

Technology with heart

HOW ONE PRACTICE MADE THEIR SCANNER MATTER

Swayne and Partners believe in making life interesting – for their employees and their clients. As one of the few independent practices in the area it also occupies the ‘interesting middle ground’ between first opinion and referral practices. We talked to partner and cardiology certificate holder, Duncan Hole, about this unique approach and the installation of a new CT scanner from Hallmarq Veterinary Imaging at his premises.

Promising beginnings

Installing a CT scanner is no small step but, for Duncan, it was a natural progression, “We’d been slowly building up cases that needed to be scanned over the years. Most of those went to a neighbouring practice for scanning with a view to us performing surgery in-house. It eventually became clear that this was taking up quite a bit of time and that we had enough to warrant having our own machine.”

Duncan did considerable research to evaluate the different options. In the end, it was the Hallmarq ‘Pay-As-You-Go’ business model that won the day. The company has, he says, been ‘absolutely brilliant’. From the first step of the journey with a call to ask ‘will it fit in the room?’ to training and ongoing support, it’s all been relatively trouble free and the service second to none.

The purpose-built premises already had a storage area that could house the scanner and Hallmarq and builders Carters worked together to ensure that all RPA requirements were met. Having the electrics put in was probably the most problematic part and indeed the only issues the practice has ever experienced around operation has been the

re-booting of the machine following a power cut. Duncan sheepishly admits that this was the practices’ fault but it was soon sorted with a bit of help from the Hallmarq support team.

Making an impact

So, how has the scanner made a difference to the practice? While most of us would expect clients to be impressed, the most amazed reactions have come from clients from other practices, “They can’t quite believe these facilities are available right on their doorstep.” Duncan says their own clients have come to expect high standards and so although there was a ‘wow’ reaction to the scanner, it wasn’t nearly as marked as those visiting from elsewhere.

At around the same time as the scanner was introduced the practice moved to provide out of hours cover for surrounding practices. It was a natural progression as routine appointments were already available until 10 pm – these days it’s pretty much a 24-7 operation and the scanner can be called upon at any time of the day or night.

It has been the practice staff who have really connected with their new 'toy'. According to Duncan, it's allowed the surgeons to use their skills more fully, "I thought when we had the scanner that we would have other practices wanting us to scan their cases and to carry out their own surgery. That hasn't

straightforward. The images though are so clear that there is not always a need for outside support, "I've been on CPD courses where I've been squinting at an image trying to make sense of it. This is nothing like that. The detail is remarkable and the difference is out of this world."

been out of the house since we'd put his dog to sleep three months before." This 'old school' approach harkens back to the days when a vet was an important member of the community and it seems as if combining the best of the old and new is working for this practice.



happened and what I've really learned is that you have to have the people there who can deliver everything and handle the case right the way through. It's worked beautifully for us. We have certificate holders and we encourage our young vets to start taking certificates as soon as they are ready. The scanner gives us amazing images and we can see things we previously would only have dreamed of seeing before – prolapsed discs and exact locations for instance. We are now doing spinal surgery regularly. As a cardiology certificate holder, I also love using it for chests. Cases that are radiographed and scoped can now be scanned as well, providing a much more detailed level of information."

A team-based approach

If the scanner has made the clinician's life much more interesting, it has also led to a requirement for a high level of nursing for recovering patients. Duncan says the nurses are always busy delivering high quality care to these more complex patients. A team of around six are fully trained in how to use the scanner, including two RVNs. Duncan says the week-long training was high quality and demanding 'at times I felt my brain would explode by the end of the day' – but ended with everyone feeling confident about operating the machinery.

Scans are read in house and supported by Vet-CT in cases where interpretation is less

Internal referrals are not a problem either as Duncan says he doesn't have to work to engage his staff with the technology, "They want to do their best for the pet and recognise that this is the way to do it."

The heart of the matter

As one of the few independent practices in the area, Duncan says he did worry as surrounding practices were bought up by corporates but in fact business is good and recruitment isn't an issue in the slightest – in fact he is regularly approached by graduates looking for permanent positions. In fairness, this is about much more than having leading edge equipment. The practice doesn't advertise and is continuing to grow by word of mouth. They do have regular coffee morning and open days when around 50 people get a chance to look around and see how the practice works.

Duncan's ethos is summed up when he explains that he realised that there were people, often elderly, that he previously had seen on a regular basis and he sometimes had the feeling that they didn't get a lot of other contact, "I started thinking that after their pets were put to sleep I hadn't seen them again and maybe they missed that contact as much as I did." So, he invited a few of those people down to the practice to join them for a cup of a tea and cake, "They were absolutely delighted," he recalls. "One man told us that it was the first time he had

Best for business

It's good to know that this caring approach also marries up with financial success. There are around 20 scans carried out a month, which, alongside the necessary surgical follow up, more than covers the costs of the scanner, using Hallmarq's unique 'pay as you go' finance model. As the overnight cover also started at the same time as the scanner, Duncan says it's impossible to put an exact figure on it but profits are definitely up. "When we're busy I'm always commenting on how great that is, which ensures we all feel positive about progress."

Duncan is also clear that he is unlikely to allow the practice to become referral only, "When I did my certificate I started to think that maybe I could specialise but I love the challenge of something new and different coming through the door and getting to know my clients. The other day I did a house call for a euthanasia and the man said to me, 'This is the fourth one of my dogs that you've put to sleep for old age. The other three were done at that exact same spot.' It took me back a bit that I'd been through so many canine generations with one client. That's quite a privilege."

Asked if he has one take home message for anyone considering acquiring a CT scanner Duncan believes it's all about people, "You have to have the people who can provide the follow up and wrap around care. It may be technology but it enables people to do their best and gives them something to stretch to achieve. We're growing our own talent within the practice and the scanner shows them that we have everything they need to create positive outcomes for their patients. We're not a referral practice in the traditional sense but we're functioning at a high level and can support complex cases at an affordable cost. That's a sustainable business model in our opinion – not least because we have happy colleagues and happy clients with pets that we've restored to health. It doesn't get any better than that."

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