



ONTARIO
ASSOCIATION OF
VETERINARY
TECHNICIANS

VETERINARY TELEHEALTH

THE RVT AND VIRTUAL
VETERINARY CARE

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Virtual Care Playbook – (Abstract)

Telehealth is defined by the Canadian Society of Telehealth (CST) as “the use of information and communications technologies (ICT’s) to deliver health services and transmit health information over long and short distances. It is about using voice, data, images, and information rather than moving patients or health practitioners and educators.” (Deshpande A, 2008). Similarly, the College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO) defines telehealth as “the overarching term that encompasses all uses of technology geared to remotely deliver health information, education or care remotely. Telehealth includes a broad variety of technology and tactics to deliver virtual medicine, health and education services. Telehealth is not a specific service, but a collection of tools which allow veterinarians to enhance care and education delivery. Telehealth encompasses both telemedicine and general advice.” (CVO, 2018).

This Virtual Care Guidebook aims to provide the RVT with useful and applicable information from regulatory and service focused perspectives. Part One guides the RVT through a few of the relevant veterinary medicine regulatory components including RVT scope and jurisdictional considerations. RVTs are encouraged to explore both the *Veterinarians Act* and the *OAVT Act* for a comprehensive perspective on the regulation of veterinary medicine in Ontario. Additionally, RVTs should remain current in practice standards and policies as outlined by the College of Veterinarians of Ontario and the Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians.

Part Two explores virtual care workflow, participant roles and technology considerations. While written with the RVT in mind, information included in this section may be applicable to other members of the veterinary team. Also included in this section are important legislative considerations, for example privacy and accessibility.

An appendix and resource section are included for readers wanting to go deeper and learn more about any of the topics covered in parts one and two. Also included in the final section of the three-part Virtual Care Guidebook are templates and scripts for the RVT.

Part One

Introduction

The Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians (OAVT) recognizes changing dynamics in the veterinary profession in the delivery of patient care and client education. Whether by design, in response pressures (internal, external, societal, economic and others) or a combination thereof, virtual delivery of care and information is on the rise. Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVTs) are an integral part of the veterinary team, and the success of delivering virtual care depends on their understanding of, and adherence to, regulatory requirements.

Please note: This guidebook provides information believed to be accurate as of the date of publication. This information may become outdated or invalid as advances in technology and veterinary medicine and/or changes to legislation, regulation and associated standards occur. The guidebook should not be construed as directing protocol, treatment, process or procedure; it is not legal advice and individuals must comply with provincial, federal and other related legislation.

What is virtual veterinary care?

Virtual veterinary care is the provision of services using technology, including telephonic and/or electronic communication tools, including video, photograph, text/chat, medical devices or a combination thereof. Virtual veterinary care is not intended to replace in person care, and may be one of several components that are used by veterinary professionals in delivering care to animals.

The College of Veterinarians of Ontario has defined telehealth and telemedicine as follows:

Telehealth is the overarching term that encompasses all uses of technology geared to remotely deliver health information, education or care remotely. Telehealth includes a broad variety of technology and tactics to deliver virtual medicine, health and education services. Telehealth is not a specific service, but a collection of tools which allow veterinarians to enhance care and education delivery. Telehealth encompasses both telemedicine and general advice.

Telemedicine is the provision of specific veterinary medical advice and veterinary treatment of an animal(s) based on the remote diagnosis of disease and injury by means of telecommunications technology where no physical examination of the animal(s) by the veterinarian takes place. It does not include consultation between veterinarians where colleagues in different physical locations consult remotely with each other or the provision of general, non-specific, advice.



Regulatory Considerations

There are two primary pieces of legislation in Ontario that provide direction and professional expectations for RVTs: [The OAVT Act](#) and [The Veterinarians Act](#).

Through the OAVT Act (Bill Pr3-1993), the Ontario Association of Veterinary Technicians is responsible for the governance of its members. It also holds the power to grant its members the right to the exclusive use of the designations "Registered Veterinary Technician", "Registered Veterinary Technologist" and "RVT."

The affairs of the Association are managed by a board of directors who may pass by-laws necessary to conduct the business and carry out the objects of the Association. Furthermore, the board of directors regulate the conduct of members of the Association in the practice of their profession, by prescribing a code of ethics, rules of professional conduct and standards of practice and by providing for the suspension, expulsion or other penalty for contravention of the code, rules or standards.

Similarly, the [Veterinarians Act](#) provides the College of Veterinarians of Ontario with the authority to develop by-laws to define the administration of the College.



The Veterinarians Act also enables Council to establish the Minimum Standards for Veterinary Facilities in Ontario. All veterinary facilities in Ontario must comply with these standards, or be granted specific exemptions. (College of Veterinarians of Ontario, n.d.)

Together, these documents and the associated by-laws, regulations, policies and standards must be considered when working within the sphere of veterinary medicine, including virtual care.

The Registered Veterinary Technician

Registered Veterinary Technicians (RVT) must meet and maintain the qualifications, conditions and standards as outlined in OAVT by-law and policy. The standards encompass professional misconduct, continuing education requirements, and essential competencies. These expectations apply to an Ontario RVT whether they are performing tasks/providing care in person or virtually.

Registration with the OAVT as an RVT requires that an applicant successfully complete an information session prescribed by the Directors on professional ethics and the Ontario regulatory environment. Presently, this is available through the [Living and Breathing Professionalism and Ethics](#) program. This workshop is

designed to provide information to assist individuals in making professional and ethical decisions while working as an RVT. Participation is required as a step to becoming registered, the course is also available to those seeking more information or looking to become more familiar with the regulatory environment.

The RVT is accountable and responsible for recognizing whether they have the knowledge, skill and judgement to meet the standards of the profession. Per by-law 2.1.1.3, an act of professional misconduct is performing a procedure which the RVT member knows or ought reasonably to know that they are not qualified to perform by education, training or experience. An RVT must not practice veterinary medicine in contravention of the Veterinarian's Act; they must not diagnose, prognose, perform surgery or prescribe.

In Ontario, RVTs may participate in telehealth by offering general information, advice or education. RVTs are able to offer advice specific to an animal when doing so in collaboration and cooperation with an Ontario licensed veterinarian and in association with an accredited facility. It is strongly recommended that RVTs and veterinarians work together and develop robust standard operating procedures and protocols (SOP) to guide these conversations, including what to do in an emergency or in cases where a valid Veterinarian-Client-Patient relationship (VCPR) has not been established. These standards and protocols should be reviewed and updated regularly.

Jurisdictional considerations

Ontario RVT

Any Ontario RVT providing care outside of the province must comply with the regulatory requirements of every jurisdiction in which they offer services.

The OAVT maintains its regulatory authority to investigate complaints made about an RVT registered in Ontario regardless of where they, the animal, the client and the VCPR is located.

The RVT should not assume that being registered and professionally accountable in one jurisdiction automatically permits practice, or will absolve them from professional accountability, in another jurisdiction.



Part Two

Introduction

With an understanding of telehealth and the regulatory considerations it is time for the RVT to put their knowledge and skills to practice.

Part Two of the Guidebook explores:

- virtual care workflows
- participant roles
- technology considerations.

While written with the RVT in mind, information included in this section may be applicable to other members of the veterinary team.

Also included in this section are important legislative considerations, for example privacy and accessibility. Telehealth can help improve access to care and its implementation should be inclusive of all members of society and their needs.



Work Flow

Preparation for telehealth appointments is essential for success. This can include envisioning an appointment including rehearsing the RVT role and associated responsibilities in preparation for, during and after. Preparation can help maximize the effectiveness and utility of the “collection of tools” within telehealth. System and process testing can also help identify gaps in protocols, knowledge and skills.

There are several approaches to telehealth:

Synchronous telehealth in real-time and involves technology which enables participants to communicate live.

Asynchronous telehealth uses technology to transmit or share data, however the participants are not meeting in real-time. This method is also known as store-and-forward. (Deshpande A, 2008)

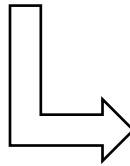
These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and furthermore, a practitioner may also choose to incorporate an in-person appointment into the care plan. Doing so promotes and supports tailoring care to best meet the needs of the patient over the course of the relationship.

The steps listed below include both synchronous and asynchronous elements. For the purposes of this document, the provider is the RVT and the user is the individual seeking information or initiating use of the telehealth services.



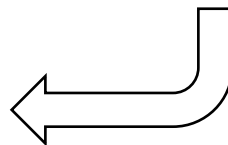
BEFORE

- Explain the process to the user
 - technology requirements
 - how to perform a system test
 - what to expect based on appointment type
 - roles of service provider (RVT vs. DVM for example)
- Obtain consent and payment information from the user
- Obtain relevant patient information
 - Images
 - Picture and/or video
 - brief history
 - referral form etc.
- Review information submitted, forward to a veterinarian, +/- communicate findings to user as directed



DURING

- Introduce all participants, their roles, and the nature of the service being provided. *RVTs should provide their full name, registration status and jurisdiction of registration*
- Confirm sound and video quality with the user
- Verbally review and confirm receipt, understanding and completion of pre-appointment forms and information
- Ask the user to confirm their identity and that of anyone else participating in the appointment for appointment records
- Follow established appointment process and procedures
- During this step, the RVT may determine an in-person appointment with a veterinarian as a needed course of action. The RVT provides this direction to the user and may or may not assist in booking this appointment as appropriate.
- The RVT may complete medical record documentation during the appointment if appropriate
- Request feedback through post



AFTER

- Complete any outstanding medical record documentation
- Forward forms, information to other providers and add to record keeping database
- Book next appointment, reminders, follow ups, future testing etc.
- Process payment

Technology Requirements

Two elements to be considered by both the provider and user for the success of telehealth are infrastructure and security.

Infrastructure

Hardware considerations on both the provider and user ends of the equation will contribute to the success of the appointment. Software and device choices may contribute to convenience, security and other features or hardware requirements.

Lastly, access to reliable internet service may be a barrier. In these cases, in-person care may be a more efficient and effective approach.

Tips for success:

- If possible, plug your computer directly into your modem or network using an ethernet cable for the strongest signal and most stable internet connection.
- If you must use wireless, be in the same room as your modem and try to reduce other internet use and traffic.



Computer or Tablet

The RVT should ensure they have access to sufficient screen space on their computer. Virtual care visits may require the simultaneous use of several computer applications. Having a large screen footprint, sometimes achieved by using a dual-screen set up, allows the provider to have several windows open at the same time.

Video Camera

A high-definition video camera whether as an external component or built in to a computer will provide the user with a clear high-quality image most closely resembling the in-person experience and allows for non-verbal communication. Position the camera at eye level so the viewer feels like you are looking directly at them.

Sound

Sound input and output effect the ability of the provider and user to clearly understand each other. Always use head/earphones or a headset rather than the built-in computer audio and microphone. In addition to providing high quality sound, using a headset or headphones prevents the conversation from being overheard by other people. Remember to set any other devices or notifications to mute or silence and try to find a quiet place away from other background noise like running water, dogs barking or music playing.



Security

The secure storage of data (written, visual and verbal) is a legal requirement and paramount to responsible professional relationships. The safeguarding of privacy cannot be accomplished without understanding and meeting the requirements as laid out in several relevant pieces of legislation.

The Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act ([FIPPA](#)) and Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act ([PIPEDA](#)) grant and protect the privacy of individuals including the collection, use and disclosure of personal information. The information can only be used for the purposes for which it was collected and an organization must obtain consent if it is going to be used for another purpose, such as teaching.

Looking to the [OAVT By-Laws](#), the disclosure of confidential information is considered to be professional misconduct, except when with the consent of the client or their authorized representative; required by law or as part of a review, investigation or proceeding under the OAVT By-laws (By-Law #2 Article 2, 2.1.1.14). Furthermore, as directed in By-Law #2, Article 2.1.3, RVTs are required to keep records per the regulations and standards of veterinary medicine. These standards can be found here: [Medical Records – Professional Practice Standard](#).

Receipt, use and storage of data and related processes may vary dependant upon synchronous or asynchronous applications of virtual care. Consider how and where medical records will be saved and stored. If the electronic medical record (EMR) form, notes and other documents are not stored securely or if back up/duplicate files need to be retained, consider using a USB key that automatically encrypts data (Dermer, 2020) and protect this data using a two-step authentication process and strong passwords.

Many telehealth and video conferencing platforms or services incorporate additional security features which prevent uninvited guests from joining. Be sure to ask about these and understand what can and cannot be disabled, where the information is stored and who can access this information.

In addition to infrastructure and security, there are several other important considerations.

Tips ensure your meeting is secure:

- ✓ Disable the video and sound recording settings and ensure only those invited can attend a meeting
- ✓ Inform the participants that the appointment is being recorded and how that information will be used and stored.
- ✓ Host your appointments in a private office where the screen cannot be seen by others and the conversation cannot be overheard or interrupted.



Accessibility Standard

Captions

Captions can be enabled on the platform by either the provider or the recipient. Get to know your platform and its functionality.

Contrast

Text and background should be of high contrast. **If the text is dark, the background should be light. If the text is light, the background should be dark.**

Greyscale photos are not advisable, colour provides much better contrast and if colour is not possible, clean black-and-white illustrations are preferred.

Tips for accessible formatting:

- **Font**
Use San Serif fonts for example: Verdana, Tahoma, Arial of 20-22 point or larger.
- **Bold** text is more visible than standard text.
- For large blocks of text include 1.25 spacing between lines.
- Avoid *Italics*
- Use underline, **bold** or "enclosing in quotation marks" for emphasis.



Colours

Use the colours that can be seen by individuals who are colour blind – Yellow, Green, Red and Purple. Black, White and Brown are also acceptable options. Grey should be avoided in both text and background. Avoid using blue as a background, it makes the eyes work 2 trillion times harder per second than red, pink, orange or yellow (Kitchel).

Get the Lighting Right

You would be surprised how much of a difference good lighting makes! It is essential that people can see you well. Make sure you have good front light – meaning the light shines brightly on your face. If your back is to a window, close the shades. While natural light is often the best choice, if your office does not have natural light, consider adding additional front lighting to improve your image.

Choose the Right Background & Frame Yourself

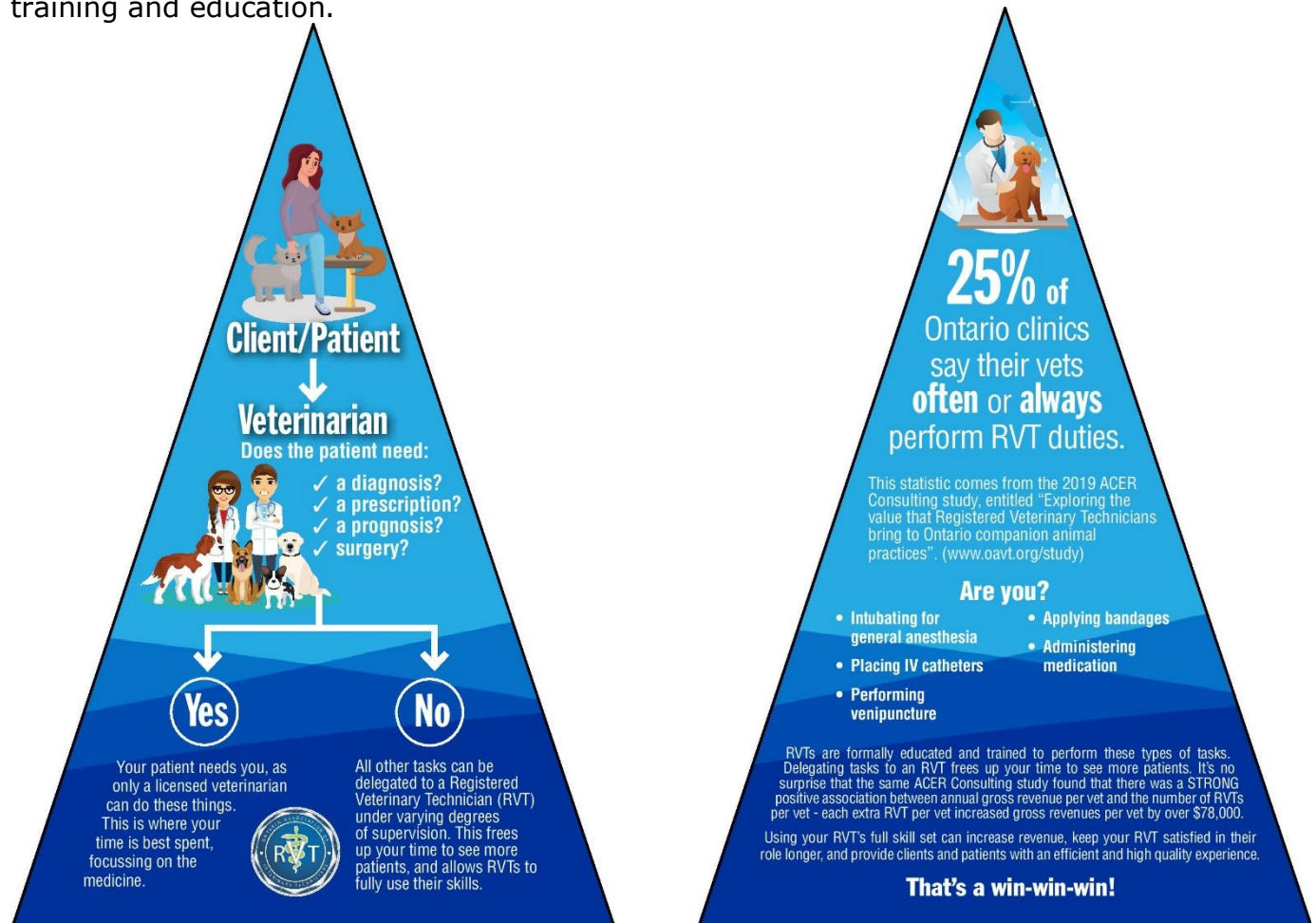
Your background can either add to your professional presentation or distract from it. Position yourself in front of a blank wall or something clean and neutral, without busy patterns. Avoid a cluttered background or anything that may be distracting for example posters or activities happening in the background.

Make sure you are close enough to your camera to frame your face, neck and shoulders. You don't want to be too close and accidentally crop part of your face or become a floating head but you don't want to be so far away from the camera that you lose connection with the user. Lastly, dress the part - present yourself for virtual work as you would for in person work.

Roles and Responsibilities of the RVT

Roles and responsibilities for all veterinary team members should be clearly outlined, understood and agreed upon in advance of commencing virtual care, creating an environment which supports efficient and appropriate assignment of duties. All team members should be working within their individual core competencies and related scope.

An RVT is responsible for recognizing whether they have the knowledge, skill and judgement to meet the standards of the profession, whether through the use of technology and virtual tools or otherwise. A framework to support the delivery of care ought to consider clear pathways, alternatives and options for accessing care. The RVT should be supported in their role through seeking advice, information and assistance or transferring care to another professional in the event they are unable to meet expectations whether due to a mis-match of communication styles or a request they are legally unable to fulfill such as providing a prescription. The most efficient use of the RVT is for them to perform functions that best leverage their training and education.



Communication and non-technical competencies 101

Telehealth is a developing field of practice with many benefits, including increased accessibility with users (Environics Research, 2020). Communication skills are essential for success and to provide a positive experience for the user and all veterinary team members. As you are practicing telehealth, it is important to be aware of several key strategies for success:

- Share digital resources (weblinks, education pamphlets/pdf, infographics) as you would in an in-person appointment
- Utilize platform tools – for example, a drawing tool maybe helpful to demonstrate anatomical position.
- Make extra effort to engage with the user and provide them with your full attention – make eye contact and use non-verbal cues (head nodding, smiling etc.) to strengthen communication channels (College of Nurses of Ontario, 2020). It is important that your non-verbal cues align with your verbal cues. It can be helpful to verbally describe what you are doing in the event you have to break eye contact. This lets the user know they still have your attention even though your eyes are looking away from them momentarily.
- Be respectful of people of diverse backgrounds and be inclusive in your behaviour.

Protocols

Write and implement protocols and standard operating procedures (SOP) to create a shared understanding of expectations for all team members. This applies for both traditional and telehealth care delivery models. RVTs are strongly encouraged to participate in the development of policies and procedures with their employer, colleagues and co-workers. Once written, current protocols should be reviewed on a regular basis to reaffirm the information is current, relevant, comprehensive and applicable. Each should be discussed through the lens of telehealth and clarifying questions asked to promote revisions which include the use of technology.

Established protocols should include a detailed list of the types of conversations and cases well suited to telehealth and those requiring in-clinic face to face care. Flow charts, questions and check lists can help guide conversations and decision making.

Below is a list of topics that *may* be well suited to telehealth. Each and every RVT is responsible for their individual professional conduct. RVTs must possess the skills, knowledge and use their professional judgement on a case-by-case basis and in conjunction with a licensed veterinarian as appropriate. Note that this may change during the course of an appointment or interaction and the RVT must continually

assess their own competence and work within the expectations as determined by the Veterinarian's Act, the OAVT act and related regulations, standards and policies.

Examples of telehealth in action:

- ✓ Providing general disease information, education and/or resources
- ✓ Screening of care needs
 - Emergency
 - Preventative
 - Non-urgent
 - Appointment pre-screening
- ✓ Facilitating audio and/or video consultation with another veterinary care provider
 - Assisting the user in obtaining high quality images and/or video
 - Attend the consultation to support continuity of care
- ✓ Providing general pet or animal care information
 - Exercise
 - Grooming
 - Teeth brushing
 - Nail trimming
- ✓ Obtain patient vitals / monitor health status or condition using appropriate data equipment
- ✓ Preventative care conversations
 - Vaccination schedules and information
 - Internal/external parasite control
 - General nutrition advice
 - Spay/neuter guidance
- ✓ Follow up care and information after an in-clinic visit
 - Oral and topical medication administration techniques
 - Wound management
 - Post operative exercise and diet information
 - Relaying information about laboratory results
 - Stable chronic patient follow-up
- ✓ Providing end of life/quality of life information
- ✓ Behavioural concerns
 - Crate, leash, house training
 - Scratching
 - Multi-pet household issues
- ✓ Exercises and rehabilitation techniques
- ✓ Nutrition
 - Weight management
 - Diet types and options

Appendix 1 - Standard Operating Procedure Template (OAVT)

Title of SOP: _____

Date Effective: _____

Persons Responsible: _____

Purpose of SOP: _____

Materials (if any): _____

Procedure: _____

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

4) _____

5) _____

6) _____

7) _____

8) _____

9) _____

Other References and Resources:

Date for Revision: _____

Signatures: _____

Appendix 2 - Sample Scripts

Introduction and Expectations

Hello, my name is XX and I'm a Registered Veterinary Technician located in (city), Ontario. As a regulated professional in Ontario, I may engage in activities that fall within the bounds of the Veterinarians Act and the OAVT Act and those that are not otherwise restricted by law. I am not a veterinarian and in the context of veterinary telehealth this means I cannot diagnose or prescribe.

Additionally, I can not offer specific advice, direction or information without having been delegated to do so by a veterinarian. I can however, provide general information or advice and provide educational resources.

If I am unable to fully assist you, I will direct you to seek additional information and/or care from a licensed veterinarian.

Diagnose, Prognose

I cannot diagnose which also includes to prognose. I am not able to engage in discussing the outcome of a disease, change, recovery, recurrence or any related progression and/or resolution.

Prescribe

I understand that you would like to begin treating your pet right away. As an RVT I am unable to suggest, recommend or prescribe medication.

Disengage, Reiterate and/or Redirect

I recommend that you book an appointment with a veterinarian to discuss the specific veterinary needs of your pet.

Explain and verbalize to maintain connection

When you have to break eye contact or look away, explain why.

I am looking at a second screen and am reviewing a note from a past visit.

If there is a pause while information is loading, explain this.

An image is loading on my computer, it will be a few seconds before we can continue.

When you want the user to see what you are seeing.

I am going to share my screen with you and together we can review the information sheet.

To explain complex information use metaphors, analogies, stories, drawings, visual images, videos and models. Keep language simple/plain and concise and review the information together.

To confirm understanding and knowledge where possible, have the user teach back the information you shared with them. This may include having them demonstrate an activity or procedure with their pet, or identify “normal”. Ask clarifying and open-ended questions to stimulate dialogue without judgement.

What questions do you have?

I want to make sure I explained this clearly. You shared that other family members help care for (pets name). What will you tell them about the information we have discussed today?

I'd like to confirm we've covered everything; would you mind telling me in your own words about xyz?

From there, fill in gaps of knowledge and repeat.

Suggested Reading, Websites and Resources

*please note many of these resources are updated regularly and a more up to date version may be available.

American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA)

<https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/animal-health-and-welfare/telehealth-telemedicine-veterinary-practice>

Canadian Medical Association Virtual Care Discussion Paper

https://www.cma.ca/sites/default/files/pdf/News/Virtual_Care_discussionpaper_v2EN.pdf

CVMA Telemedicine Guidelines

<https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/documents/cvma-veterinary-telemedicine-guidelines>

CVO Professional Practice Standards - Telemedicine

<https://cvo.org/getmedia/57fa4e6f-3bbb-4596-9d89-c5f5a4772bd4/Telemedicine.aspx>

CVO Guide to the Professional Practice Standard - Telemedicine

<https://cvo.org/getmedia/e1199958-3f32-4b89-8bcf-fb3a72b6f8bc/TelemedicineGuide.pdf.aspx> CVO September 2020 Council meeting topic of Telemedicine.

<https://cvo.org/About-CVO/Council/Highlights-Minutes.aspx>

CVO Professional Practice Standards – Medical Records

<https://cvo.org/getmedia/75c753ca-40d4-459a-8020-fb32e4aa4f1f/PPSMedicalRecords.pdf.aspx>

CVO Professional Practice Standards – Delegation

<https://cvo.org/CVO/media/College-of-Veterinarians-of-Ontario/Resources%20and%20Publications/Professional%20Practice%20Standards/Delegation.pdf>

CVO Professional Practice Standard – Informed Client Consent

<https://cvo.org/CVO/media/College-of-Veterinarians-of-Ontario/Resources%20and%20Publications/Professional%20Practice%20Standards/PPSInformedClientConsent.pdf>

Dr. Aaron Smiley is a veterinarian practicing in Indiana who uses virtual care on a daily basis and leverages RVTs. His website includes several videos explaining telemedicine.

<https://www.aaronsmileydvm.com/veterinary-telemedicine>

OAVT Telehealth and RVTs update – (June 2020)

<https://oavt.org/press-releases/telehealth-for-registered-veterinary-technicians-in-ontario/>

Veterinary Telehealth Community Resources

<https://coda.io/@jessica-vogelsang/telehealth-overview?fbclid=IwAR3VADQCAhMfo-Sv2rA0HQv3iRYGbRf9s46CkFWaJUFTt3CHyMgcrRRbguE>

Veterinary Virtual Care Association

<https://vvca.org/>

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