issue an invoice for services rendered. And (perhaps surprisingly) vets report that many clients are happy to pay the invoice on the spot.

A keyboard is also no longer the only way to enter information – digital pens and scanners are also in play. Also, some suppliers now include both the batch number and expiry date on product labels, allowing practices to scan and capture traceability information.

Storing field work and preparing for the next day

Once the day's rounds are complete, all work can be uploaded to the clinic's main practice management system database either by connecting to the internet from home, or by returning to the clinic and reconnecting the laptop or tablet PC to the network. To prepare the following

day's field work, a fresh version of the database can be transferred from the main system to the vet's portable PC in a matter of seconds. This updated version will contain all current client, patient and financial information, plus a calendar showing latest appointments.

If a vet chooses not to print invoices whilst in the field, the work billed out during each visit can be kept 'open' for the office staff back in the practice to check, close and bill out. The important point here is that practices can develop internal processes which ensure that the gap between the field work that the vet is doing and what is being billed out is closed – and done so much more efficiently. No more deciphering handwritten notes.

Looking to the future

No useful technology remains static, and as mobile veterinary management technology gains acceptance around the globe, additional useful features and functions will be developed. Here's a peek at what this technology may look like just a few years down the road:

- Easy interface to regulatory and other databases – as EU regulations covering batch traceability increase, it may become a government requirement for vets to upload data from their systems to the relevant regulatory database. In Denmark, for example, it is already a requirement for practices to upload batch traceability information weekly to a regulatory database.
- Full replicated databases which automatically synchronise with each other will allow for ever increasing freedom to 'keep in touch' with the practice, colleagues and appointments whilst on the move. Also, the gaps that currently exist in rural Ireland regarding internet access will close over the next few years as internet demand increases and internet service provider (ISP) coverage spreads.
- Exchange of data between organisations is currently slow and cumbersome. This will improve as initiatives such as the SPVS-backed VET XML in the UK help develop common formats for data exchange between laboratories for test results, insurance companies and government bodies.

Though not yet in wide use throughout Ireland, mobile technology is a major breakthrough for the large animal vet. It eliminates hours of duplicated effort keying data into the main system, helps eliminate mistakes and speeds up both record entry and invoice creation. It also helps vets to accurately track and comply with important regulatory requirements such as batch traceability. Most importantly, it enables veterinarians to deliver an improved service to clients – a primary goal of any vet, whether on the move or in the clinic setting.

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