Dr. Emma K. Read

Editorial

No matter what you call it, we need it: teaching, mentoring, and practicing spectrum of care

Dear Readers,

It is with enormous gratitude that I am writing to you as the Guest Editor for this special issue regarding spectrum of care (SOC). As veterinarians and regular readers of this journal, you are acutely aware of the shortages we face across our profession and the growing number of animal owners in this country who are struggling to access veterinary services.[1] The veterinary profession landscape has continually shifted since an early report about SOC in 2018,[2] yet the needs that were identified then have become even more pressing now. At present, 71% of the veterinary profession in the US cares for companion animals, yet some geographic locations across the country reportedly have no accessible care for pet owners at all.[1] A 2024 survey[3] documented that 52% of clients reported having not taken their pets to the veterinarian within the past year, even when they felt their pet needed veterinary care, or that they had declined the care that was recommended to them by a veterinarian because of concerns with economic or personal limitations.

The situation in food animal and equine practice is similarly pressing because of the relative shift in workforce with the increasing urbanization, ballooning student debt load, and heavy emergency workload demands in rural practice. These challenges have led to critical geographic shortages that leave rural livestock owners with few, if any, options.[1] Veterinarians are critical for providing a broad spectrum of options for care that not only keep animals healthy but also protect the integrity of our nation's food supply and safeguard the country from foreign animal and other reportable diseases.[1] Specific care for an individual animal or herd is influenced by a myriad of factors, as determined to be "best fit" in each instance for the patient, client, client's business, or economic sector in which they work. Navigating which care options to offer in each unique situation or setting is a perpetual professional challenge, and one that veterinary colleges continue to struggle to effectively teach their students to master.[4]

There is currently no sector of the veterinary profession that can avoid the need to provide the ever-expanding and increasingly technical care options, yet it is important to do so in a manner that doesn't exceed what clients can reasonably afford or manage. At its core, SOC is the recognition that acceptable veterinary care isn't a fixed point but rather a continuum, tailored to meet the specific medical needs of each animal while simultaneously considering a holistic picture of the associated client's circumstances.[4] This drive in the profession to personalize care is also pushing our colleges to teach new generations to be more flexible, empathetic, and resourceful as they provide services.[5] In recent years, publications regarding SOC have multiplied, and veterinary colleges are now purposefully constructing and delivering programs that aim to better teach what some may argue has been practiced for years.[4-6]

Spectrum of care, as it has been described to date, embraces offering a range of acceptable care options for patients with consideration of evidence-based medicine and client-associated factors so that a veterinarian can best tailor a care plan to fit each unique situation. Spectrum of care offers a flexible, client-centered approach to animal health, recognizing that one size does not fit all. It strongly emphasizes meeting patients and clients where they are—medically, financially, and personally—and empowers veterinary teams to collaborate and customize treatment plans on the basis of what is best for each animal, at each stage of life, while promoting well-being, trust, and access to care across various communities.[6]

Naturally, debate has arisen about what to best call such renewed focus on offering a broader range of diagnostic and treatment options to clients, from low-cost, low-resource, low-technology options to high-cost, high-resource, high-technology options.[4] Terms such as *access to care*, *contextualized care*, *incremental care*, *value-based care*, and *team-based care* are being added to the lexicon, while phrases that have been used for decades like *gold-standard care* or *standard of care* are being increasingly scrutinized through a new lens.[6]

Access to care is about offering creative solutions for providing care to the widest range of patients possible and includes such solutions as low-cost clinics, payment plans, nonprofit partnerships, expanded insurance options, and the concerted effort to train and place more veterinary professionals in underserved areas with the goal being that every owner has the support they need to care for the animals that depend on them.[7] *Contextualized care* invites animal owners to openly communicate and be active participants in the decision-making process and honors both the animal's needs and the caregiver's beliefs and circumstances in order to provide care that respects individuality and prioritizes the patient.[8] *Incremental care* aims to prevent animal suffering and reduce long-term costs by starting with routine visits and preventable disease control

to catch issues before they grow. As concerns arise, care is offered in a progressive manner on the basis of how the patient responds to treatment. This gradual approach not only prevents suffering and reduces long-term costs, but it also allows for increased flexibility as new information emerges.[9] *Value-based care* is about achieving the best possible outcomes for animals while using available resources wisely and ethically,[10] whereas *team-based care* is about bringing together diverse groups of coordinated professionals to deliver comprehensive, high-quality care that ensures the animal benefits from varied expertise and options.[11]

Taken collectively, these different labels show that the veterinary profession is increasingly recognizing that we must respond to client concerns in a more empathetic way, while simultaneously considering the entirety of their situation and offering a broad range of possible options for the care of their animals. *Spectrum of care*, by definition, is the widest umbrella to embrace all of these ideas and offer personalized animal health care for modern needs. It represents a professional growth mindset and a shift from "What's ideal?" to "What's possible for this client and patient, right now?" This allows us to reach more animals and people in need, using our scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society, as we pledged to do upon graduation.[6]

For years, veterinarians and professional organizations have endorsed a focus on the ideal, establishing a "standard of care" that is grounded in scientific research while ensuring consistency, safety, and quality across the profession.[12] Veterinarians were taught to implement evidence-based protocols that evolved as the science did. This particular standard of care ensures that the profession is committed to doing what is best for animals. *Gold-standard care* is a term that has been used since the early 1960s that represents the excellence in diagnosis and treatment with every decision, procedure, and interaction that is driven by the pursuit of optimal health and quality of life for the animal. *Gold standard* maintains ethical integrity by providing clear communication to clients about treatment options, costs, and anticipated outcomes[13]; however, it has recently been called into question because it tends to result in a "one-size-fits-all" approach to care, which may disservice some patients and clients if they lack the resources to afford it.[13] As veterinarians, we have been classically trained to provide state-of-the-art medicine whenever possible, which is often confused by learners with standard of care. At a veterinary college, a professor espousing a "gold-standard" option to reduce the risk of litigation or disciplinary action reinforces to those new to the profession that we should be offering a single best option in each case, rather than helping clients select from a range of options that may be best for their unique circumstances.[12] Embracing an SOC approach necessarily means that we need to practice differently, and that begins with teaching differently. As the public demands and the profession embraces the need for SOC, it is important that we broadly agree upon the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values we must teach our students and mentor our new graduates to help them be more confident and competent practitioners.[14]

This special issue of *JAVMA* highlights the ways in which we can embrace SOC in practice and offer it to our clients, how we can best mentor new graduates to feel comfortable in providing this kind of practice, and how we can improve our own skills in many of these important areas. This issue also provides insight into how little our profession has investigated options for care outside of the "gold standard" and how there is a critical need to make that happen so we can better provide more comprehensive care for those around us. It also highlights changes required in our own mindset and asks us to question our reservations in meeting these needs. I encourage all of us—student, new graduate or seasoned practitioner, specialist or generalist, companion animal or rural animal provider—to embrace a change in thinking and working so that we can hold up our end of the "grand bargain"[15] and provide society access to affordable and high-quality care no matter the zip code of the client or the dollars in their pocket.

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