

# Animal Health Beyond-the-pill: From Research Labs to Social Networks

All observers agree that health will be the next sector to be totally revolutionised by the digital transformation. At the core of this revolution lie digital power and the progress of artificial intelligence but also and especially the role attributed to the patient, whose commitment could be 'the blockbuster drug of the century'. What is at stake is a total change to the pharmaceutical industry's economic model, which evolved from the status of 'developer and manufacturer of drugs' to that of 'provider of therapeutic solutions'.

Animal Health needs to rethink its business by helping patients to play an active role in their health, thanks to digital health solutions such as websites, physical sensors and applications that can help patients to self-monitor. We note that such devices allow for more successful treatment through a better adjustment between treatment and the evolution of the patient's state or lifestyle. As a result, there is better decision-making by the patient who shares more information with their doctor. What is true in human health is even more so in animal health.

Animals will also communicate, being able to send us information about their health, their activity and possibly even their wellbeing. The veterinary pharmaceutical industry should also be aware of the fact that animals have an owner and not just a veterinarian. If the owner is better informed about the disease, they can better understand the treatment and can therefore better administer it and accept the cost and constraints. This is the concept of the My Epileptic Pet programme, which was launched in 2012 by TVM Laboratory to help veterinarians and animal owners improve care in animal epilepsy.

*"If patient engagement were a drug, it would be the blockbuster drug of the century and malpractice not to use it." Leonard Kish, Health Consultant*

Today, people don't simply 'go' online, they 'live' online. There is an abundance of information available online – people search the web for solutions to all of their daily problems and share their experiences and feelings. Health problems are no exceptions.

The results of an Odoxa survey for the Healthcare Data Institut (HDI), carried out in France in November 2018 revealed that 29% of French people had already mentioned their health online, which represents about 15 million testimonials. Among them, 73% do so mainly on social networks (Facebook groups, Twitter and Instagram). For 58% of people questioned, these online testimonials bring them useful information about the side-effects from medication and on patient experience. 46% believe that they are also of help when searching for information in order to 'know what disease corresponds to what symptoms?'

If pharmaceutical companies do not communicate on the internet about the pathologies they treat, they face the risk that incomplete information or distorted exchanges will



complicate the work of the caregiver and patient follow-up. The laboratory's role does not stop at drug marketing, it goes further: it's a real commitment to the management of the disease.

Like patients, owners of sick pets are becoming more aware and more engaged, and have more expectations. Historically, pet owners had a much more passive role. They would simply go and meet the veterinarian and rely on the medicines prescribed and start the treatment. With digitisation, before or after meeting a veterinary surgeon, the patient researches everything about the disease – its symptoms, diagnosis, possible cures, etc., and often has already interacted with other pet owners.

If these facts are relevant to health in general, they are even more so for chronic or rare diseases. Epilepsy is a relatively rare pathology in animal health. During a survey carried out by one of our laboratories in 2018<sup>2</sup>, 80% of veterinarians questioned have less than 10 cases per year. Due to the fact that there are so few cases, 75% of veterinarians admit that they are not comfortable with the treatment that needs to be put into place, 50% don't feel comfortable with the emotional aspect with the owners of an epileptic animal, and two out of three have difficulties when proposing the follow-up of an epileptic animal.

Successful management of chronic diseases like epilepsy is largely based on compliance to treatment and we know that the keys to good compliance are an understanding of the disease and treatment, as well as assistance and support. However, it is not possible for the veterinarian to address all aspects of the disease during one consultation, through both a lack of time and of direct experience with the disease on a day-to-day basis; moral support and practical advice are the least talked about subjects.

Animal owners need information and moral support. Seeing their animal have convulsions and then learning that it is epilepsy are two very difficult and shocking events for owners. Faced with this chronic disease, they feel powerless and obviously have a lot of questions. In the same study, it appeared that only half of the owners left the first epilepsy consultation having well understood what was wrong

with their pet, the examinations and treatment necessary. The same proportion of owners also complained that the follow-up was insufficient and that their veterinarian did not understand what they are going through. 50% stated that they did not measure the impact that epilepsy would have on their daily lives. Given this situation, expectations focus on follow-up and assistance as well as more emotional support. When asked what they expected from an epilepsy plan of care, they mentioned receiving information regularly, appointments to discuss the disease and daily tools to keep track of seizures.

From 2012, we implemented a programme in France combining online and offline tools around animal epilepsy to meet owners' expectations and veterinarians' needs. The objective is to give veterinarians follow-up and information tools to facilitate their communication with their customers and animal follow-up, but also to communicate directly with the owners of epileptic animals who are looking for information online to inform and advise them and put them in touch with each other.

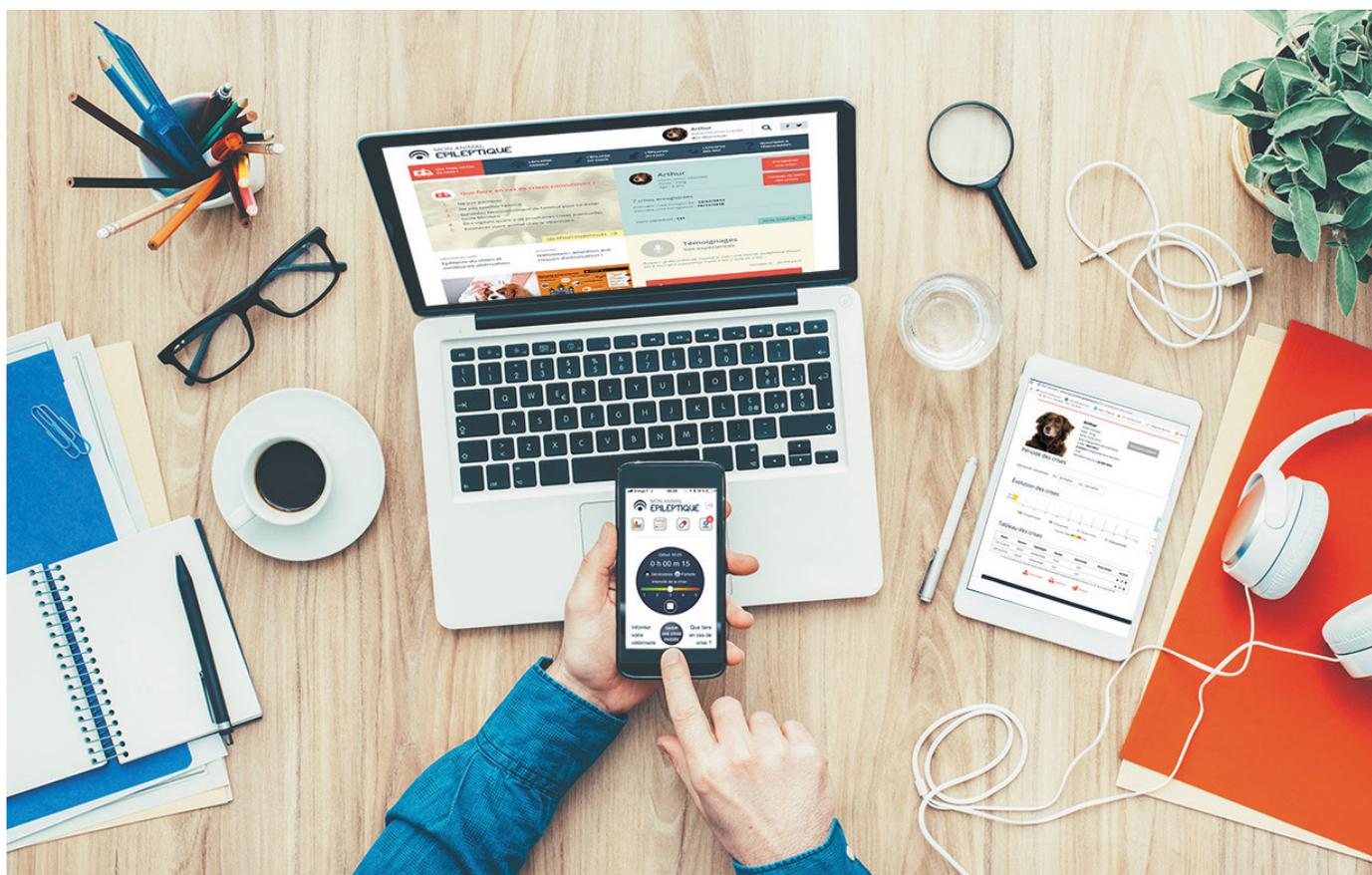
We first published an informational site about animal epilepsy where owners could ask our experts questions and publish testimonials. Starting in 2013, we added a seizure management module on the website and via a smartphone app to allow owners to save all their animal's seizures in a simple and fast way and send fit history in the form of a chart to their veterinarian. The application and its features were immediately greatly appreciated by many owners and veterinarians. The issues and the evidence received on the site quickly encouraged us to open an exchange space concerning the disease on Facebook. Exchanging with pet owners dramatically changed our approach. As the information that we produced around disease management was intended for veterinarians, we realised that we were forgetting important elements for the owners.

We worked for many years with the KOL (key opinion leader) veterinary specialists in neurology, but we had never worked with epileptic pet owners.

Social networks have allowed us to have this contact with our customers, those who use our products and who live with their animal and this disease every day. This has enabled us to better understand their expectations and challenges, and to implement actions to improve disease management. We met the owner of an epileptic Australian Shepherd who had created a community around animal epilepsy and who became our consultant "epilepsy specialist owner". Thanks to her and her group, we discovered a lot about their daily lives and difficulties that we had never suspected. This collaboration has brought about even more powerful veterinarian/owner solutions, such as the creation of an information booklet given at the end of the first consultation that answers the owner's first questions. Then we improved the fit management application in a process of co-creating with users to develop features that seemed the most useful and practical.

Supporting the owners of sick animals is also an important part of our programme. A study published by Veterinary Record in 2017 III showed that owners of seriously or terminally ill pets are more likely to suffer with stress and symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as poorer quality of life, compared with owners of healthy animals. In a linked commentary, the author calls for improved training for veterinarians around the provision of long-term care for serious illness. This includes tailoring treatment plans to client preferences, recognising when clients are distressed, and partnering with mental health professionals to provide support.

The health of formal and informal caregivers is therefore to be taken into account in this disease and its effects. By



hosting a community of epileptic pet owners, we can have both a formative and informative role with veterinarians and alert them to the moral suffering experienced by their patients and provide them with tools and advice to relieve the pain. In the future, it is probably one of the most promising roads to improve the monitoring and management of the disease.

At the base of the success of the double objective to improve the life of the animal and its family and to improve treatment results, is the understanding of the crucial importance of establishing confidence. As in any relationship, trust is built on a solid foundation of communication. What cannot be done during a consultation must be done outside the consultation by reliable sources and with the right tools. The devices such as those that we rolled out, place communication as the medical device of the future.

In addition to improving the lives of patients and caregivers, this collaboration between the veterinarian, the patient and the pharmaceutical company collects valuable information that in time will allow the provision of treatment which will no longer be based on the simple interpretation of symptoms, but personalised and adapted to the expectations and needs of the patient.

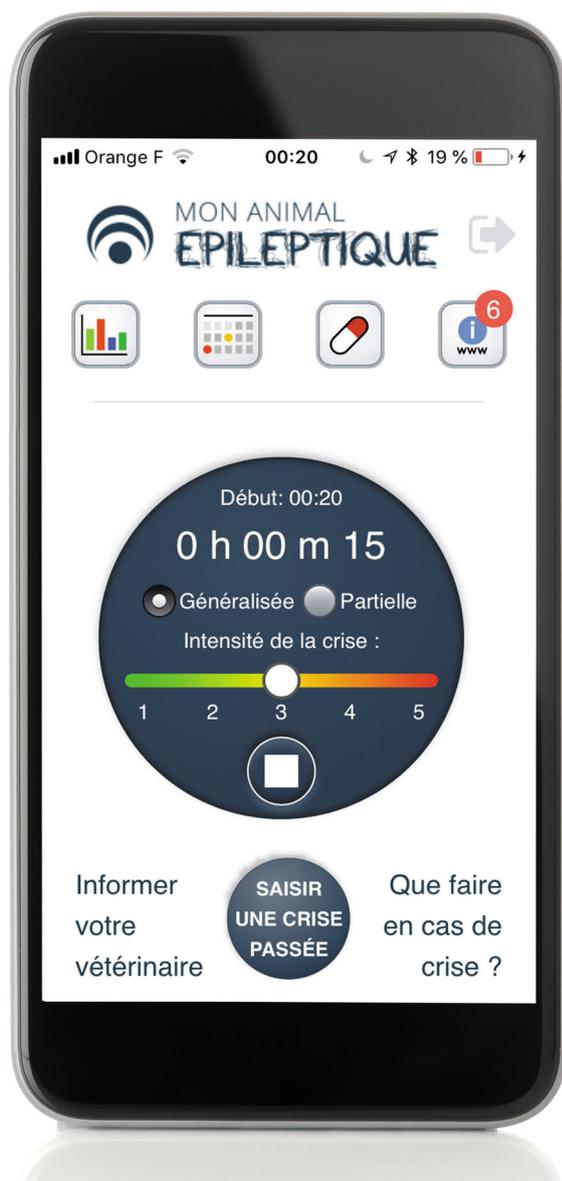


Some figures:

- 1500 enrolled in fit management
- 8500 seizures recorded
- 330 questions and testimonials
- 5500 monthly visits to the site
- 1130 fans on the Facebook community
- 25,000 people reached each month by the Facebook page posts.

#### REFERENCES

1. Social networks and health: A Challenge for Patient Management and scientific research, September 2018, Healthcare Data Institute – International Think Tank dedicated to Big data in Healthcare
2. Internal survey lead by TVM Laboratory in 2017 in France with 128 veterinarians and 92 owners of epileptic animals.
3. Mary Beth Spitznagel, Dana M Jacobson, Melanie D Cox, Mark D Carlson. Caregiver burden in owners of a sick companion animal: a cross-sectional observational study. *Veterinary Record*, 2017; vetrec-2017-104295 DOI: 10.1136/vr.104295



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