

PLAN AHEAD: CREATING VETERINARY CARE PLANS

Liza Wysong, BAS, CVT, VTS (CP-CF)(SAIM)

Rowan College of South Jersey, Sewell, NJ

Introduction

The nursing process is an organizational tool first described in human medicine in 1955 to guide nursing students and promote patient care. It is currently included in the American Nursing Association's (ANA) standards of practice. Utilization of the nursing process in veterinary medicine allows veterinary technicians to function in a similar capacity to that of human nurses. The process employs a systemic approach to delivering care to every patient. In order to correctly use the nursing process, the veterinary technician must be able to apply critical thinking and veterinary nursing knowledge to institute a high standard of care and enhance patient care. Veterinary knowledge refers to a thorough understanding of common disease processes, diagnostics, treatments, and associated procedures - as well as potential complications or risk factors associated with these diseases and procedures.

The core of the veterinary nursing process includes patient assessment, planning, implementation, and evaluation of results. Each step of the nursing process is addressed separately, but depending on the patient case dynamic, these steps may occur concurrently, overlap, or occur out of sequence.

Assessment

The veterinary technician should evaluate the individual needs of the patient to provide proper patient care. A large part of this process is data collection and analysis. Data collection is finding the clues, and analysis is making sense of the clues. Information should be collected from the veterinary technician's direct observations and information from the client and other team members. This data may come from patient history (owner, patient medical records), staff members (rounds, patient medical records), or the patient status (attitude, pain score, laboratory values, physiologic parameters, physical examination). It is important for the veterinary technician to become comfortable and skilled at evaluating their patients and performing physical examinations. Ideally, every patient should be examined at the beginning of every nursing shift. This will help establish a baseline for comparison in evaluating ongoing nursing or medical interventions.

Diagnosis (Problem List)

Unlike registered nurses, who have the ability to assign a diagnosis from a database to their patient, veterinary technicians are limited by Veterinary Practice Acts, and it is considered unlawful for a technician to assign a diagnosis to a patient. However, veterinary technicians can compile a patient problem list. Defining a patient's actual (current) and potential (future) problems will encourage the technician to think critically and directly impact the quality of patient care.

Planning

Once information has been gathered during the assessment phase, the next part of the nursing process is the planning stage. Planning should be broken into identifying actual problems versus potential problems. Actual problems are those that interfere with the patient's well-being and for which further diagnostics and treatments are required. Potential problems are those that have not yet occurred, but the patient is at risk of developing them. It is essential to try to solve the solvable and lessen the

impact of the unsolvable patient problems. It is also essential to monitor patients for the re-emergence of previously managed issues that may present themselves in a decompensating patient.

Once a problem list is composed, it must be prioritized, and goals should be set. Goals should be stated in terms of outcomes that can be observed, measured, or tested so that effective evaluation can be carried out; distinctions should be made between short-term and long-term goals. In circumstances in which the patient's problem(s) cannot be solved or alleviated, maintaining the quality of life should be defined as a goal. Steps should be taken to help make the patient as comfortable as possible – even when death is inevitable.

Implementation

Implementation, or nursing intervention, is addressed after the planning stage. It is important to clarify what decision-making has taken place to justify the nursing intervention. Veterinary technicians should understand the reason for the action (intervention) and properly document the actions in the medical record.

Evaluation

Evaluating the nursing plan is a vital and sometimes challenging part of the nursing process. Ideally, a positive response should be observed in the patient, confirming that the nursing goals have been achieved. The nursing plan should be constantly re-evaluated to provide high-quality patient care. It is difficult to justify planning and implementing nursing interventions if you are unsure that there has been some benefit to the patient or the client. The plan should be flexible and dynamic to adapt to the changes in the patient's needs. If the plan is not effective, the following questions should be asked:

- How has the problem responded?
 - Has there been partial improvement?
 - Is the problem unchanged or worsened? If so, should the nursing intervention be altered or stopped? Should the plan include something completely different?
- Was the goal inappropriate when first set?
- Is there additional intervention required?
 - Is more information from the clinician or the client needed to decide the next step in the nursing care?
 - Does the goal require interventions from other members of the veterinary team?

Conclusion

The nursing process is generally a cooperative venture between the veterinarian and the technician. Having a systematic approach encourages the practice team as a whole to be fully involved with patient care. It promotes good case communication between different technicians, veterinarians, and even different clinics. Nursing care plans can save time and allow better communication in larger practices. In smaller practices, where inpatient care may be less common, the veterinary practice team may benefit from the structure and prompts in a plan. When used appropriately, the veterinary nursing process allows the veterinary technician to be utilized to the extent of their ability and can free the veterinarian to diagnose and prescribe. This can improve hospital efficiency and economy and job satisfaction for the entire veterinary team.

Resources

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