

## **Advancing Patient Care Through Team Commitment to Forward Booking**

The Roaring Fork Valley provides some of the best fly fishing in Colorado, and the town of Carbondale – with its 6,500 residents located in the mountains 170 miles west of Denver – lies at its center. Resting in the magnificent shadow of 12,953-foot Mt. Sopris, Carbondale offers plenty of activity and enjoyment for tourists and residents alike.

Carbondale also provides the home to Alpine Animal Hospital, a thriving, AAHA-accredited mixed animal practice with five veterinarians and 12 staff members. Mary Fox, MBA, who characterizes Carbondale as “a fabulous town” and serves as Alpine’s hospital administrator, recently shared her observations about successfully implementing forward booking into the protocols and culture of the hospital.

Q: How did your practice implement forward booking?

A: It was a process, and it took some time because part of it was spending time with the staff to figure out practice goals and values, and how we express them in a positive way. We quickly learned that if we talked about forward booking in isolation and didn’t attach it to preventive healthcare, the staff thought it seemed pushy. Once we got staff buy-in that they were acting in the best interest of the patients, they started to feel comfortable and confident talking about forward booking.

Q: What was the biggest barrier to implementation?

A: First, the staff did not want to be “pushy salespeople.” Second, communication in the practice needed improvement. The front desk often did not know what the next step was in the preventive healthcare process so we improved the communication between our receptionists and our exam room team. We now use the code “RTG” in our software system, which stands for “Ready To Go.” No patient can leave without that code, and next to the code the doctor indicates the next steps in the patient’s healthcare.

Q: How does forward booking tie into your patient reminder system?

A: We’re right in the middle of evaluating the process of how we want to remind our clients. We have a new communication platform, which starts with an email reminder, then goes to a text, then a call. Once the appointment is confirmed, the client doesn’t receive any other messages. Because we use all mediums (email, text, phone), a lot fewer cards go out, which saves us time and money. In the beginning, the staff was very tentative about asking for client email addresses. It’s taken about a year, but now they say to clients, “and your email address is...” without becoming apologetic.

What has also been important is for our staff to be unafraid of saying to the client what the patient needs. The best care for the pet should not be posed as a question, rather it’s “here’s

what's best for your pet." You have to believe in providing the best care and then it's natural to say, "let's schedule that exam" instead of asking for permission.

Q: How good is the practice at forward booking?

A: 90% there! It took two years because our goal is to help our staff understand that we're all in this together. It's really a switch in practice culture, which will have a longer lasting effect than just dictating protocols to the staff.

Q: Any other advice for practices?

A: Have definite, purposeful goals that will bring your team together – Why are we here? What do we want our culture to be? Then, build it out and ask, "How do we accomplish this?" Sure enough, you circle back to where you started and the initial things that were difficult to implement, you either find they fit in or they don't and you reject them. We are always trying to do things better.