

AVDC POSITION STATEMENT ON NON-PROFESSIONAL DENTAL SCALING

Companion Animal Dental Scaling Without Anesthesia

In the United States and Canada, only licensed veterinarians can practice veterinary medicine. Veterinary medicine includes veterinary surgery, medicine and dentistry. Anyone providing dental services other than a licensed veterinarian, or a supervised and trained veterinary technician, is practicing veterinary medicine without a license and shall be subject to criminal charges.

This position statement addresses dental scaling procedures performed on pets without anesthesia, often by individuals untrained in veterinary dental techniques. Although the term "Anesthesia-Free Dentistry" has been used in this context, AVDC prefers to use the more accurate term Non-Professional Dental Scaling (NPDS) to describe this combination.

Owners of pets naturally are concerned when anesthesia is required for their pet. However, performing NPDS on an unanesthetized pet is inappropriate for the following reasons:

1. Dental tartar is firmly adhered to the surface of the teeth. Scaling to remove tartar is accomplished using ultrasonic and sonic power scalers, plus hand instruments that must have a sharp working edge to be used effectively. Even slight head movement by the patient could result in injury to the oral tissues of the patient, and the operator may be bitten when the patient reacts.
2. Professional dental scaling includes scaling the surfaces of the teeth both above and below the gingival margin (gum line), followed by dental polishing. The most critical part of a dental scaling procedure is scaling the tooth surfaces that are within the gingival pocket (the subgingival space between the gum and the root), where periodontal disease is active. Because the patient cooperates, dental scaling of human teeth performed by a professional trained in the procedures can be completed successfully without anesthesia. However, access to the subgingival area of every tooth is impossible in an unanesthetized canine or feline patient. Removal of dental tartar on the visible surfaces of the teeth has little effect on a pet's health, and provides a false sense of accomplishment. The effect is purely cosmetic.
3. Inhalation anesthesia using a cuffed endotracheal tube provides three important advantages – the cooperation of the patient with a procedure it does not understand, elimination of pain resulting from examination and treatment of affected dental tissues during the procedure, and protection of the airway and lungs from accidental aspiration.
4. A complete oral examination, which is an important part of a professional dental scaling procedure, is not possible in an unanesthetized patient. The surfaces of the teeth facing the tongue cannot be examined, and areas of disease and discomfort are likely to be missed.

Safe use of an anesthetic or sedative in a dog or cat requires evaluation of the general health and size of the patient to determine the appropriate drug and dose, and continual monitoring of the patient. Veterinarians are trained in all of these procedures. Prescribing or administering anesthetic or sedative drugs by a non-veterinarian can be very dangerous, and is illegal. Although anesthesia will never be 100% risk-free, modern anesthetic and patient evaluation techniques used in veterinary hospitals minimize the risks, and millions of dental scaling procedures are safely performed each year in veterinary hospitals.

To minimize the need for professional dental scaling procedures and to maintain optimal oral health, the AVDC recommends daily dental home care from an early age. This should include brushing or use of other effective techniques to retard accumulation of dental plaque, such as dental diets and chew materials. This, combined with periodic examination of the patient by a veterinarian and with dental scaling under anesthesia when indicated, will optimize life-long oral health for dogs and cats.

For general information on performance of dental procedures on veterinary patients, please read the AVDC Position Statement on Veterinary Dental Healthcare Providers, which is available on the AVDC web site (www.AVDC.org). For information on effective oral hygiene products for dogs and cats, visit the Veterinary Oral Health Council web site (www.VOHC.org).

Adopted by the AVDC Board of Directors, April 10, 2004.

MY TWO-CENTS

NPDS = Fraud + Theft + Malpractice+ Animal abuse + Rotten PR.

Regardless of who provides the NPDS, it is wrong. It is wrong for a groomer to do it. It is wrong for a breeder to do it. It is wrong for an owner to do it on their own pets (even if they are a registered dental hygienist – they should know better). It is very very wrong for any employee of a veterinary facility to offer this service and it is even more wrong to accept payment for such harmful treatment. When offered within the context of a veterinary facility, even if it is at the grooming centre next door, the client has a right to assume that the treatment is safe and medically beneficial. Since NPDS is neither, it is wholly inappropriate to offer it.

The only safe way to do a thorough dental examination and to provide therapeutically beneficial dental treatment is with the animal under a surgical plane of general anesthesia with a properly fitted, cuffed endotracheal tube in place. If the owners do not consent to this, leave the teeth dirty and the breath stinky. Eventually, they will get the message and let you do the right thing. If you pander to their fear of anesthesia and chip the gunk off the crowns (while leaving it behind below the gum line), you are guilty of malpractice. Remember there are some patients we cannot help, but there are none we cannot harm. It is better to do nothing than to do the wrong thing.