



The Current State of Telemedicine in Ontario

Background

In Ontario, the practice of veterinary medicine is governed by The College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO). In September 2018, CVO revised its Professional Practice Standard on Telemedicine. The key elements of the revised practice standard were as follows:

- Telemedicine is defined as “the provision of specific veterinary medical advice and veterinary treatment of an animal(s) based on the remote diagnosis of disease and injury by means of telecommunications technology where no physical examination of the animal(s) by the veterinarian takes place. It does not include consultation between veterinarians where colleagues in different physical locations consult remotely with each other or the provision of general, non-specific, advice”.
- Veterinarians may establish a VCPR via telemedicine.
- To meet the practice standard, a veterinarian must employ “sound professional judgment to determine whether using telemedicine is appropriate in particular circumstances each and every time he or she considers practising via telemedicine, and only provides advice via telemedicine to the extent that it is possible without a physical examination”.
- Veterinarians are cautioned against “substituting telemedicine technology for a physical examination when a physical examination is necessary, and where he or she could not thereby make an appropriate diagnosis or create a treatment plan”.
- A veterinarian “cannot prescribe drugs when practising via telemedicine alone, unless the veterinarian has recent and sufficient knowledge of the animal or group of animals by virtue of a history and inquiry and either physical examination of the animal(s) or groups of animals or medically appropriate and timely visits to the premises where the animal or group of animals is kept to reach at least a general or preliminary diagnosis”.

In March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, CVO temporarily amended its rules regarding prescribing via telemedicine (see the last point above) to assist veterinary practices to provide patient care in a manner that protected the health of both clients and veterinary staff during the pandemic. CVO’s temporary guidance states that:

- “A veterinarian is expected to use their professional judgement when determining whether they have an appropriate amount of recent and sufficient knowledge in order to provide a prescription. If a veterinarian believes that they have this information, then a veterinarian is permitted within a VCPR to provide a prescription via telemedicine.”

This change effectively enables veterinarians to prescribe medications where the VCPR has been established via telemedicine, without a physical examination of the animal, if they believe they have recent and sufficient knowledge of the animal to provide that prescription.

Impact on the Profession

Telemedicine is not new to the veterinary profession. Veterinarians have been offering telemedicine, primarily by phone, for decades. What has changed is the scope of what Ontario veterinarians are allowed to do via telemedicine, and the increasingly diverse means by which veterinarians are communicating with clients.

Telemedicine offered a lifeline to both Ontario veterinarians and animal owners in April/May 2020, when the provincial government mandated that veterinarians were only able to offer emergency care. Out of necessity, veterinarians significantly expanded the use of telemedicine to communicate with clients.

The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA) frequently surveys its members regarding issues of interest to the profession. Here are some of the findings from that research regarding telemedicine.

- Within two months of the provincial shutdown, 86% of veterinarians in Ontario reported they were using telemedicine to manage cases. (*Source: OVMA May 2020 COVID Survey*)
- Of those who were using telemedicine:
 - 86% were using telemedicine to manage non-urgent or chronic cases.
 - 68% were using telemedicine to triage new cases.
 - 56% had used telemedicine to establish a VCPR for prescribing and dispensing medications. Being able to do so was particularly important when so many Ontario residents were acquiring new pets during the pandemic and were in need of flea, tick and heartworm medication for their new pets, but did not yet have a VCPR established with a veterinarian.
- Most veterinarians (83%) were using the telephone to conduct their telemedicine consults. 12% used Zoom, and 8% used another form of free video or phone chat service through their smart phone. Only 11% were using a dedicated veterinary telemedicine application. Many practices were using multiple methods, depending on the nature of the consult and the technological capability of the client.
- By July 2020, four months after the pandemic shutdown began and two months after veterinarians were once again able to book non-emergency appointments, 81% of practices in Ontario were still utilizing telemedicine. (*Source: OVMA July COVID Survey*)

Impact on Patient Care

One of the major concerns expressed by those who oppose the establishment of a VCPR by telemedicine is the likelihood that allowing such a practice will result in adverse patient

outcomes. Two years after allowing the establishment of a VCPR via telemedicine, the College of Veterinarians of Ontario has yet to receive a single complaint from veterinary clients related to an adverse outcome resulting from the use of telemedicine. This is a testament to both the direction that CVO provided to veterinarians in terms of the appropriate use of telemedicine, and veterinarians' ability to use their professional judgement to determine when to employ telemedicine in patient care and client communication.

Not only have there been no adverse outcomes to date, offering telemedicine has proven effective in enhancing client convenience and reducing in-practice veterinary traffic, which has helped to protect the health of both clients and veterinary staff during the pandemic. Ontario pet owners who have participated in a telemedicine consultation report a 75% resolution rate with pet-absent telemedicine consults. Only 25% reported that they had to bring their pet into see the veterinarian (*Source: OVMA 2020 Pet Owner Survey*)

Where to From Here?

The College of Veterinarians of Ontario is currently considering whether to make permanent the temporary provision enabling veterinarians to prescribe if the VCPR has been established via telemedicine without examining the animal, as long as they have recent and sufficient knowledge in order to provide the prescription. CVO Council is scheduled to consider that question early in 2021.

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