Did you brush your dog’s teeth today? Little known fact: the most common disease among cats and dogs is periodontal disease. Worse, most pet owners aren’t even aware of their pet’s oral condition, which brings to light the importance of veterinary dentistry and dental checkups in every vet appointment.

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), veterinary dentistry “includes the cleaning, adjustment, filing, extraction, or repair of animals’ teeth and all other aspects of oral health care in animals.”

It’s a branch of veterinary medicine pursued by graduate veterinarians that was previously mainly focused on equine dental care. A Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) who’s undergone 3-6 years of specialty training is equipped to “remove sharp enamel points, treat malocclusions of premolars, molars, and incisors, reshape teeth, extract first premolars and deciduous premolars and incisors; extract damaged or diseased teeth; treat diseased teeth via restorations and endodontic procedures; periodontal and orthodontic treatments; and take dental radiographs” of all animals. Gone are the days of simply tranquilizing followed by clean-and-pull or watchful waiting with fractured teeth. Nowadays, the same concepts of prophylaxis, diagnosis, and treatment of dental disease apply to both pets and their owners and all animals deserve adequate amounts of dental care.

Who is the Veterinary Dentist?

The word “Dentist” is generally referred to the person who treats human dental problems but just like medicine is a twin so is the discipline of dentistry. There are a lot of similarities between the human physiology and anatomy with that of animals. Animals do become sick so as we human-beings. As both of us have teeth, certain problems like caries, periodontitis, pulpitis will possibly occur in animals. The major of the patients complain at dental clinics is pain. Imagine a lion suffering from severe toothache due to class III caries, irreversible pulpitis or a recently fractured tooth. Imagine the pain it would have to go through for so long if nobody is there to care for it. It probably would die a very painful and agonizing death.

As a matter of fact, a Veterinary Dentist is critical for the oral health of animals. Like other Veterinary specialties, the Veterinary Dentistry field is comprised of professionals that have dedication and passion to care for animals. They are licensed in each State in the USA and must have extensive knowledge of animal anatomy, pharmacology, anesthesia, histology, physiology, neurology and radiology—among many other medical specialties. The Veterinary Dentistry job duties include: Examination and cleaning teeth of animals, adjustments, oral surgery, treating periodontal disease in animals. After becoming a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, a qualified candidate will enroll in a Veterinary Dentistry program monitored by the American Veterinary Dental College. The AVDC is recognized by the American Board of Veterinary Specialties as a specialist certification organization in the field of Veterinary Dentistry in North America and
works along with the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry in supporting training programs to achieve expertise in Veterinary Dentistry. Like other Veterinary specialties, dentistry is an invasive practice that often has a significant impact on the overall health of animals. Typically the use of tranquilizers, sedatives, and anesthetics are used in the treatment of animals – not only to reduce anxiety for the animals, but to assist the dentist in completing their work.

Common Myth and Misconceptions about Veterinary Dentistry
(Sharon L. Hoffman et. al)

Myth — Veterinary dentistry involves minor procedures that require no special patient preparation or monitoring during anesthesia.

Reality — Dental patients often become hypothermic because of the cooling of a patient as a result of continuous use of water in the mouth from power scalers and high-speed drills, prolonged procedures, and metal tables. Very small animals (< 5 kg [< 11 lb]) are especially at risk of developing hypothermia because of their larger surface area-to-volume ratio, compared with heavier animals. Simple measures such as continuous monitoring of intraoperative temperature, use of circulating warm water blankets or forced-air warming devices, and IV administration of warm fluids will aid in the prevention and correction of hypothermia. Appropriate IV administration of fluids and monitoring of blood pressure, oxygenation, heart rate and rhythm, and body temperature are especially important in older or compromised patients.

Myth — A fractured tooth can always be treated with watchful waiting.

Reality — Animals have similar anatomy and physiology to humans. They suffer enormous pain just as much as we do but because of difference in our behaviour, they may not display any sign of pain and discomfort. A fractured tooth can be very painful but then the animal may not be able to show it. Early intervention is superior to late intervention or even the watchful waiting. Fractured tooth may lead to other complications like infection. So do not wait and watch, always take animals to the vet dentist for immediate intervention.

Myth — Dental radiography is not necessary prior to extraction of severely mobile teeth.

Reality — There are multiple causes of tooth mobility including periodontal disease, trauma, and neoplasia. The extent of periodontal disease; a fracture of the alveolus, root, mandible, or maxilla; and neoplasia are not always evident on oral examination alone. Preoperative radiographs are mandatory to assess the pathologic changes and identify morphologic abnormalities (e.g., curved or fracture roots, root resorption, or fractures) prior to exodontia.

Myth — Dentistry is an ancillary service veterinary practitioners provide for their patients.

Reality — An epidemiologic study conducted in 1995 at the University of Minnesota revealed that oral disease was the most common disease in all age groups of cats and dogs. In human medicine, periodontal disease causes increased insulin resistance, decreased glycemic control, cardiovascular disease, myocardial infarction, pneumonia, and other systemic diseases. There is now evidence that periodontal disease also affects the systemic health of veterinary patients. Dental care of animals is very important and may affect their life span or quality of life.

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