

# Making Your Practice and Facility More User-Friendly For Those With Disabilities

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As veterinarians, our duties extend beyond practicing medicine. We must realize that the veterinary profession requires excellent client communication and we must alter our way of practice to meet client needs. We must do more than compromise, empathize, and explain terms on a client's level. It is critical that we take into consideration the special needs of disabled clients. This paper will discuss some of the legal and ethical aspects of communicating with disabled clients while making your practice more user-friendly to those with these special needs. Dog guides and their care will also be discussed briefly.

## Statistics

Recent studies indicate that 49 million Americans are legally disabled which equals one out of every six citizens. Over 500,000 are deaf and another 7.7 million have hearing difficulties. More than 13 million are visually impaired of which 1.7 million of these being legally blind. 2.5 million are speech impaired and 19.2 million are mobility impaired (over 8 million using wheelchairs).<sup>1,2</sup> These are a significant percentage of the public, so it is inevitable that someday you will have clients with special needs. There are more than professional and ethical reasons for accommodating these clients, there are also legal responsibilities.

## The Americans With Disabilities Act

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed by President Bush on

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July 26, 1990. Title III of this law requires places of public accommodation to be accessible to persons with disabilities when accommodations are readily achievable without excessive difficulty or expense.<sup>2,3</sup> Veterinarians are affected by the ADA with regard to how we treat animals owned by disabled persons, by how we hire those with disabilities, and how facilities are designed and operated.<sup>4</sup> It is necessary to first understand the meaning of some terms according to the ADA. What is a disability? To be considered disabled, a person must satisfy at least one of these three requirements:

- 1) Have a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of that person's major life activities. "This includes any physiological disorder, condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of several body systems or any mental or psychological disorder. Major life activities include walking, seeing, sitting, and breathing" to name a few.<sup>3</sup>
- 2) Have a record of such an impairment,<sup>3</sup> or
- 3) Is regarded by the covered entity as having such an impairment.<sup>3</sup>

A place of public accommodation is defined by the ADA as "a facility operated by a private entity, whose operations affect commerce and fall within one of at least twelve entities". Animal clinics and hospitals are included, as well as pet shops and boarding agencies. A facility includes not only the building, but also the entrance roads, parking lots, and sidewalks under the control of that property.<sup>3</sup>

In new facilities or those undergoing renovations, curb cuts and ramps must be installed in parking lots and entries. The interior of the building must also be wheelchair accessible, requiring wide

doorways and non-restrictive flooring. Grab bars are required in bathroom stalls and water fountains must be low enough to accommodate for access by wheelchair.<sup>3,4</sup> Other helpful devices include levered door handles, Teletouch device phones, and large-print signs. Despite what you may fear, more than half of the ADA's required accommodations cost less than fifty dollars. Therefore, accommodations are readily achievable and reasonable and can be accomplished without excessive difficulty or expense.<sup>5</sup>

### **Client Communication**

Once you have your facility in compliance with the ADA, how do you go about communicating with these clients? Remember that disabled clients are also consumers whose decisions to or not to patronize your practice can affect your business. You should treat the disabled with the same respect as any other client. However, you must consider their individual needs on a case by case basis. Often disabled clients rely on public transportation or assistants for transportation and for this reason, you should try to allow flexible scheduling. It is also a good idea to allow prolonged appointments to allow good communication.<sup>1,6</sup>

### **Hearing Impaired Clients**

There are varying degrees of deafness and many ways of communicating with hearing impaired clients. Included in these communication choices are sign language, lip reading, cued speech, and written communication. You may ask the client which method she or he prefers. When a signing client is accompanied by an interpreter, it is important to talk directly to the *client*, not to the interpreter and allow extra time in the conversation for the interpretation. You must remember that the ADA may require you to provide an interpreter if needed. Charging the client for this expense, however, is illegal. You need to show the client what you are doing dur-

ing the exam and demonstrate treatments. Facing the client and speaking clearly is paramount. Exaggerated speech is not necessary. Written instructions of treatment is a helpful communication tool, but try not be afraid to ask a speaking, but hearing impaired client to repeat a sentence if you are having trouble understanding them. It is also the client's goal to facilitate good communication. As a result of the ADA, each state has established a relay system of text telephone service for communication between hearing and non-hearing persons.<sup>1,7,8,9</sup> Using advanced technology like Teletouch device phones shows the deaf client, as well as your other clientele, that your practice cares about the community.

### **Visually Impaired Or Blind Clients**

Verbalizing is the most important tool in dealing with hearing but visually impaired clients and trying to avoid using terms like here, there, this, and that because these terms are useless to an unsighted person.<sup>1</sup> Each employee who enters the room or interacts with the client should introduce themselves and ask the client if he/she would like to be led into the exam room by you or by their guide dog (if applicable). When offering a chair to the client, place their hand on the back of the chair.<sup>2</sup> You need to remember that a thorough history is not always possible for visually impaired persons. They can not tell you what color of urine or feces that the animal is eliminating. Verbally leading a blind client through the physical exam is also important to let them know about their animal's health. Facing the client as you speak also helps the client to hear you clearly.

Communicate with your client about administering medications since he or she may need hands-on demonstrations of treatments. Some creative thinking can help a client with home treatments. For example, syringe plungers can be notched to indicate the amount of liquid medication to administer. This system allows a blind client to feel how



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**Wheelchair accessible entrance at the Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Electronic doors allow disabled persons to enter without needing assistance.**

much liquid to pull up into the syringe. Medication containers can be distinguished from one another with rubber bands or strips of thick tape. Extra medications can be dispensed to account for spillage.<sup>1,8,9</sup>

### **Physically Disabled Clients**

Physically debilitating conditions like cerebral palsy do not necessarily indicate a lack of cognitive abilities. Many of these people may have speech impairments. Patience and understanding on your part will facilitate communication. If possible, try to sit in a chair to discuss the case at eye level with a person who uses a wheelchair and place signs lower on the wall so that the signs are easily read from the height of a wheelchair. Counters that are too high for a wheelchair user to see over are communication barriers. Door handles that are difficult to grasp may make it impossible for those clients to freely move into and around the facility. Some people using crutches or wheelchairs may need some assistance and be sure to ask in advance if the client needs a little help. As discussed earlier, communication is key with these clients so talk about home treatment abilities with the client to ensure proper home care.<sup>1,7,8,9</sup>

### **Dog Guides**

A dog guide is a general term referring to assistance animals for the handicapped. These dogs provide mobility,

dignity, independence, and companionship for many persons with disabilities. Guide dogs are used by the visually impaired, hearing dogs help the hearing impaired, and assistance dogs accompany those who are physically challenged. The use of proper terms informs the guide dog owner that you are familiar with their dog's role. Typically, medium to large breed dogs are used for guiding and assisting, while hearing dogs are usually smaller breeds.

Guide dogs allow their partners to safely avoid obstacles, stop at curb sides, find entries and exits, and avoid moving objects. These dogs are taught intelligent disobedience and will refuse a command they perceive as dangerous or unreasonable. Hearing dogs alert their partners to sounds in the environment, including the person's name. They will make physical contact with the person and lead them to the sound's source. Assistance dogs have many roles. They retrieve requested items, turn switches on and off, open and close doors. They can push buttons, pull wheelchairs, and provide stability for persons with balance problems.

Being aware of important needs is critical to the veterinary care of dog guides. Working dogs have special sensory functions that should be examined frequently. This means that dog guides should have perfect sight, hearing, and physical condition. A dog guide user's well-being depends on how well the animal functions. Any health problems relating to the dog interferes with the good working relationship. People using these animals depend on the animal's ability to sense stimuli in the environment. Therefore, the dog should have perfect mentation and sensory abilities when leaving the clinic.

Some procedures, such as dentals, can be altered to accommodate service dogs. Sedation or anesthesia can be avoided if the dog's teeth are cleaned more frequently. The degree of cleaning is not as detailed as usual, but the animal's sensory abilities do not have to be diminished.<sup>1,9</sup> Hospitalizing a dog guide should be reserved for extreme

cases. The client depends on that dog for daily activities and may not be able to perform at his or her full potential. However, most owners would rather not use their dog for a while than endanger its health.

### Where Can I Get Help?

There are many sources to help you make your practice and facility more user-friendly to clients with special needs. Here are some information sources:<sup>5,6</sup>

\**What Business Must Know About the Americans with Disabilities Act*, a booklet available from the US Chamber of Commerce, 1615 H St NW, Washington, DC 20062. Phone (800) 638-6582.

\**US Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board-Title III*, Suite 501, 1111 18th St. NW, Washington DC 20036. Phone (800) USA-ABLE.

\*US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section.

\*The references used in this paper.

Complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act is required by federal law. The actions taken to make your

clinic and facility better for those with disabilities, however, is an ethical issue as well. In dealing with public relations, client accommodation is paramount. Making these changes to your facility and how you run your practice on a daily basis is not only a good for public relations, but will also leave you with feelings of accomplishment and pride. ♦

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