

4 tips to bridge liability gaps

Sometimes you just can't anticipate all of the potholes in your path. But these four recommendations will guide you over the rocky road ahead and help you steer clear of dangerous legal ground.

1. Don't practice outside your comfort zone. Karen Felsted, CPA, MS, DVM, CVPM, a consultant with Brakke Consulting in Dallas, says she often visits practices where team members who aren't familiar with drugs fill prescriptions—with dangerous consequences. "Practices get busy and staff members need to be vigilant," she says. "If you're not comfortable doing something, you need to say so. No one likes to look stupid, but some mistakes are not worth making. So if you don't understand something, ask questions."

2. Communicate clearly and often. "When a client feels unhappy, the issue often boils down to poor communication between the practice and the client," says Dr. Felsted. "Support staff members often get the best chance to head off potential problems."

For example, if you promised to call a client about a test result, call when you say you will. And if you don't get the results, call anyway and say you haven't forgotten them and that you'll call as soon as the results come in. "These steps show that your practice team is reliable," Dr. Felsted says.

3. Watch what you say. "If a client asks about teeth cleaning and the receptionist laughs and says she's never had her pet's teeth cleaned, she undermines the doctor's advice—whether she means to or not," says Dr. Felsted. The result: Clients may feel ripped off and question the doctor's recommendations. Remember, any time clients feel uncomfortable with the recommendations, Dr. Felsted says your practice is at risk, especially if something goes wrong.

4. Don't make any promises. "Say, 'We'll do our best to help your pet,' but never say, 'We guarantee your pet will get better,'" says Dr. Felsted. "I know you want to make clients feel better and to say something positive, but a kindly meant promise can come back and haunt a practice."