

Straight Talk About Veterinary Telemedicine and the Veterinary Workforce

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Telehealth reduces barriers to care without opening the VCPR

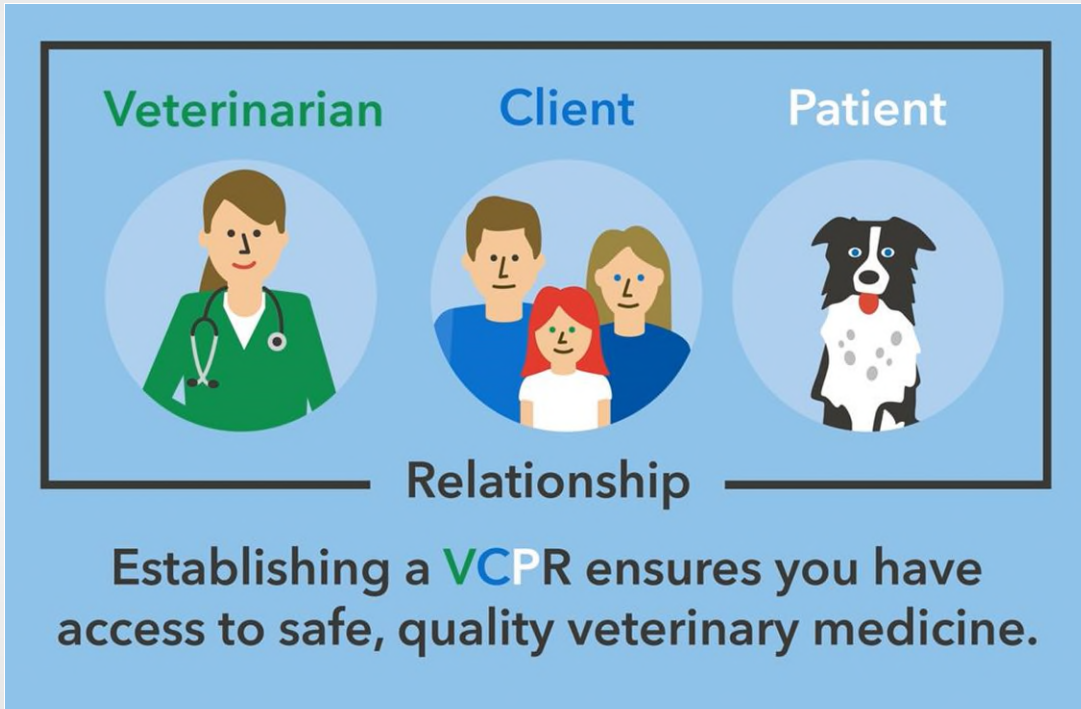
Definitions:

Telehealth is the **overarching** term that encompasses all uses of technology to remotely gather and deliver health information, advice, education, and care. This also encompasses teletriage.

- **Teleadvice** provides owners with basic answers to their questions and education around preventive care. **No VCPR** required.
- **Teletriage** enables determination of urgency (i.e., whether the animal needs to be immediately seen by a veterinarian or not). **No VCPR** required.
- **Telemedicine** can be used—once the **VCPR** is established through an in-person examination or premise visit—to facilitate progress checks and owner compliance. Saves time and money.
- **Emergency clauses** present in state practice acts allow treatment in the case where immediate intervention is required and/or address unique needs (e.g., geography), while maintaining the **integrity of the VCPR**.



Telemedicine



- Have been doing for a long, long, time.
- Important to do it with a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) established in-person.
- In-person visit provides critical information about both the patient and the client.
- Knowledge about both allows veterinarians to deliver an effective treatment plan the owner can follow.
- Animals with gaps in seeing a veterinarian are more likely to have acute and complex problems that neither an electronic VCPR, nor a prescription for flea control are going to solve.
- “Some care is better than no care” isn’t true when you have the wrong diagnosis and wrong treatment plan.
- An accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment plan from the start reduces the number of visits needed and reduces costs to the owner.



Because veterinary medicine is frequently compared to pediatrics...

- **AAP/ATA Guidelines:** Telehealth services should **not** be provided to children under two years of age in their home or other non-clinical setting ***except when the provider or their surrogate has a previously established in-person relationship with the patient or when the PCMH has referred them for subspecialty consultation.***
- **Curfman, et al, 2022:** Care within the medical home: Support for the use of telehealth within the medical home recognizes that the medical home offers continuity and the prudent use of health care resources, avoiding fragmented and episodic care delivered without such coordination.



Patient-Centered Medical Home vs Direct-to-Consumer Telemedicine

It is important to make a distinction between telemedicine provided in the PCMH vs a stand-alone DTC platform that targets a specific problem.

It is also important to distinguish between DTC sites that provide teleadvice and teletriage services vs those that prioritize product sales over appropriate care.



DTC Veterinary Care: Telehealth-oriented

TeleHEALTH companies provide general advice and/or triage services

Please note, _____ never offers a formal diagnosis or prescribes. Rather, our veterinary experts help pet parents understand signs and symptoms so they can make the best possible decision on behalf of their pet. No matter what our advice or the choices you make, we always follow up within 48 hours to see how things are going and if there's anything else we can do to help.

Does Teletriage Violate VCPR Regulations? ^

No. We have carefully worked with our legal team and various regulatory bodies to make sure that our Teletriage services do not establish any VCPR. Our doctors do not in any way provide diagnoses nor are we a substitute for a physical examination. Our triage team does not provide a prognosis or prescribe medications. To be clear, our Teletriage team DOES NOT provide Telemedicine. We do, however, provide triage support, assist owners in determining emergent versus non-emergent concerns, and assist with scheduling appointments with the practice the following day.

**Screenshots (2 companies--identifiers removed) acquired April 2023*



DTC Veterinary Care: Product-oriented

Online vet care and prescriptions, when you need it.
Meet with a top-rated online vet to get customized prescription treatment plans when you need it.

Patient: Kitty Cat
Symptoms: Scabs, crusts, and hair loss
Diagnosis: allergies
Treatment plan: antibiotics, flea meds

“At that moment the technological imperative transforms the healing profession into a healthcare enterprise and our patients become a means to an end.”

~Fleming, Edison, Pak

Can I get antibiotics for infections online?
Get prescriptions without costly vet visits.

Answer questions about your pet and get their medication shipped directly to your door. No wait times, no hassle, and all for an affordable price.

**Text from screenshots acquired April 2023 from various DTC companies--modified to remove identifying info.*



(Human) Medical Malpractice Risks

- Over 4-year period, one liability company found **66%** telemedicine-related claims related to misdiagnosis
- Harvard Medical School found **68%** telemedicine-related claims due to failed diagnosis
- Misdiagnosis accounts for **47%** claims associated with in-person visits
- Consequences of misdiagnosis were high
 - **44% loss of life** (most common consequence)
- **60%** malpractice claims resulted in settlement or award to plaintiff
- Mitigating risks is challenging because unknown how many cases settled before being heard in court



~Rowland 2022



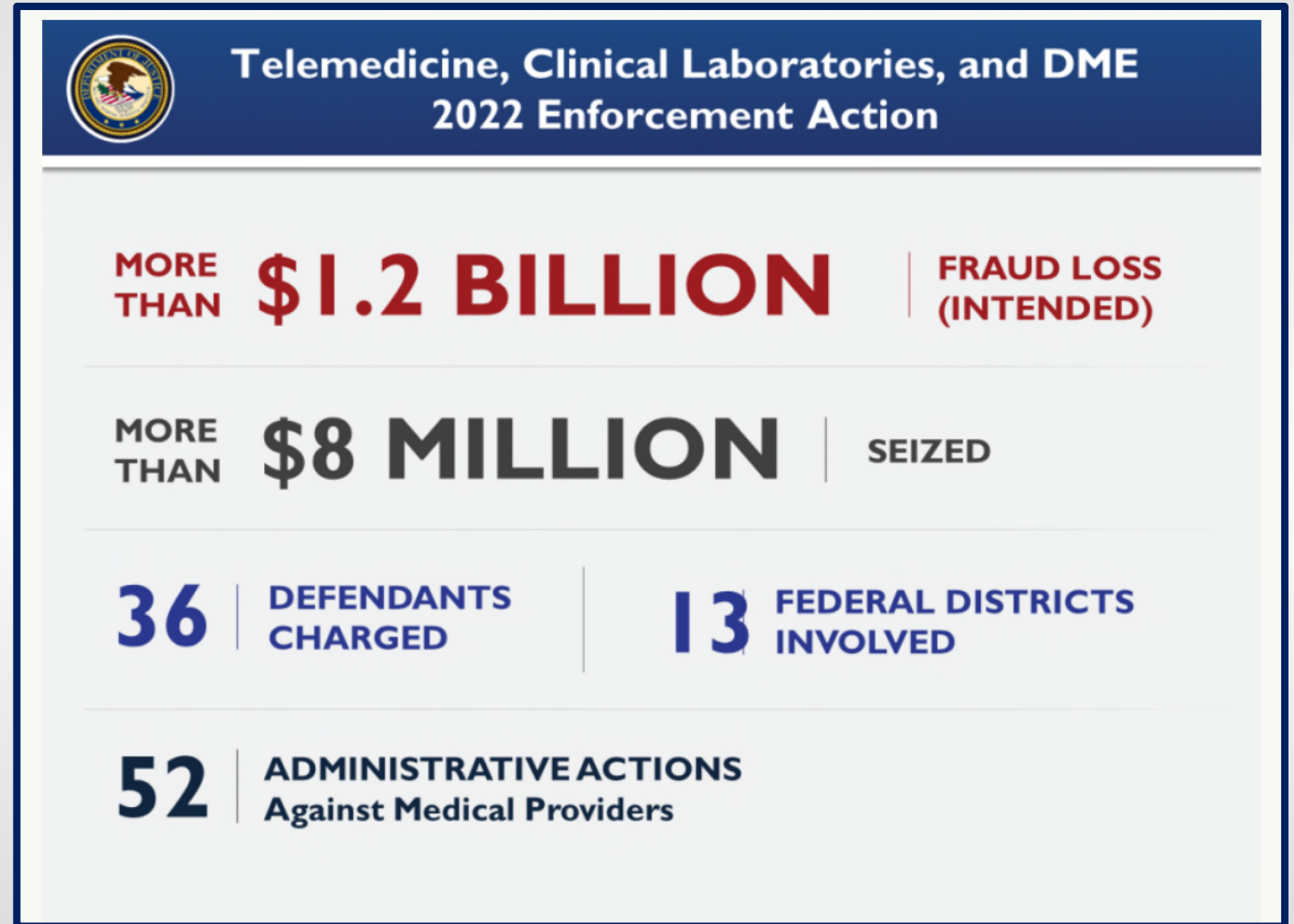
Challenges in Human and Veterinary Virtual Care

- Medicare data indicate that >25% beneficiaries lack digital access at home
 - Highest proportion amongst those of lowest economic status and those in communities of color
 - Disparities in digital access continue to exist
- Clients/Patients who have financial barriers to care may also have transportation barriers and limited internet access
 - ***Home visits are most essential for this population***
- Inappropriate prescribing of antimicrobials is more prevalent during telemedicine visits
- As DTC telemedicine companies continue to expand, it will be imperative for health care professionals and policy makers to monitor these treatment options to ensure convenience does not come at the expense of quality. ~Jain



What does a virtual VCPR deliver?

- Missed or delayed diagnoses
 - Patient suffering
 - Public health risks
 - High-consequence disease economic impacts that can range into the billions of dollars
- Confusion for veterinarians and clients due to differing state and federal requirements for prescribing
- Increased liability
- As learned from human medicine
 - Reductions in preventive care
 - Pill mills and fraud



More about the workforce: proposed solutions & likely effects

Increasing the number of veterinarians



- Already happening!
- Between 2022 and 2030 the number of **companion animal** veterinarians will grow by more than 20%—from about 80,000 to more than 98,000.
- In addition to this 20% increase...
 - Veterinary schools are adding seats to their existing programs.
 - **10** new veterinary schools are in various stages of development.
- Rural areas and certain segments of the profession—food animal, equine, shelters, academia, and some veterinary specialties—continue to be challenged.
- Hiring more staff substantively impacts practices financially.
- Problematic when market demand downshifts.
- Already seeing indications of a downshift: reductions in visits, new patients, and new client numbers, YOY



Proposed solutions & likely effects

Veterinary Midlevel Position

- Functions overlap services already competently delivered by veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and veterinary technician specialists.
- Accredited educational programs, national testing and licensing, and needed state and federal practice authorities, are likely to take decades.
- First NP program was established nearly 60 years ago, and human medicine still struggles with issues created by moving forward without standardized education, credentialing, and licensure. This includes educational programs that do not prepare students appropriately and put patients at risk.
- Instead, fully engage credentialed veterinary technicians and veterinary technician specialists as part of a veterinarian-led team and pay appropriately.

...Until this variability is resolved we conclude that NPs should not perform independent, unsupervised care in the ED regardless of state law or hospital regulations in order to protect patient safety.

—Lavin RP, et al. J Nurs Reg 2022;12(4):50-62



Proposed solutions & likely effects

Midlevel practitioner (MLP)

- In human medicine, recent large-scale studies^{1,2,3} have found:
 - MLPs significantly increase resource utilization, but achieve worse patient outcomes
 - Net medical costs are higher
 - MLPs have significantly more diagnosis-related malpractice allegations than physicians

X-ray ordering increased
441% among non-physicians



Non-physicians needed
2x the number of biopsies
to screen for skin cancer

Patients were **15%**
more likely to receive an antibiotic
from a non-physician



6.3% of nurse practitioners prescribed opioids
to over half of their patients compared to **1.3%** of physicians

¹Chan DC, Chen Y. The productivity of professions: evidence from the emergency department. Working Paper 30608, National Bureau of Economic Research, Issued October 2022, revised June 2023.

²Batson BN, Crosby SN, Fitzpatrick JM. Targeting value-based care with physician-led care teams. *JMSMA* 2022;63(1):19-21.

³Brock DM, Nicholson JG, Hooker RS. Physician assistant and nurse practitioner malpractice trends. *Med Care Res and Rev* 2017;74(5):613-624.

⁴American Medical Association, 2021.



Proposed solutions and likely effects

Areas and practice segment with special needs:

- Clear workforce shortages in
 - Rural areas
 - Food animal
 - Equine
 - Academia
 - Shelters
 - Some specialties
 - Public health
- Each faces unique challenges and needs targeted solutions.
- Neither simply increasing the number of veterinarians, nor creating a midlevel practitioner is going to fix these issues.



Proposed solutions and likely effects

Improving practice efficiency:

As we settle into the new, postpandemic “normal,” along with the rest of the world, it would be valuable to consider other ways of meeting demand that may provide more immediate—and more sustainable—gains, no matter how markets are behaving.

—Fred Ouedraogo, Peter Weinstein, Sandra Lefebvre

- Subject of recent article in *JAVMA*
- Study findings suggest efforts to optimize efficiency could allow companion animal practices to meet service demands without needing to hire more staff.
- Highly efficient practices use the least resources (inputs) to achieve maximal production (outputs).
- Improvements leading to better efficiency include
 - Engaging support staff to full potential
 - Fully utilizing technology (e.g., PIMS, digital inventory management, online scheduling, **telehealth**)
 - Better leadership and management



Questions?

