Scan Every Pet, Every Visit

By Amy Van Gels, DVM, March 16, 2016

On their Easter vacation in 2013, the Bishop family lost their beloved miniature blue heeler, Shelby. Because Shelby disappeared from their car while they checked into a hotel, the family suspected that Shelby had been stolen. Her owner, Dacie, obsessively searched for Shelby for weeks: canvassing the neighborhood and local shelters, posting flyers, posting on social media, and combing lost-pet websites. Although her search eventually slowed, she never gave up hope that Shelby would return.

Three years later, Dacie's hope was realized. She received an email and a text message from the microchip company PetLink. A little boy had found Shelby, and his father had taken her to a veterinarian who had identified her by her microchip. After three years and a three-hour drive, Dacie joyously reunited with an odoriferous and tick-ridden Shelby.1

As a veterinary professional, you likely have participated in your own microchip success story. As such, you understand the critical role microchips play in reuniting lost pets with their owners. In fact, a 2009 JAVMA study showed that microchipped stray dogs return to their owners more frequently than strays without microchips (52.2% and 21.9%, respectively). Even more dramatically, 38.5% of microchipped stray cats return to their owners compared to only 1.8% of un-microchipped stray cats.2 Professional organizations, the AVMA and AAHA, endorse the use of microchips and encourage veterinarians to recommend them to pet owners.3,4 Additionally, the AVMA, AHAA, and the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) advocate that veterinarians routinely scan all pets in order to assess the function and proper location of implanted microchips. Specifically, the AVMA's policy on microchipping states that veterinary staff should scan for microchips "whenever possible."

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Why scan every pet at every visit?

Avenue Animal Hospital in Tinley Park, IL, launched their microchip scanning program with a "Check the Chip Day." They chose one day in the summer of 2014 to scan every pet that entered the hospital. According to the hospital's practice manager, Kim Gignac, one of the patients that they scanned that day unexpectedly came up negative for a microchip. Although his owner thought that he had a microchip and the clinic had the number recorded in his chart, several scans with two separate scanners did not reveal a chip. "This proved to our hospital the importance of scanning every pet," says Kim. "In the past, we used to only scan surgical patients. Now we scan every new pet and all pets during their annual wellness visits."

Kim refers to this decision as a "win-win" for both their patients and the clinic. "The scanning program is a revenue builder for our clinic, and we have seen a 20-40% increase in microchip sales since it started. More importantly, though, it allows us to provide full-rounded care that goes above and beyond client expectations. It is just one more way to protect the pet, in addition to vaccines and heartworm prevention."

Although it seldom occurs, the electronic transponders within microchips can fail, as seen by the staff of Avenue Animal Hospital on their "Check the Chip Day." Malfunctioning chips give owners a false sense of protection because they believe that the chip will work when in fact it doesn't. Scanning every patient during every visit can ensure that your patients' microchips are functioning as expected. After all, how do you know that your patients' microchips are working if you aren't checking them?

An effective microchip program also relies on reliable registration databases. As of March of 2016, the databases of 19 microchip companies can be accessed with the AAHA Universal Pet Microchip Lookup tool, available at http://www.petmicrochiplookup.org.5,6 Veterinary and shelter staff members can easily determine the microchip's manufacturer by entering an animal's microchip number on the website.

Unfortunately, the owner's contact information is not always up-to-date. In the 2009 JAVMA study, only 58% of the microchipped animals in the shelter had current contact information in a microchip registry.2 Christine Theriault, the hospital manager at Health and Wellness Animal Hospital in Hampton Falls, NH, has encountered this as well, "As our town's drop-off for stray animals, we see too many unregistered microchips. We scan all of our patients every time they visit so that we can help owners remember to keep their microchip information up-to-date. Our patients are our four-legged kids; we don't want to lose them."

The emergence of "900 chips" can also create difficulties for shelters and veterinarians who want to reunite lost pets with their owners. The first three digits of a microchip number typically refer to the chip's manufacturer, for example microchips starting with "981" are manufactured by PetLink. However, at least six companies in the United States sell microchips with a shared 900 code. This means that a shelter may have to contact six different companies to identify a lost animal whose microchip starts with 900. At least one of these companies makes "no promise to keep information on [anyone] who purchases microchips, nor document which microchips are shipped to which customers."7 This policy goes against the industry standard of being able to trace microchips from the manufacturer to the purchaser. Therefore, animals with 900 chips may be extremely difficult to identify. If you discover a 900 chip in one of your patients during a routine scan, suggest to the pet's owner that they try to track down their contact information in the company's registry. If they struggle to acquire the information, so will a shelter or veterinarian in the event that the pet gets lost.

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Start your own “Scan Every Pet, Every Visit” program

Veterinary hospitals can easily initiate their own “Scan Every Pet, Every Time” microchip program. Both Christine and Kim felt that the programs were easy to launch within their hospitals, and neither experienced any staff resistance. Start by teaching technicians and assistants proper scanning techniques, as recommended by the scanner’s manufacturer. Make sure technicians know that low battery charge, interference from metal objects (such as exam tables, fluorescent lights, and computer equipment), and scanning in only one direction can all result in false negative readings.5 Then, instruct trained staff members to scan all patients as part of their intake assessment, around the same time that they take temperatures and patient history. If a microchip is present, they should enter or verify the pet’s microchip number in the medical record and remind owners to update their contact information with the microchip registry. If no microchip is present, the technician can educate the owner about the benefits of microchipping. As Kim Gignac said, “It’s simple and inexpensive to microchip patients. It’s also simple to scan every time.”

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4 AAHA animal identification and microchipping position statement. AAHA Web site.

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