

Ask A Vet: Exploring the Cost of Veterinary Care

Sunday, July 2, 2017

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My fiancé and I have been shopping for a new puppy, but after speaking to some friends of ours, we are blown away at the cost of veterinary care. We don't think that we'll move ahead with getting a puppy because the necessary care and surgery costs aren't in our budget. Why is it so expensive to visit the vet?!

-Bummed in Bremen

Dear Bremen,

I'm so glad you asked! You aren't wrong, and we sympathize with you – veterinary care is not cheap, and unplanned veterinary care can be financially straining. A simple answer to your question would be to say that your veterinarian is part of a business and businesses need to generate income. But, there's more that we in the veterinary field would like you to know.

This conversation should be prefaced by saying that EVERYONE at your vet clinic cares about your pet. The hustle and chaos may distract from it, but those individuals are extremely hard working and they've dedicated their lives to ensuring the betterment of you and your pet's lives. The obvious holds true – veterinary clinics are commercial entities with large utility bills and lots of overhead. Additionally, medications, surgical instruments, x-rays, ultrasounds, etc., all cost a lot of money to purchase and maintain. Most importantly, though, vet clinics charge what they charge so that veterinarians, receptionists, nurses, and support staff can continue to keep pets healthy. What many people don't understand is that the amount of money that a clinic generates rarely reflects the enormous amounts of work, education, sacrifice, blood, sweat, and tears that go into a regular day on the job.

This is well illustrated by comparing veterinary medicine to human medicine. Veterinarians have very similar training to physicians on the human side – 4 years of college followed by 4 years of veterinary school. And many veterinarians go on to specialize, just like medical doctors. That education comes at a price for everyone; vets and physicians graduate with a similar amount of debt (approaching \$200,000 for recent graduates). However, veterinarians make anywhere from $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ of what physicians make.

Meanwhile, veterinary nurses and assistants (arguably the hardest working and most caring members of the veterinary team) are also suffering from a large debt to income ratio. Though many people are aware of the education required for vets, very few realize that many of the nurses they see at the vet have 2 year, and sometimes 4 year degrees. Despite their education and on-the-job training, most veterinary nurses make half (at best) of what their human counterparts bring in. The same holds true for all support staff involved. They are all extremely qualified individuals who work very hard to bring you and your animals better lives.

I haven't pointed all of this out to complain, however. All of us enjoy our work and we're proud of what we do. We signed up for this. I've pointed this out to illustrate that the veterinary team, in many ways, makes a financial sacrifice, so that we can all continue to enjoy the love and fulfillment our animals bring.

-Dr. Kyle DeYoung