

PRACTICE EXPERIENCES

Experiences from Practices that have Stopped Elective Declawing

Contained herein are real-world experiences that demonstrate how practices made the transition to no longer offer declawing as an elective procedure. They discuss various techniques and tactics that were applied in order to implement new policies and educate staff and clients, as well as share positive impacts. Below several practices provide their stories and feedback.

Banfield Pet Hospital

On January 1, 2020, more than 1,000 Banfield hospitals and the Mars Veterinary Health family of brands stopped the practice of elective declawing. Every medical procedure supported by Banfield has been put in place with the health and wellness of pets in mind, and, based on this, we do not support the elective declawing. Banfield veterinarians should educate and encourage owners on alternatives to declaw.

There is a great concern for medical complications. Banfield found, based on literature review, that several short- and long-term complications were reported from declawing across veterinary practices, with estimates of postoperative complication ratings ranging from 24-80%.

As we began to enact this change, communication was key when taking the first steps to end declawing at so many practices and focusing effort on the 'why' behind our decision. Our practice's field leadership communicated the change to medical leaders and made sure they understood why the change was being made. Those leaders then shared the change with hospital associates and were encouraged to talk to one another to fully understand the new policy and strengthen the positioning behind it. Ongoing review of literature and data was fundamental when making the decision to end declawing, and we used a robust plan to launch this to our hospitals nationwide.

Even with COVID-19 disruptions in 2020, since Banfield has stopped declawing, we have seen a 3.6% increase in cat visits in 2020 compared to total cat visits in 2019 (data for 2020 was through 11/23/20).

Banfield Hospital in Minnesota

Did you have any unhappy clients and if so, what did you relay to them?

As with any conversation with a client – difficult or positive – it's important to come from a place of compassion and understanding. In situations where a client might be frustrated after learning we won't be performing an elective declaw on their cat, I find a majority of the time their response is coming from a lack of general

understanding of the procedure. Particularly with new cat owners or those who haven't owned a cat for many years, they can also have preconceived notions or fears about what having a clawed cat is actually like. When Banfield implemented our declaw policy practice-wide, it made these tough conversations easier and empowered us to stand behind the 'why' of our decision.

In my experience, there is always a little bit of a surprised reaction from pet owners when I tell them our declaw policy is a company-wide position across all of our 1,000 hospitals nationwide. That surprise almost always turns to curiosity, and the first question they ask is, "why?" This opens the doors for our team to educate the client on potential wellbeing consequences for their cat and the pain involved in the procedure. I find other key components of working through frustrations with a client are to review alternative options in-depth with them, talk about the importance of nail trimmings, perform the first nail-trimming in the hospital, and review at-home trimmings. It can also be helpful to provide written material for them to review on their own.

After spending time with the client to help them understand all the different elements of the procedure and other ways they can manage the situation at home, I find that 9 times out of 10 we end the visit with the client feeling good about the decision – and they almost never bring the declaw topic up again at future visits.

Were there any positive outcomes?

In addition to the benefits mentioned above, we find that taking the time to really educate cat owners on the elective declaw procedure and potential implications for their cat can help strengthen the client-veterinarian bond and build more trust in the long run. They understand that our decision is rooted in wanting the best thing for them and their cat.

Deciding not to perform elective declaws can also be a differentiator for practices looking to attract new talent who might be more drawn to a hospital if their views are aligned with the practice's policies. Having a formal position can help staff feel empowered to practice veterinary medicine in a way that aligns with their standard of care.



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Banfield Hospital in Minnesota continued

Is there anything else you would share with other veterinary professionals?

Implementing a new policy can sometimes feel daunting as you aren't sure how clients might react and what implications it could potentially have for your hospital team. Implementing the Mars Veterinary Health declaw policy at our hospital has helped position our veterinary team as a trusted source that puts the health of the pet first – and strengthen the relationship we have with our clients, who now have a better understanding of the 'why' behind our decision. We as veterinary professionals face difficult situations every day, but as long as we are approaching challenges with compassion and understanding, we can feel good knowing we are doing what's right for our patients.

Feline-Only Practice in Ontario, Canada

In 2015, our two feline-only clinics stopped declawing. We regret not having done it sooner. Even in the last five years, I have seen a paradigm shift in cat families – they don't agree with declawing, and many showed relief that we no longer did it or could support it under any circumstances. People would say, "well, I really didn't want to do it anyway," when the topic arose, so they were relieved and accepting.

Have your cat visits decreased or increased since you stopped declawing?

Our practices are growing, and stopping declawing had absolutely no negative financial impact—actually, the opposite as we acquired new clients as we were a non-declaw clinic. We have a strong retention rate and a large number of new clients – we are near to the point where we have grown beyond our capacity. We always include complimentary nail trims with our examinations (unless it is a fearful cat that didn't take pre-visit medication) as a way to "celebrate having nails on all four paws" – our clients love this, and it has increased their respect and trust.

What processes did you implement to ultimately stop declawing?

We prepared by educating clients and the team. We did fewer and fewer declaws because of that, and then when we stopped, it was a non-issue. If I had to do it over again, I would have stopped years before we did. We always

used the excuse – we do it right, and we have great pain protocols – hindsight is 20/20. Preparations and education for the team can be done with a CE lunch and learn. Once the team is on board and can chat about the decision with clients, it is a no brainer. Our only mistake is that we should have done it long before we did. Once the team is educated and have their "scripts" for the client, it can be stopped overnight with only a positive impact.

Were there any positive outcomes?

Young veterinarians don't want to declaw. We are in a time where veterinarians are hard to come by, and it is an incentive that we don't declaw for young veterinarians to work at our practice. It is one of the questions they ask during interviews - "do you declaw here?" Staff are proud, and it's easy to get new team members to join us. We have a fully booked appointment schedule, and it continues to be that way. We also sell a lot of scratching resources, nail trimmers, and have cats coming in and paying for nail trims. My practices are still at a healthy growth rate, and I have some excellent young practitioners who would not stay with us if we declawed.

Is there anything else you would share with other veterinary professionals?

Once you stop declawing, you are shocked that you ever did it. One of the 'Five Freedoms' for Humane Treatment of Animals is for them to have the ability to express their normal behavior. Scratching is normal behavior for a cat, and therefore by definition – declawing is cruel. With my work with Cat Healthy in Canada, we do a lot of data collection about cat owners. Times have changed, and young people and the majority of the cat-owning public think declawing is cruel, as do shelters and humane organizations. We need to move with the times regarding medicine, cat handling, and what our clients feel is important, and what we know is right for the feline species in order to have successful practices. We had to pivot on a dime to safely practice with this pandemic, so we have shown as a profession that we can change.

Giving up declawing is an easy decision that can be made immediately. You and your practice will never look back, except with regret that you ever did it in the first place. Many provinces across Canada have banned declawing, and I am embarrassed that Ontario still allows it. It is our responsibility as veterinarians to lead the way to do what is right for the feline species.



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Small Animal Practice in Denver, CO

In 2017, Denver City Council passed a bill on declawing effective immediately, but we had rarely performed the procedure since we opened our practice in 2011. We see about 5200 feline patients a year and have always discouraged declawing. When the issue was in front of the Denver City Council, we were promoting our support of the ban and definitely heard support from clients and staff.

How did you prepare?

At our practice, we focused on education and providing alternatives such as training regarding nail trims, appropriate toys, and enrichment to our clients, which increased client loyalty. The surgery was a last resort, and when we discontinued, it wasn't missed.

Were there any positive outcomes?

Our staff appreciated that we fully discontinued declawing. It was never a procedure that provided a marked financial impact. The city aligned with our values so we could discontinue in a public way, not just privately.

Feline-Only Practice in Columbus, OH

When did your practice stop declawing?

We have been transitioning but officially ended in January 2020. We started by banning all four paw declaws and then moved to requiring consultation visits that would provide all education options to owners that we had to offer. Then we restricted it to only families who claimed they had a high-risk family member (which, with time, we realized this is a myth) and those who threatened to go elsewhere (which terrified us). Eventually, we officially ended declawing all together.

What processes did you implement to end elective declawing?

When I was a student in veterinary school, declawing of cats was briefly discussed. I had a handful of lectures on feline-specific medicine, none of which were in-depth feline behavior, and certainly none regarding alternatives to declawing.

When I left general practice for my current feline-only practice (established 25 years at that time and were performing declaws), I began the process of ABVP board certification and became a member of the AAFP. I started getting more exposure to feline behavior and discovered more and more published data revealing the long-term complications these declawed cats were experiencing. Honestly, the behavior lectures given at the 2016 AAFP Conference really gave me the tools I needed to begin the process of ceasing declawing at our practice.

In 2018, we established a new kitten-visit protocol for the practice to make sure all kittens/owners were receiving the same training regardless of whether this was their first cat or tenth cat. We wanted to make sure everyone was hearing the same things from our staff regarding behavior, scratching, training, and environmental enrichment. Eventually, we developed a more structured behavior consultation program for cats that destructively scratch at home, and we then saw fewer and fewer declaws getting booked. We then moved towards more organized claw "consultation" appointments where we would meet with a client several times before considering the declaw procedure as we had a good success rate at getting owners to accept alternatives. These tactics helped get us to the point where we stopped declawing at the practice.

Did you have any unhappy clients and if so what did you relay to them?

The hardest clients to convince that declawing is unethical and wrong were those that have "always had declawed cats" who were "fine," - especially those who had the procedure performed here at our practice over the last few decades. We found that sharing published literature seemed to be the most impactful for these clients, as well as relaying that even though their cat was one of the "lucky ones," the majority of other cats are sadly not as fortunate. For new cat owners, or owners who "thought declawing was just what you do with cats," - they are the easiest to teach about alternatives, and these are usually new clients who LOVE us for educating them!

Is there anything else you would share with other veterinary professionals?

I think if they are hesitant because of the same reasons we were initially (afraid they would go somewhere else and receive poor pain control/surgical technique), then you have to just commit, let go of that fear, and stick to your morals. We now know this is a bad procedure with terrible long-term consequences for the cat. The more practices that stop declawing, and the more owner educating we can do as a profession, then eventually we will make it all stop! Additionally, practices should not expect declaws to be an income generator; it's like a spay or neuter; once it's done, it's done, so it's not going to be a repeat source of income for a patient. I think owners will respect you more if you have good solid evidence as to why you don't perform them, especially if they trust that you have their pet's best interest at stake.

