

Spay Delay and Its Economic Implications for Veterinarians

Veterinary medicine competes with franchise services, low-cost clinics and even mail order pharmaceuticals on a greater level than ever before. Additionally, when the client leaves the practice with a significant item of health care that needs to be purchased but with the scheduling delayed, the opportunity is opened for increased, “shopping,” and for a vital part of the relationship with that client, both economic and personal, to be lost.

The traditional recommendation of sterilizing pets at six months of age has been challenged for over a decade and the benefits of avoiding the first estrus cycle has come to the forefront through the research of Schneider R, Dorn CR, & Taylor DON (1969)¹. and Beth Overly² which reveals the optimal age to sterilize female dogs and cats is before their first estrus. Compared with its incidence in sexually intact dogs, those spayed before their first estrus have .5% of the risk of developing mammary gland cancer. Cats spayed before their first estrus have 9% of the risk of developing mammary gland cancer of intact cats.

However, according to a 2009 IPSOS Marketing survey commissioned by PetSmart Charities, Inc., widespread confusion among pet owners leaves 14% of all pet owners thinking that pets should be spayed or neutered after nine months and 29% falsely believing that it is harmful to spay a pet before the first estrus cycle. An additional 8% believe it is best for a pet to have one litter before sterilization.

Mainstreaming the information on the health benefits of avoiding the first estrus, along with pet overpopulation statistics, makes the argument for changing the timeline for pet sterilization even more compelling; however it still fails to take into account the economic implications for the private practitioner.

In short, the veterinarian who sends the client with a vaccinated kitten out the door with instructions to call back in a couple of months for sterilization unnecessarily risks the loss of that sterilization surgery. By offering time to, ‘shop around,’ the client relationship may be weakened, while the long term risk of mammary gland cancer is increased.

For the private practitioner, revenue could be retained by concluding the series of juvenile wellness visits, including sterilization, within an efficient timeline which keeps the client under the umbrella of an appointment until the conclusion of these basic wellness procedures.

Jennifer Zinn, DVM, of Feline Specialties in Tulsa, OK said, “

¹ Schneider R, Dorn CR, & Taylor DON (1969). Factors influencing canine mammary gland cancer development and post-surgical survival. *J. Nat'l Cancer Inst.* **43**, 1255.

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