

PAWS for Action – What is Fair?
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This past week I received the February issue of *dvm360*, a magazine that reports on issues affecting the veterinary profession. This month's edition reported on the results of a survey asking, "What's keeping veterinarians up at night?" The number one most pressing issue listed was, rising costs and the affordability of veterinary care. Not surprisingly, this is also one of the most pressing issues for those of us who love our pets.

Primarily due to the high cost of veterinary care, visits to veterinarians are flat or on the decline. This is especially true for cats and for multi-pet households. We all have to make economic choices and some pet owners will make the choice to forego the annual checkup and vaccines if their cat is kept indoors.

Where a family owns multiple pets the veterinary bill can get very high very quickly, even when their pets are only due for the basics in veterinary care. This is not hard to understand when, according to data reported by the American Veterinary Medical Association, the average cost per visit for one dog was \$146, and this was back in 2011.

What happens when a family is experiencing economic challenges? Or maybe they are simply going through that period in their lives when they are taking care of elderly parents and/or sending their kids to college? What about the working poor? What happens when you unexpectedly get laid off from your job?

Stuff happens and we all have to find a way to get through it. If your child gets sick he or she will be seen in the hospital emergency room, if nowhere else. Where do you go if your dog has a medical emergency and your checking account is low?

Low cost veterinary practices have found a niche in some cities. One such veterinarian owned practice is located in Columbus, Georgia. This is a full service clinic which caters to pet owners who want to provide a reasonably high level of care for their pets but can't afford the customary rates charged by traditional veterinary clinics. For instance, the price to spay an adult female dog at Affordable Veterinary Services runs \$110. The going rate in Auburn and Opelika ranges from \$300 - \$350.

That brings us to number two on the list of "what keeps veterinarians up at night". They worry that competition from nontraditional service providers, such as big box retailers, on-line pharmacies, and nonprofit shelter clinics will siphon off business. Some veterinarians have expressed the opinion that this is unfair. However, it is nothing more than capitalism and it is a fact of life in virtually every other industry from book sellers to grocery stores to medical and dental practitioners. Part of what makes America great is when business owners, both large and small, compete with each other to provide the highest quality products and services at the lowest prices. Capitalism serves the consumer.

You could make the case that having a pet is a luxury. But having a couple of furry friends is what gets a lot of us up in the morning. They provide comic relief when we're weighed down with the cares of the world. They give us a compelling reason to get outdoors and take a walk. They offer unconditional love and a warm body to put our arms around.

One report published by the AVMA notes that almost 65% of pet owners consider their pets to be members of the family. Like it or not consumers are going to seek out the highest quality of affordable veterinary care they can get.

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