What happens when you leave your pet at the Vet?

Having worked in a vet practice for about 10 years now I have a vague idea of what goes on behind the scenes. Sadly clients hear words like routine surgery – We often forget (because it is what the practice does) that surgery to the client is NOT routine! This may be the first time they have had a pet and so are have genuine concerns about what actually happens. Most of our clients at some time or another will bring their pet to us for a surgical procedure (most commonly neutering) but few have any understanding of what happens to their beloved pet when they leave. I have found this lack of understanding by the client and failure to impart the relevant information by us can lead to anxiety and worry for the owner as they wait for the telephone call saying their pet is awake and recovering from its anaesthetic. I thought, therefore, it would be useful to explain what happens. Now not all vets will do it exactly as we do at Coombefield, and I will explain how we do it below, but for almost all vets the system will be broadly similar.

Thank you to Mrs Dean and Vinnie who kindly consented to having Vinny’s day with us recorded for this article. Vinnie was booked in for a castration and an operation to deal with BOAS (Brachycephalic Obstructive Airway Disease)

Step One – Admittance

On the day of the surgery you will be booked in for an appointment with a nurse, usually between 8 and 9 in the morning. At this appointment the nurse will examine your pet, making sure they’re well and fit for surgery, and check that they have not been fed overnight (although some species will need to be fed overnight, primarily small mammals) – You should have been advised of this when booking the appointment but you should also ensure that water has not been withheld. Our nurses then discuss the operation and ensure that you have read and understood the consent form that all owners must sign prior to surgery including the cost. You will be given the option of a Pre-anaesthetic blood screen – to check if the anaesthetic poses a significant risk to your pet.
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Step Two – Pre-surgery
Once the consent form has been signed, your pet will be taken through to the kennelling area. All admitted pets are given their own kennel with bedding in to wait in prior to surgery.

We have separate cat and dog wards so that stress is kept to a minimum i.e. a cat doesn’t have to sit in a ward full of barking dogs! If you elected to have the blood tests to check the health of your pet prior to surgery, these will be taken now. We have an in house laboratory, so the results are available within 15 minutes.

Step Three – Pre-medication
Approximately 30 minutes before surgery, your pet will be checked by the operating vet and an appropriate pre-med given. This pre-med, normally given by injection under the skin, involves a mild sedative and pain relief. We do this to minimise the amount of anaesthetic required which helps to keep your pet relaxed as well as to provide a smooth recovery.
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**Step Four – Anaesthesia**
The majority of anaesthetics are administered by injection into the vein running down the front leg of your pet. Hair will need to be clipped off the leg to do this, so don’t be surprised if you see a bald patch when your pet goes home at the end of the day! Once your pet’s asleep, a tube is passed down the windpipe to enable oxygen and a gas anaesthetic to be administered – this will keep your pet anaesthetised while the operation takes place.

**Step Five – Patient Preparation**
Once your pet is asleep, a nurse will prepare them for surgery. This usually involves clipping a considerable amount of hair off! Owners are often surprised at the amount that needs to be clipped off for even a small operation but it is important that the skin surrounding the operation site can be thoroughly cleaned and that hair doesn’t get in the way during the operation. Once the hair has been removed, the surgical site is cleaned and sterilised. The operation will not start until we are satisfied that it has been sufficiently prepared for surgery.
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Step Six – Surgery

Once prepared, your pet will be taken from the prep area into theatre where the operation will take place. This is a sterile area and vets and nurses working in this area will be suitably gowned to prevent dirt and infection getting into the theatre. From the point where your pet was anaesthetised, and throughout the whole surgical procedure, your pet’s heart and respiratory rates are monitored by a nurse who remains with your pet the whole time. These rates are recorded so that any changes are noted instantly and levels of anaesthesia can be adjusted. Intravenous fluids are often administered, even during routine procedures, as they help maintain an efficient blood circulation.
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Step Seven – Recovery

Once surgery is completed, your pet will have the anaesthetic gas turned off but the tube in their windpipe remains in place delivering oxygen until your pet has come round sufficiently to allow it to be removed. Your pet is then moved back into a recovery area where a nurse will monitor them until they are fully awake and aware of their surroundings.

Once we are happy they have fully recovered, they’re taken back to their kennel area to rest. It is usually at this point that you will be phoned to let them know everything is OK, and your pet is recovering from surgery.

Step Eight – Discharge

This is usually in the afternoon, an appointment will be made with a nurse (or sometimes the vet) to discharge your pet when the admission takes place in the morning. At this point it is important that we now take enough time to discuss with you any post-operative care needed e.g. care of any dressings, preventing your pet from licking any stitches, what level of exercise and food to give in the next few days. Any post-operative treatment like antibiotics or pain relief are also discussed and dispensed.
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**Step Nine – Post-operative Checks**
Depending on what the operation was for, a post-operative check is usually arranged for 3-4 days’ time – usually with the nurse. Here we can discuss any problems you are having and wounds and stitches checked to ensure they are healing well.

**Step Ten – stitches out**
Usually 10-14 days post-surgery. A nurse will remove the stitches and check the surgical site. Any further worries or advice about the operation can be discussed.

I have found that if a client knows what is happening to their pet, they are much happier and it causes them less anxiety. If you are ever worried about what will happen to your pet once they pass through the “big door to the back”, you should ask as many questions as you want so your vet can put your mind at rest. At Coombefield we are happy to arrange for clients to view the prep and operating area before their pet comes in if they are particularly worried, although this needs to be arranged in advance and will be in the afternoon when the theatres are less likely to be in use!

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*Stuart Saunders has over 10 years’ experience working in both small animal and large animal veterinary practice and is the Practice Manager of Coombefield Veterinary Hospital. Nettle his dog has 13 years’ experience of being a dog, has been registered at 3 different vets over her life and doesn’t want to move to a 4th*