

Pet Insurance: It's all about YOU!

Dr. Jennifer Sperry
Veterinary Advisor
Crum & Forster Pet Insurance Group™

Outrageous. Ridiculous. Insane.

How many of us have heard these words from our clients? Are they talking about our mad surgical skills? Our diagnostic prowess? No! They're talking about our fees, of course! They're using these words to tell us they don't see as much value in our services as they see dollars on the bill. And it's discouraging, right? Day after day...to be told that your expertise isn't worth the expense?

People's reactions to your fees will never change. Veterinary medicine will continue to advance, the human-animal bond will continue to strengthen, and client expectations will continue to soar, but pet owners will *never* enjoy spending their limited discretionary (or non-discretionary) income on medical bills. We can educate them about value, but they will never welcome the expense. For your own efficiency, professional fulfillment, and mental health, you need to guide your clients towards tools that can help them access and afford appropriate veterinary care.

We have all experienced the typical pitch for pet insurance: Insured pets visit the vet more often, and their owners spend more per visit compared to the owners of uninsured pets.

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This benefits both the pet and the clinic, translating to an increased level of care and increased revenue.

Recommending insurance in the interest of the pet is noble. Recommending it to bolster your clinic's revenue is smart. But in today's high stress veterinary environment, I want you to forget about all that, and recommend it for completely selfish reasons. Recommend it because it could make your clients behave better. Recommend it because it could make *your* life better.

The secret is finally out: the life of a veterinarian is a stressful and often dark experience. Clients' expectations for their pets' health care are high. They want advanced treatments, flashy alternative therapies, and quality health products, all delivered with white-glove customer service. Client *budgets*, however, don't align with these expectations. They have a poor comprehension of the cost of care, and they're expecting a vet bill straight out of a James Herriot novel.

More than half of Americans have less than \$1,000 available to pay for an unexpected expense.¹ And on average, your clients stop or refuse treatment, or even consider euthanasia, when costs exceed \$1,300-\$1,700.² This obviously creates a tense, emotional, and challenging situation when a costly medical concern arises.

Veterinarians and their teams routinely face bullying, threats, and abuse related to the disconnect between treatment expectations, cost expectations, and the perception of value. On top of this, veterinary team members must navigate other stresses like demanding work, crippling debt, and wages that rarely reflect their level of responsibility and expertise. These factors contribute significantly to the current mental health crisis in veterinary medicine.



So, I want you to start emphasizing the importance of pet insurance for *you*.

Pet owners can never be made to truly understand the cost of delivering high-quality veterinary care. They will never comprehend how many ways an animal can become sick or injured. And some will never learn to control their behavior when expenses and emotions collide.

When I was in clinical practice, I focused my “insurance talk” efforts on the owners of pets that I predicted would become medical lemons: The Frenchies, the Scottish Folds, the “hypoallergenic” designer dogs that seemed (ironically) destined to develop all the allergies. But the reality is that *all* animals are at risk of suffering from a costly injury or illness.

When you decide to commit some of your precious time to discussing pet insurance with your clients, think about which *clients* will need it, rather than which *pets* will need it. How many of your clients have \$1,000 available in case of an emergency? How many have \$5,000? How many can add the cost of managing a chronic illness to their expenses?

When you talk about insurance with your clients, you should do it for you!

- Do it so you don't have to go home and worry about the blocked cat who got the 'cath and dash' treatment.
- Do it so you can exercise your full potential as a veterinarian.
- Do it so you and your team get showered with gratitude, instead of cost complaints at discharge time.

As interest rates rise, the cash reserve of the average client can be expected to dwindle. We all know the atmosphere in the exam room when you start discussing a patient's diagnosis. That breathless space when you deliver a treatment estimate and the client's expression flashes from concern to panic to anger or sadness. We have all seen the frenzied attempts to make decisions and secure funds. And it wears us down! It gets in our way! It interferes with our purpose as doctors!

“You are one of the most powerful influences on your clients' insurance decisions.”



they can submit their claims on their own, through a user-friendly app.

Wellness plans now allow clients to budget for routine care. The need to integrate with your practice management software can be bypassed, protecting your clients' privacy. Best of all, new financing options, coupled with pet insurance, give your clients access to the funds they need to start treatment right away, eliminating the strain of paying out of pocket for up-front costs.

Tools like this can help your client get from diagnosis to reimbursement seamlessly, without scrambling, crowdfunding, or tapping into clinic payment plans.

Many veterinarians are reluctant to educate clients about the availability and objectives of pet insurance. You want to focus on the medicine!

But nearly half of your clients see you as their primary source of information about pet insurance³. Additionally, 50% of pet owners said they would likely enroll in pet insurance if their vet actively recommended it³. You are one of the most powerful influences on your clients' insurance decisions.

New pet owners and healthy pet owners don't want to think of all the bad things that could happen...but when *you* tell them "this could get expensive," they pay attention.

Pets live wonderful lives in financially restricted homes. They enrich the worlds of their owners, playing an integral role in families.

"Pet insurance has become more clinic-friendly than ever."

That's why veterinarian-client relationships can sour so quickly in the face of a large bill. Shelter yourself by guiding these clients to plan for their pets' future medical care.

Pet insurance has become more clinic-friendly than ever. Claims submission responsibilities have been shifted from you to the client, so

"...get from diagnosis to reimbursement seamlessly, without scrambling, crowdfunding, or tapping into clinic payment plans."

Cost issues are a known source of stress, staff burnout, and inefficiency in veterinary medicine. They distract you, they slow you down, and sometimes they make you the target of emotion-fueled outbursts.

It's time to make it a priority to discuss pet insurance with all your clients so that you and your team can find fulfillment in doing what you do best. Endorsing pet insurance is just a smart recommendation for *you*.



About the Author

Dr. Jennifer Sperry is a companion animal veterinarian and the Veterinary Advisor for Crum & Forster Pet Insurance Group. She assists the company by providing scientific insights and medical updates; and by sharing the perspectives and experiences of veterinary professionals in the trenches.

Dr. Sperry was attracted to her current role because she recognized an urgent need to spread awareness about financial tools that allow people to access vital but costly veterinary care.

As a veterinarian practicing in general and emergency medicine for more than a decade, she has a unique understanding of the needs of pets and their people. She witnessed first-hand how difficult it can be for pet owners to both predict and overcome the cost of quality veterinary care.

She also experienced how difficult it can be for veterinary team members to share the

emotional burden that occurs when financial limitations adversely impact the wellbeing of pets and their owners.

Since joining the team in 2020, Dr. Sperry has shared her medical experience for internal and external educational events, claims and underwriting process improvements, and even accessible policy wording.

Dr. Sperry shares her home with her husband, two young boys, and a cranky old chihuahua. When she's not working, she can be found beside the nearest campfire.

References

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³North American Pet Health Insurance Association. (2016). Driving Growth of Pet Health Insurance. <https://naphia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NAPHIA-Driving-Growth-of-Pet-Health-Insurance-2016.pdf>

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