Managing dermatology cases

A step-by-step guide to managing dermatology cases efficiently in primary practice, from booking appointments to monitoring and review

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A recent survey of the UK veterinary profession (Nielsen, 2014) revealed that dermatological disease was the most common complaint reported in companion animal practice, occurring in no less than 32% of dogs and 27% of cats presented. In referral practice, dermatology specialists routinely emphasise how important a thorough history can be in assessing a case and as the history often stretches back over several years and different clinicians, this can take time to gather, extending the consultation. The challenge therefore, in primary practice, is to cover the same ground effectively and efficiently in a much shorter time slot.

Booking in

The streamlining process starts with the initial client contact; reception staff should ensure that the following key details are obtained in addition to the standard contact and animal information:

- Nature and duration of problem.
- Prior history and treatment – it is often useful to print out a long history as this can be reviewed far more rapidly on paper than on a computer screen and can be annotated to highlight details. If this is done in advance, it will allow the clinician to spend the valuable consultation time examining the patient.
- Permission to see the case if it is coming from another practice and request history.

Appointment allocation

It is important to decide who will see the case and how long will be allowed for the initial consultation. If there is a clinician in the practice with an interest in dermatology, they should be the first choice for a new case. If this is a follow-up, it should be booked in to see the clinician who last saw the case to ensure continuity. This is much more important than it may seem as it will shorten subsequent consultations, permit effective monitoring of progress and treatment and help to build the co-operative clinician/client relationship essential for long-term management.

- Normal appointment – the clinician should be advised in advance that a skin case is booked.
- Extended appointment – some practices routinely book a double appointment for new skins.
- Special appointment – consider booking an extended appointment during a quieter period of the day. Many clients will respond very positively to the suggestion of special treatment. Double or extended appointments should not be loss-leaders and need to be charged for appropriately, as a substantial proportion of the final cost to the owner will consist of consultation charges.

Consultation priorities

There will often be a limited time available and it will not be possible to review the whole history during the first visit. The goal at each visit should be to definitively eliminate one or more differentials.

Clinical challenge: What questions would you ask the owners of this eight-year-old crossbreed presenting with severe dorsal pruritus of 12 months’ duration?