

Complications in small animal veterinary surgery

Editorial

Dear Colleagues, one of the most difficult and stress-full times for a small animal veterinary surgeon is when even after minor surgical procedures complications occur. Everybody who is involved with veterinary small animal surgery (veterinary surgeons, technicians and nurses) is pretty much aware of potential complications that might come up during or after surgical procedures. It is our responsibility to be always prepared to identify and deal with any of these as early as possible when they come up.

All surgical teams should provide the owners, even before surgery, all available information regarding potential complications and risks that might come up and make sure that they understand the fact that all anesthetic techniques, investigative and surgical procedures potentially involve some risk to the patient. By signing the consent form the owners give us the right to move on and perform the surgical procedures that our patients require. Have we ever really asked ourselves which of those risks could we accept-as individuals-for our own pets or ourselves or even for our children?

We all know that complications do occur and are not uncommon in everyday practice. We do explain to owners preoperatively what can possibly go wrong, but do we really know how likely this to happen is? We have to explain to owners in detail using our own experience and of course the current literature all different scenarios regarding the surgical procedure in question.

It is also our moral obligation as professionals to bring up these issues and provide realistic reports for what we do in our practices rather than how successful we are with certain surgical procedures. If a surgeon states that "there are no complications in my surgeries", then he or she, is not a surgeon. Therefore for each one of us it is very important to understand our limitations and when a case is not in our field of expertise it is ethical and in our favor long-term to seek for referral service in order to provide the best available therapeutic approach to our patients.

Of course some might say that it would be more appropriate to evaluate complication rates on individual groups of veterinary surgeons. It seems reasonable to expect that surgeon's level of skills may contribute in variations in success rates when same procedures are encountered. Everybody can accept that compared to general practitioners a veterinary surgeon with a diplomatic status or advance surgical training may encounter fewer surgical complications because of higher level of surgical skills and probably more adequate facilities and support from its specialist centre (either referral practice or university).

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There is though one more problem regarding complication data available in the veterinary literature. The majority of those are derived from universities or referral practices. In general they both feel confident to report complications, more likely because they do not expect their reputation to be threatened or because their case load in most cases includes more difficult or advanced surgical entities in which someone could consider complications more anticipated although always unpredictable.

We still don't know what happens in general practices where veterinary surgeons might be less experienced and probably deal with fewer cases. Are their complications rates higher, smaller or similar to specialist centre's? Probably general practices are less experienced but some might say that they have the advantage to spend more time for individual cases.

Considering all of the above I do believe that we need more reports from general practices to help us complete the image. Every veterinary surgeon, either diplomate or general practitioner should be confident to report complications. It is very important for all of us to contribute to veterinary literature by sharing our experience and knowledge and publish papers reporting complications we have encountered in our practices. It is highly professional conduct to report complications, yes it takes courage to do it and we certainly should give it a try.

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