

Modern modalities in small ruminant practice

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Abstract

Feeling old-fashioned on your farm calls? While we may enjoy the break from screentime, emails and phone calls we get while practicing on small ruminants, there are some pieces of modern technology that can improve our efficiency, patient care and work life balance if we let them. Adapting to new technology can be hard, especially as new things come out every day, but this presentation aims to provide specific ideas and recommendations that may help small ruminant practitioners. You don't have to give up your horse and buggy if you don't want to, though – everyone's practice style will be unique to them!

Key words: technology, artificial intelligence, medical records, client communication

Medical records

Programs

A wide range of software and web-based medical record options are available for practitioners to use. Electronic medical records (EMR) provide a multitude of benefits, despite it potentially feeling more comfortable to write hand-written notes. EMR allows the use of templates, pre-written content and more detailed notes that improve the quality of medical records. They also ensure legibility of records, ease of sharing information with clients and referrals, and a professional appearance. Although not at the forefront of everyone's mind, EMR tend to be more defensible in the case of a dispute, legal case or board complaint. There are many options available, with cloud-based programs ensuring access to data at any location with available service or internet. Software based programs may be preferable in some situations. Cost and functionality vary significantly, and not all programs are well-suited to small ruminant practice, as many have default settings geared towards a traditional small animal practice. Integration with inventory and practice management solutions may provide additional benefits.

Templates

Use of templates or pre-written content for medical records is essential for efficient use of time and improves consistency of messaging and information delivery to clients. Exam templates based on species or type of exam can be a simple way to begin, if not previously utilized. Detailed exams can be very quick to write if a normal template is utilized and only abnormal findings are modified. Many EMR programs allow for quick insertion of pre-written templates, often called macros, snippets or shortcuts. While it may take a while to develop an initial library of content, the author utilizes hers frequently for sharing information about things like withdrawal times, parasites, mineral supplementation and general herd health recommendations.

Scribes

Multiple companies offer simple dictation, AI-based dictation and human scribing services. The author has no direct personal experience with them, but some colleagues report that the AI-based programs can listen to the veterinarian dictate an exam and formulate an SOAP afterward. In the right setting, this can help streamline medical records.

Communication

Phones

Communication is the cornerstone of owner compliance and satisfaction but can be a burden and stressor to many practitioners. A constantly buzzing cellphone can be stressful and impact quality of life and balance, but there are some modern apps and programs that can help alleviate some of that stress. While some people may choose to communicate via phone call or email exclusively with clients, texting can provide quick check ins and provide useful context such as photos and videos which allow the practitioner to triage issues before rushing to a call. Using applications like Google Voice, Grasshopper or OpenPhone can provide a separate phone number to clients but still allow access to texts/calls from a personal device. Some of these apps allow for sharing access between multiple employees, setting automatic reply messages, and maintaining "business hours."

Social media

Social media can be a valuable tool to connect with clients and give them personal or educational insight into your practice. The author chooses to share photos of patients and clients that have consented to Instagram to highlight common conditions, services, or seasonal recommendations. Having an internet presence can be a good way for potential clients to become familiar with your practice and existing ones to feel involved and connected. Unfortunately, it can also be a magnet for disgruntled clients and unrelated discourse or arguments. Virality may not bring new clients and revenue to a practice, and the author recommends monitoring any social media posting and interactions carefully. Facebook, Instagram and Tik Tok tend to be the most frequently utilized apps.

Revenue

Payment processing

Taking credit cards is almost universally expected by clients at this point and allows clients more flexibility in how they pay for services for their animals. There will always be a cut that the credit card processors take, but sometimes this can be negotiable between providers to attain a competitive rate. It is the author's opinion that the cost of processing fees is an inherent cost of doing business, and all prices should reflect that cost. A modest cash discount can be offered to incentivize cash payments, if one prefers it. Many different companies exist with

various kinds of hardware that can take cards with or without internet service, though many EMR programs have integrated payments that only require typing a credit card number into the software. Allowing for online or over the phone payment also gives more flexibility with invoicing, if unable to finalize an invoice at time of service.

Financial apps

Many clients prefer to pay invoices via money transfer apps. Many of them are free for personal transactions, but require paying similar fees to credit card processors for business transactions (beware PayPal and Venmo, especially). The author recommends having one or two apps available to receive payment, to provide additional ease and convenience for clients.

Online pharmacies

While being berated by Chewy about prescriptions is low on everyone's list of favorite activities, the author reluctantly encourages everyone with a smaller practice to consider an online pharmacy. It reduces the amount of inventory required to be stocked, and allows prescribing of singular, expensive items. While the margins are better if ordered from distributors and dispensed by the practice, the convenience of outsourcing inventory management, order fulfillment and shipping can be a time-saver that is worth the decrease in margin. It also provides a bit of revenue retention if owners ask about scripts for Chewy, Valley Vet, and other places that do not give a percentage to the prescribing veterinarian. MyAnimalRX by MWI is the most tailored to large animal practices, but some of the other more small-animal-focused ones like VetSource can provide useful products for small ruminants.

Miscellaneous

The author also recommends getting an inexpensive wireless Bluetooth label printer for dispensing prescriptions that comply with legal requirements in an ambulatory setting. She generates labels in her EMR and uses Bluetooth to print, but you can make templates in the printer's software or simply print labels with spaces to add your own SIG and medications. Additionally, an Instant Pot can be an inexpensive and small alternative to an autoclave for sterilization of small packs and instruments.¹

References

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