Talking to Your Clients About Cannabis

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In the midst of a rapidly evolving cannabis industry, pet parents are seeking guidance on the pros and cons of this substance and they’re looking to the veterinary community for answers.

Why should veterinarians care about cannabis?
As we see huge shifts in marketplace innovation and cultural perceptions, it is imperative to rely on accurate and scientific information when exploring the use of cannabis in animals and to help combat the misinformation that is starting to be disseminated.

And therein lies a huge part of the problem—with a dearth of scientific literature as guidance, many veterinarians shy away from providing their clients with education on cannabis. However, be assured that product companies, dispensaries, and other entities in the cannabis industry are not shy about providing information to your clients—regardless of whether that information is accurate or in the best interest of your animal patients.

While cannabis products do appear to be among one of the safest “supplements” a pet parent can give their animal—cannabis does have interactions with other pharmaceuticals and can cause side effects. Cannabis as a powerful and effective medicine is a possibility, but as a medicine, needs to be utilized by pet parents with the knowledge and oversight of the veterinary team.

How to start the conversation
Cannabis awareness, like so many other health issues, is a team effort. Training for everyone from the reception staff to technical support staff can ensure that the whole team is on the same page and provide your clients with a sense of continuity.

Make a statement
1. Talk to all of your staff about the stance the clinic will be taking on issues surrounding cannabis.
2. Will all of your doctors discuss cannabis questions with clients or are only particular associates comfortable with these questions?
3. Give your staff guidelines on how to answer owners that ask about cannabis to avoid awkward or inaccurate answers. Consider something like the following: “The use of cannabis in veterinary medicine is a complicated issue. There are legal considerations, as well as potential interactions with pharmaceutical drugs. Let’s make sure you and the veterinarian have time to discuss your questions about cannabis during your appointment.”

Increase awareness
1. Your technical staff is already accustomed to asking about over-the-counter supplements. Make sure that everyone is aware of the importance of knowing whether a pet parent is using a cannabis product for their animal—including hemp or cannabidiol (CBD)-only products.
2. Owners often struggle with stigma and their own ideologies and they may be reluctant to admit that they have purchased cannabis for their animal. Reassure your clients that you’re all on the same “team”—all focused on looking out for the health of their animal.
3. Knowing if cannabis is being used at home helps you as the veterinarian make important decisions about other medications, supplements, and treatment plans.

A vital part of the patient history
1. The interaction of cannabis with pharmaceuticals is a fascinating area with great potential for being leveraged therapeutically. An in-depth examination of this is beyond the scope of this article, but in brief—expect cannabis to potentiate both the effect and length of action of many pharmaceutical drugs and consider what effect this may have on the patient and established treatment plan.
2. Consider drug level testing when possible (i.e. anti-seizure medications) and carefully monitor physical parameters where applicable (i.e. blood pressure) depending on the regimen of drugs the animal is receiving.

Legal considerations
The content of this article is not intended as, nor should be considered, legal advice. The fine details of cannabis legal issues should be discussed carefully with an attorney—specifically one who specializes in cannabis law. However, here are some points to consider:

1. Cannabis (all components of the plant, CBD included) are considered Schedule 1 by the DEA. As veterinarians, we are not authorized to prescribe any Schedule 1 drugs—including cannabis. A veterinarian cannot prescribe cannabis to any patient.
2. Train yourself and your staff to avoid using words such as “prescribe” or even “recommend” when discussing cannabis with clients. Instead, the veterinary team fills an educator role once a pet parent has decided to utilize cannabis.
3. CvMA as our state organization has issued the statement that all Colorado veterinarians “have an obligation to provide companion animal owners with complete education in regard to the potential risks and benefits of marijuana products in animals” (see colovma.org for CVMA’s position statement)
4. Cannabis is a substance that can be legally obtained and administered to an animal by a pet parent with or without the permission or guidance of a veterinarian.

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However, pet parents interested in utilizing cannabis are hungry for guidance and education on this subject and they will obtain information from one source or another.

**Our role in the cannabis discussion**
The veterinarian’s knowledge of species differences, training in the use of medications that are off-label, or extrapolation when there are few existing studies as well as our ability to monitor for both therapeutic effect and/or toxicity makes us the best source of information for our clients. The role of the veterinarian in the cannabis discussion should focus on education and takes the form of two main points:

**Harm reduction**
As a veterinarian, we are obligated to make sure the decisions of our clients (i.e. administration of cannabis) do not cause harm to our patients, and therefore, the veterinarian should be involved in the discussion of, and owner’s decision to use cannabis in their animal.

**Exploration of potential medical benefit**
Once an owner has decided to administer cannabis to their animal, incorporation of their veterinarian’s knowledge of that animal’s health history, ability to extrapolate from human cannabis studies, as well as the ability to monitor for both therapeutic effect or for toxicity provides the greatest possibility of obtaining medical benefit from that owner’s decision.

**Abbreviated guide to product selection**
The number and variety of choices in cannabis products is staggering and will only increase as this industry grows, as will owners’ desire to try these therapies with their pets. At that point, our goal as veterinarians is to achieve harm reduction and provide education to clients once they have made the decision to purchase a cannabis product.

As veterinarians, we are familiar with the array of products that can emerge in the veterinary market (e.g. joint supplements, skin and coat health supplements, etc.). These products have little if any scientific data to support their rationale for formulation. In the same manner, there are myriads of cannabis products in various formulations from companies with varying reputations. We are barely scratching the surface of understanding the independent effects of molecules such as cannabidiol (CBD) and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and others, much less their effects when administered in combination. It is beyond the scope of this article to fully explore the properties of CBD and THC individually or discuss the anecdotal reports of the effects of specific ratios or specific products.

Here are six guidelines that focus on pet parent education and harm reduction, intended as a starting point for your clients as they navigate the cannabis marketplace.

**Plant choice and care**
- Is a hemp or marijuana plant the best choice for this case?
- What is the reputation of the grower/harvester?
- What care has been put into the genetics of the plant to produce the best medicinal quality product?

**Formulation**
- Among the array of formulations available for human consumption, edibles (cannabis products intended to be consumed orally) are the most common to be purchased by a pet parent for their animal. Edibles can be in many forms: gummies, pills or tablets, cookies, drinks, etc. or in a tincture (liquid extracts).
- Anecdotally, among all the edible formulations available, a tincture provides the most accurate dosing, consistency, and ease of administration for animals. For animals that don’t like the taste of a tincture, tincture can be added to unfilled gel-caps and administer via a pill.
- Avoid alcohol-based tinctures and look for an oil based product. Depending on the animal’s individual taste preference, oils such as safflower, hemp, and others are acceptable. However, coconut oil based tinctures anecdotally increases absorption and efficacy, and may be a better choice in cases with gastrointestinal sensitivities.
- Products administered to animals should be free of additives, colorings, and above all, make sure there are no artificial sweeteners such as xylitol in the product.

**Free of contaminants**
- Cannabis products should be lab-tested to demonstrate freedom from pesticides, heavy metals, mold, and bacteria, as well as to document the chemical consistency (THC, CBD, terpenes, etc.) in the product.
- Look for products extracted with alcohol (Note: an alcohol extraction technique is different than using alcohol as a tincture base) or CO2. Other extraction methods such as butane or hexane may leave residue behind in the product with possible adverse effects on the animal.

**Clear labeling**
- Ensure that the tincture bottle is clearly labeled to allow accurate dosing.
- The packaging should clearly state the product ratio (CBD:THC), total volume (____mls of fluid in bottle), concentration (____mg per ____mls) as well as a lot number for quality control and adverse event reporting.

**Ratio & concentration**
- Cannabis tinctures come in many different ratios: 20:1, 10:1, 6:1, 1:1, etc. Commonly written in this format “20:1” this would be read as a tincture with “CBD to THC in a ratio of 20 to 1”.
- Again, although this area of dosing is one of the most interesting, **it is beyond the scope of this article**. However, the
people where they are at right now, and to meet our future neighbors.”

Another record-breaking year for applications

Applications to our DVM program broke records again this year, with 2,194 applications for 138 spots for entry in 2018. For the second year, the DVM Program will again welcome about 350 applicants to campus in January for in-person interviews using the Multiple Mini Interview (MMI) format, a new approach to DVM admissions.

The MMI model is a scenario-based interview format developed for medical school admissions, and offers insight into non-technical skills, such as communication, critical thinking, and empathy. We use the information gained through this process, along with conventional application information, to help diversify our applicant pools.

Candidates told us they enjoyed the experience, and we plan a thorough outcomes assessment to determine the impact of the MMI approach.

Many thanks go to the volunteers from our veterinary community who assisted with the interview process. We appreciate your willingness to give of your time and expertise in this new approach to candidate selection.

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importance of knowing the concentration and ratio of CBD and THC in a product is of the utmost importance. Many edibles can be intended solely for human recreational purposes and contain high levels of THC that are not appropriate for animals. Once again, pet parents that use a tincture formulation are more likely to be able to accurate dose, record, and report effects to their veterinarian.

• Pet parents should evaluate the concentration of the product as well. In a highly concentrated product, one extra drop can make a huge (and often uncomfortable) difference in a small dog or cat. In larger dogs, however, more concentrated products can increase the ease of administration.

Environment and behavioral conditioning

• Once a pet parent has decided to administer cannabis, veterinarians can provide education to best avoid side effects. Pet parents should start with very small amounts and low concentrations and work their way up in volume and amount such as one might dose oral ivermectin – start low, incremental increases, and drop back down in volume if side effects (usually GI) occur.

• Pet parents should plan to be around the home during the first few times of administration and ensure that the environment is quiet and safe. If there are any side effects, these will usually be sensitivity to light and sound. Pet parents that stay calm themselves, turn off the lights, and block out loud noises will usually be able help alleviate or avoid any sensitivity of the animals to the environment.

• These sensitivities should dissipate with time and as the animal’s body becomes accustomed to the cannabis product. If sensitivities persist, the pet parent should revisit their choice in cannabis product along with additional education and review by the veterinary team.

Resources and further education

This article is intended as a brief overview of cannabis in veterinary medicine and to, hopefully, provide a starting point for veterinarians and their teams to begin providing their clients with information regarding cannabis. It is NOT intended as legal advice or a clinical recommendation. Please consider the following additional resources.

Website resources

• www.veterinarycannabis.org/resources

Articles (available at colovma.org/marijuana-and-pets/)

• “A Tale of Two Cannabinoids: The Therapeutic Rationale for Combining Tetrahydrocannabinol and Cannabidiol”

• “Overcoming the Bell-Shaped Dose-Response of a Cannabinoid by Using Cannabis Extract Enriched in Cannabidiol

Other resources

• Online community forum (discussion with other veterinary professionals concerning cannabis) offered through Veterinary Cannabis Education & Consulting email info@veterinarycannabis.org for more information.