

Practice makes perfect

Melanie O'Donoghue VN, VetAssist, looks at the development of a new companion animal practice premises in Tyrrelstown, Dublin 15.



The new prep room at Cara Veterinary Hospital, Tyrrelstown, (left) and its 3D virtual version (above).

I set up VetAssist four-and-a-half years ago, with the aim of helping practitioners to develop their premises, both in design layout and in practice management. I was inspired to set up the business by identifying an area where I could see practitioners needed help. Whether setting up a new practice or developing an existing one, I help with the design as well as offering advice on fixtures and fittings and equipment needed within the practice. Sourcing all of these can be time consuming and, when added to the demands of a busy practice, they can be a huge cause of stress! In this article, I will describe a recent practice project for VetAssist: Cara Veterinary Hospital, Tyrrelstown, Dublin 15.

Planning a practice

My involvement with this project started in 2005 when new premises were sourced for the practice. Located in a busy business park, the building was finished to a very high standard, with 24-hour security and plenty of parking. A lot of veterinary practices are setting up in similar developments due to the increasing difficulty in obtaining planning permission in residential areas. Location is extremely important when choosing a premises; it must be convenient and close to other local amenities such as shops or schools. Parking is also a huge issue and, unless you have sufficient space, it may affect your chances of obtaining planning permission.

It is essential that the layout of the practice is practical in design and that each room leads or connects to the next corresponding room/ area. For example, in a poorly designed large animal or mixed practice the pharmacy may be located to the rear of the practice. This may be very frustrating for staff as it means they have to leave the front retail/reception area and travel long distances to retrieve products. If the pharmacy were to be located nearer to the front of the

practice, ensuring that there position was in keeping with the Animal Remedies Regulations, this would be a far better way of using staff time and productivity. With a lot of these issues in mind, Syd [Nagle, the practice principal at Cara Veterinary Hospital] contacted me to help him to create the best possible layout for the practice's needs.

Client communication

My first initial meeting with Syd was a fact-finding mission to learn what the practice needed and how it operated currently. A very busy companion animal practice, with a client base of around 7,500, Cara Veterinary Hospital had two main priorities: serving clients with the highest possible veterinary care and creating an excellent working environment for the veterinary team. I worked with the staff on a 'practice wish list' – a list of all the features they wished to incorporate into the practice design. From this, I started the design process.

PRACTICE PROFILE:

Practice	Cara Veterinary Hospital
Location	Tyrrelstown, Dublin
Practice category	Companion Animal
Practice principal	Mr. Sydney Nagle MVB MRCVS
Practice team	Two veterinary surgeons One practice manager Two qualified veterinary nurses One student veterinary nurse Three animal care assistants One receptionist
Property spec.	Business unit, approx 158 sq metres, two storey



The plans for Cara Veterinary Hospital were drawn up so that space was used as efficiently as possible. Pictured are the new laboratory/utility facilities.

I usually ask for a plan or footprint of a premises, which allows me to work with the space provided, merging the practices' needs with the practical design layout. I always aim to provide a few different options. This can prove important when dealing with the architect at the final phase of the design – for example when looking at fire safety and regulations. I also utilise as much space as possible as the costs per square foot a practitioner has to invest in such projects is an important factor.

Once planning permission for Cara Veterinary Hospital was obtained, the design was fine tuned and I completed a furniture and equipment layout plan – again vital to the utilisation of space. This plan also determined where plumbing and electrics should be placed. Unfortunately, too often plumbing and electrics can be an afterthought which restrict the layout of a room hugely. It can be the difference, for example, in whether a useful tub-table can be installed in a prep area or not.

At this point, I met with the practice staff to give them a 3D virtual tour of the premises. This helped them to get a good visual idea of the practice layout and where everything would be placed in each of the rooms.

Project construction

With all of the above points taken into consideration, Syd and the staff at Cara Veterinary were very happy with the practice design and construction started in March 2007. It took approximately eight months for the project to be completed and they moved into their new premises at the start of December 2007. The unit was originally a single story, but the insertion of a mezzanine floor doubled the floor space allowing for the space to be utilised more productively.

The practice ground floor now consists of:

- A bright, spacious open plan waiting and retail area for clients

- A reception and office area
- A weighing area
- Two consulting rooms
- A treatment room with recovery kennel, this room also houses the patients lift to the second floor
- Four large walk-in kennels
- An isolation unit
- A piped oxygen supply store, freezer and bin store
- A POM, pharmacy and bulk storage room
- Two WCs

The second floor consists of:

- A spacious open plan prep room, which all the other rooms lead off. This is where the patient lift is located.
- A dog surgical ward
- A cat surgical ward
- A cat boarding facility
- An x-ray room with automatic developing unit
- An operating theatre
- A pack preparation room with pack-pass connected to the theatre
- A laboratory and utility room
- Staff canteen and library
- Office area
- WC
- A service room for electrics, air exchange unit etc.

Special features

The practice also benefits from special features such as a lift which connects the ground floor treatment area to the first floor prep area – this has made the transport of patients from one floor to another much more practical. Patients tolerate the lift well and staff are spared heavy lifting up and down stairs.

There is also a pack preparation room situated off the prep room which is connected to the theatre. Its function is to house all the equipment needed for theatre, including the instruments which, once sterilised, are placed in a pack-pass and can be accessed from the theatre. This ensures that there is no unnecessary human traffic in the theatre, thus keeping sterility to the highest standards.

Another special feature is the animal weigh-in area in the waiting room. This was a small area with limited size due to its position. So, when the flooring was being prepared we constructed a recess in the floor which allowed a weighing scales to be embedded in the floor. This allows staff and clients to avoid the inevitable toe stubbing and ankle bashing incidents that weighing scales can create! Patients are also far happier to stand on the level area.

I was very fortunate to be able to 'test drive' my design as I returned to the practice in February 2008 to locum as a veterinary nurse. Overall, the feel of the practice design is good; the rooms flow well into each other and are they are laid out with ease of accessibility and use in mind. I was delighted to see how happy the staff were in their new surroundings – they now wonder how they managed in their older, smaller premises. When I spoke to clients I found that they were very impressed with the hospital. I was pleasantly



The pack-pass allows sterile equipment to be passed through to theatre, preventing unnecessary human traffic.

reassured by their expectations in this new era of veterinary health care; clients expect the best for their pets so we have an obligation as a profession to provide it.

Special thanks

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Cara Veterinary Hospital team for letting me be involved in the development of the practice and also for the 'test drive'. It was great to be able to work in a practice that I helped to create and to see the staff, clients and patients so pleased with the final result. I wish them every success in the future as they continue to provide an excellent veterinary service.

Melanie O'Donoghue has been in the veterinary profession – both clinical practice and industry – since 1990 and has worked in both Ireland and the UK. She qualified as a veterinary nurse through the RCVS in 1995. Melanie was appointed to the Veterinary Council of Ireland in 2006 and now runs practice development company VetAssist.



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