Monica Tarantino

Bridging the Gap: Communicating with Senior Dog Pet Parents

Editor's note: *This is the third and final part of a series by Dr. Tarantino on the care of senior dogs. In May she explored why senior dogs represent one of the most underleveraged yet emotionally meaningful demographics in veterinary medicine. In June, she discussed how to build a senior dog care program and why doing so can elevate patient outcomes, client satisfaction, team morale and practice revenue. This month Dr. Tarantino focuses on how to build trust with owners of senior dogs through informed, empathetic client communication.*

Highlights:

- For veterinary practice managers and those guiding hospital strategy, it's not enough to manage the medical side of care for senior dogs. Our teams may need help connecting with the unique needs of the people who love them.
- During interactions with clients who have lost their dog, communication breakdowns can occur easily, leading to mistrust, missed care opportunities or frustration directed at the veterinary team.
- Words hold immense weight with clients who are already under stress. Managers can share best practices on communication with their teams.
- Frequent calls, long emotional consults and after-hours emails can lead to emotional exhaustion on the part of the veterinary team.

Veterinary professionals already know that senior dogs are complex medical cases. But for veterinary practice managers and those guiding hospital strategy, it's not enough to manage the medical side well. We must also help our teams connect with the unique needs of the people caring for these dogs.

Senior dog pet parents are not a passive demographic. Many are deeply bonded to their pets, overwhelmed by decisions, and often isolated in their grief. As a result, communication breakdowns can occur easily, leading to mistrust, missed care opportunities or frustration directed at the team. Following are three common emotional patterns to train your team to recognize.

- **Anticipatory grief.** Fear of making the wrong decision is common, especially around end-of-life choices. Research has shown that caregivers of seriously ill pets often experience elevated anxiety and distress, particularly when dealing with terminal diagnoses or cancer [Spitznagel et al., 2021].
- **Caregiver burden.** Long-term medical management at home can exhaust owners, especially when physical support, emotional bandwidth or financial resources are limited. Caregivers who perceive treatments as ineffective are more likely to experience increased emotional burden [Spitznagel et al., 2021].
- **Information overload.** Clients often arrive at the practice after researching forums, Googling symptoms and absorbing misinformation. (This is not a judgment; it's a reflection of how desperate they are for clarity and comfort.) Providing your team with the tools and language to respond effectively to each of these states can help prevent burnout while enhancing client satisfaction.

Common missteps and how to avoid them

Veterinary team members often unintentionally worsen communication with senior dog parents when they:

- Skip goal-setting conversations early on.
- Overwhelm owners with lists of problems.
- Fail to provide clear plans and timelines.
- Use vague or overly clinical language when discussing diagnoses.
- Avoid hard conversations about quality of life or prognosis.

Practice managers should create protocols for:

- Regularly scheduled wellness visits (at least twice yearly) for seniors.
- Standard phrases or scripts for goal-setting. ("Our focus is creating the happiest life for your dog for as long as possible.")
- Euthanasia-prep SOPs that include emotional support language.
- Encouraging the team to offer options, even when uncertain owners need time,

Words hold immense weight with clients who are already under stress. Managers can share best practices on communication with their teams, such as:

- **Say:** "We found cancer on your pet's diagnostics; let me tell you what we know," rather than, "We saw some concerning findings; maybe we'll refer."
- **Say:** "It's common for older pets to have multiple things happening at once. Let's talk about the big picture," instead of, "There's a lot going on here."
- **Say:** "Here's what we're watching for. If X happens, we'll Y," instead of, "We'll see how it goes."

These small refinements build client confidence and improve retention.

Supporting your team while supporting clients

Frequent calls, long emotional consults and after-hours emails often stem from the emotional load clients are carrying. Studies show that caregiver burden is associated with increased clinic contact and emotional exhaustion among the team [Spitznagel et al., 2021]. Practice managers can support their teams by:

- Implementing nurse appointments or telehealth check-ins to reduce doctor overload.
- Assigning client liaisons for complex senior cases.
- Offering written handouts and FAQs to reinforce in-room conversations.
- Encouraging clear timelines for rechecks and medication reviews.

The practice can refer families to outside grief support resources (such as Pet Loss Community or local counselors) when appropriate. This validates the client's emotional experience and gives the team breathing room.

Your senior pet program doesn't end with diagnostics and treatment. It extends into exam room conversations, follow-up care, and how your team makes senior dog parents feel. With strong communication systems in place, you'll not only support better outcomes, you'll also build deep loyalty and trust, which fuel lasting success.

Monica Tarantino, DVM, is a veterinarian with over 10 years of experience. She formerly served as chief of staff at a busy general practice in Charlotte, North Carolina, and is co-founder of the **Senior Dog Veterinary Society**, an organization dedicated to advancing the care of senior and geriatric canine patients. Dr. Tarantino runs ***Senior Dog Revolution*** (@seniordogdoc), a social media platform that helps pet parents navigate the unique challenges of caring for aging dogs. She is the coauthor of two books designed to support recent graduates in their transition into practice – ***New Vet Jumpstart Guide: GP Edition*** and ***ER Edition.*** A passionate rescue advocate, she shares her home with four rescue dogs, two rescue cats and the occasional foster pet.

Want your vet team certified to care for senior dogs? Visit seniordogvets.com and use code FOUNTAIN25 for $25 off per team member. Or email info@seniordogvets.com for group rates.

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