Reputation management: Managing the risks to maximize the benefits of social media

Jason B Coe, DVM, PhD
Associate Professor
Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
N1G 2W1

Introduction
Social media are the fastest developing form of communication in society today. There are many benefits to social media including the ability to connect readily and easily with friends, peers, clients, colleagues and other acquaintances. As a result, many veterinary practices are turning to social-media sites to market their business. Social media allow veterinary practices to enhance communication with clients by allowing pet owners to access information on their own time and by providing pet owners easy access to in-the-moment updates about clinic events or products. Despite the many benefits of social media to both the practice and the individuals in it, inherent risks also exist. For veterinary personnel specifically, risks of using social media include threats to personal security (e.g., theft, fraud, bullying) or loss of reputation. Associated with an individual’s loss of reputation is a risk to the reputation of their veterinary employer and the veterinary profession as a whole. To maximize the benefits of social media, veterinary practices need to manage the risks of social media including the risks associated with employees’ public posting of inappropriate information. This requires educating all members of a veterinary practice about the potential risks to themselves, the practice and the veterinary profession of publicly posting certain content online.

Research into veterinarians’ disclosure of personal information to Facebook
A study reviewing the Facebook profiles of 352 early-career veterinarians identified 75% publicly disclosed personal information to their own Facebook profiles that extended beyond what would typically be disclosed to a client within a traditional veterinarian-client relationship. Of participants, 21% publicly posted information that was deemed to be of a questionable nature, posing a potential risk to the individual’s and the veterinary profession’s reputation. The nature of the questionable content posted by early-career veterinarians included breaches of client confidentiality, evidence of substance abuse, and demeaning comments toward others.

Because veterinarians are members of a regulated profession which allows them to self-regulate and hold a monopoly over the practice of veterinary medicine, society expects a higher standard of behavior from veterinarians than of the general public. As social media continue to become more and more integrated within society, the personal and professional lives of veterinarians and veterinary staff are increasingly likely to overlap as veterinary clinics use social media for marketing purposes and veterinary personnel use social media in their personal lives. Therefore, understanding the risks associated with one’s personal use of social media will allow all veterinary staff to benefit from their personal use in a manner that avoids the potential pitfalls that could be harmful to oneself, the practice they represent or the veterinary profession.

A recent study involving 1587 members of the American Animal Hospital Association identified 72% of veterinarians responding to the survey had a personal Facebook profile. Of these respondents, only 52% indicated that they felt the image they presented on Facebook accurately represented them as a professional. In addition, veterinarians participating in the study indicated they disclosed more personal information to Facebook than they do in general. An individual’s trust in others, need for popularity, and more time spent on Facebook were found to be associated with an increase in veterinarians’ disclosure of personal information.

Reprinted from the 2014 Australian Veterinary Association Annual Conference Proceedings.

© JB Coe, 2014
contrast, awareness of consequences and an increased number of years of experience in veterinary practice were found to reduce disclosure of information to Facebook. Interestingly, 24% of veterinarians participating in the study indicated they planned to change their approach to using Facebook upon completing the survey.

Addressing the risks associated with veterinary staff’s personal use of social media

Awareness of consequences

Research has shown that raising awareness to the real-life risks of publicly posting inappropriate content to social-media sites such as Facebook encourages greater caution with the type of information posted online. In the study of member veterinarians of the American Animal Hospital Association, 15% of participants indicated their veterinary practice had experienced a negative event relating to information posted to Facebook. As a result, many of the participants were able to provide real-life examples of the negative consequence that can arise from the public posting of certain content by staff members to social media. The most common scenarios described by the participants were occasions of staff members “venting” inappropriately about work or other colleagues.

Three examples taken from participants of this study raise awareness to the potential consequences that can arise from veterinary staff’s personal disclosure of inappropriate content to social media. In addition to providing examples of consequences, the situations described also highlight that this is an issue of which all veterinary staff need to be aware.

Veterinarian example:
“*A fellow associate veterinarian made negative posts about our clinic that were sent anonymously back to the clinic. Although they were just ‘venting’, she didn’t see that clients could see that post, and just how negatively it affected the clinic and other veterinarians.*"

Technician example:
“*A technician had various photos posted relating to patients. The photo album privacy setting had not been changed…..A client who was a FB friend of another person in the practice found these photos and felt they were highly inappropriate…..The client brought a case against the technician with the licensing board.*”

Auxiliary staff example:
“*Client left practice because of wild Facebook page of kennel worker. They were concerned about who was taking care of their pet.*”

Drawing comparisons to these examples or providing other examples directly from one’s own veterinary practice can help raise veterinary staff’s awareness to the risks and potential consequences of posting certain information to social-media sites. In addition, it can be beneficial to draw on examples of the negative consequences of social media from other contexts. A useful online resource for this purpose has been developed by the Australian and New Zealand Medical Associations entitled “*Social media and the medical profession: A guide to online professionalism for medical practitioners and medical students*”.

Example questions staff should ask themselves before posting online

In addition to raising veterinary staff’s awareness to the consequences of publicly posting inappropriate content online, it is important that veterinary practices create a culture where veterinary staff can self-regulate their own and their colleagues’ use of social media. Providing staff with a number of reflective questions to assist in navigating the inherent risks of social media prior to posting online can be helpful:

- What is the intention of this post?

Reprinted from the 2014 Australian Veterinary Association Annual Conference Proceedings.

© JB Coe, 2014
• Could the post hurt me, a colleague, a client, the practice, the veterinary profession or others?
• Could the post be misinterpreted?
• Could the post be modified to reduce any potential risks?
• Does this post break any laws or professional standards?
• Before posting to a friend’s site, would I be happy if they posted the same information to mine?

References


“All aboard”: Activating the veterinary team to achieve optimal veterinary outcomes

Jason B Coe, DVM, PhD
Associate Professor
Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
N1G 2W1

“Instead of bringing employees together, many traditional work practices tend to foster and solidify divisions among them.”

Introduction
To truly maximize the outcomes of veterinary care, the focus of a veterinary practice must extend beyond the one-on-one interaction between veterinary staff and a client to include the role and influence of relationships among all levels of the veterinary health care team. Within the human health care field, ‘relational coordination’ has been the term used to capture the provision of team health care in a manner that involves “frequent, timely, accurate communication, as well as problem-solving, shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect among health care providers”. Research from human medicine has shown that a higher level of relational coordination within health care systems is associated with a number of positive outcomes for patients, health care staff and the hospital. Therefore, in order to truly maximize the quality and outcome of care for its patients, veterinary medicine needs to consider the role and function of all relationships within a veterinary care system including veterinarian-to-client, support staff-to-client and veterinarian-to-support staff.

Relational Coordination
Relational coordination is “the management of interdependencies between the people who perform tasks”. The term ‘relational coordination’ arose from research focused on understanding the departure process for commercial airlines, specifically the system that made Southwest airlines stand ahead of all other commercial airlines as the most profitable and successful airline in the history of aviation. Functioning within a highly turbulent and often non-profitable industry, Southwest airlines proved to be an anomaly with a consistent record of profitability, high levels of employee satisfaction and low employee turnover rates. Research into the process behind the success of this company identified that the organization’s ability to generate and sustain important relationships that were focused on shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect contributed to their success. It was found that relational coordination was a powerful driver of both quality and efficiency outcomes for Southwest airlines. Since the time of this initial discovery, it has been found that relational coordination can also be a powerful driver of quality and efficiency within other organizations that rely on a high level of interdependence among people, specifically human health care. Given that veterinary health care is also reliant on a team-based approach for providing successful outcomes of care, relational coordination has important application in the provision of high quality and efficient veterinary care.

Similar to human medicine, providing optimal care for a veterinary patient requires a number of basic coordinated needs including getting information from the client, getting information from previous care providers, sharing acquired information with all assigned to care for the patient, keeping everyone informed of tests, diagnosis, and interventions performed, integrating that information to develop next steps with those involved in the care, and sharing information with the client or the next care provider as needed to continue on with the appropriate care of the veterinary patient. Although this seems intuitive, research in human health care has shown that coordinating these efforts among the many health care providers involved in caring for a patient can be difficult to achieve.
Toxic attitudes and environments within veterinary teams

A recent study conducted at the Ontario Veterinary College, Guelph, Ontario, Canada involving an independent series of four veterinarian focus groups and four registered-veterinary technician (RVT) focus groups explored the concept of effective veterinary healthcare teams. One major theme that was common to both the veterinarian and RVT focus groups was the negative impact that a toxic attitude or environment has on the function of a veterinary team. Toxic attitudes were described by participants as individuals that are chronically negative, individuals that are not willing to assist others saying “that’s not my job”, individuals who try to hold power over others by manipulating information, and individuals whose personality is not compatible with the rest of the team. Toxic environments existed where there was a lack of trust within the team, members did not feel appreciated or respected, members did not feel supported in their role by others, and where personnel problems were left unaddressed. Many participants also expressed a belief that a lack of leadership within a veterinary practice set the stage for a toxic environment.

Interestingly, the description of toxic attitudes and environments described by the veterinarian and RVT participants of the focus group study are in direct contrast to the core elements of relational coordination (i.e., shared goals, shared knowledge and mutual respect). Toxic attitudes and environments within veterinary practice undoubtedly have an effect on outcomes for the practice, the staff, the client and ultimately the patient. Research in human medicine illustrates that successfully functioning teams have an important role in improving staff’s job satisfaction, as well as in achieving optimal patient outcomes including reduced post-operative pain, improved post-operative functioning, decreased hospital stay, higher levels of patient-perceived quality of care, and reduced patient readmission rates. As such, veterinary practices should evaluate the relationships and communications that currently exist within their own team environments while considering how relational coordination may enhance their provision of veterinary healthcare in a way that optimizes the outcomes for their practice, their staff, their clients and ultimately their patients.

Fostering relational coordination to strengthen a veterinary team

Both communication and the quality of the communication occurring during the care of an animal are important to the successful outcome of veterinary care. To achieve coordinated patient care in veterinary medicine the communication between providers of care (e.g., veterinarian-to-client, support staff-to-client or veterinarian-to-support staff) must be frequent, timely and accurate. In addition, the quality of the relationship between providers must also be taken into consideration. Even with communication that is frequent, timely and accurate, if the receiver does not respect the source, have shared knowledge or have shared goals with the source, the communication runs a good chance of being ignored. The key component to achieving relational coordination within a veterinary practice is to focus on all aspects of communication to ensure it fosters relationships with shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect.

Within the relational coordination literature specific to healthcare, 12 work-place practices have been identified for fostering relational coordination among high-performing healthcare teams. Utilizing the findings from the focus group research on veterinary teams discussed above, the current proceedings will discuss three of the work-place practices that have been shown to foster relational coordination. In addition to these three, readers are encouraged to investigate the other work-place practices that have been found to foster relational coordination within high-performing healthcare teams. Achieving relational coordination has been shown to be dependent upon the number of work-place practices employed, the intensity with which they are followed and the number of employee groups within the healthcare team included.

Selecting for teamwork

By selecting for teamwork when hiring, a practice has the potential to affect the relational coordination of their team in two ways, first it has the direct effect of selecting someone who

works well as part of a team and secondly it delivers a message to the new hire and the rest of the staff that the veterinary practice places high value on teamwork. The relational coordination of a practice can also be enhanced by involving members of the current team, from different employee groups, to be a part of the hiring process which allows current staff to have input into the selection process, allows the leadership in the practice to observe how the candidates interact with different members of the current team, and allows the practice to further communicate the team-oriented culture of the veterinary practice. To focus hiring on technical skills over relationship skills can provide an interesting conundrum, as failure to establish successful work relationships with colleagues can in itself become a barrier to maximizing the value of one’s technical skill.1

Resolve conflicts proactively
As in all healthcare settings, the often intense and interdependent task-driven environment of veterinary practice provides a breeding ground for interpersonal conflict. Conflict is not all bad; rather most change and progress arise out of conflict when it is managed effectively. However, unresolved interpersonal conflict can damage relationships within the veterinary healthcare team leading to a toxic environment which impacts upon overall team effectiveness and productivity. As considerable differences exist between people and their ability to manage conflict, it behooves veterinary practices to take a level of responsibility upon themselves to provide a mechanism to assist staff in managing interpersonal conflicts. Although the mechanism for managing conflict can take a variety of forms, it is important to create a culture and process by where staff have the opportunity to understand and address their personal differences.1 Based on the focus group research discussed above, this opportunity is particularly important for staff with different roles in a veterinary practice to gain a better understanding and appreciation for the work of others. One specific consideration when developing a process to proactively resolve conflicts in a veterinary practice is to develop an explicit mechanism to address perceived power-differentials that may exist within the veterinary practice team (e.g., clinic owner-to-high school student). In these cases a process such as assigning a specific staff liaison (e.g., liaison with the clinic-owner) can be important to ensure conflict management occurs and relational coordination is not undermined.

Make job boundaries flexible
Boundaries for acceptable workplace behavior are often governed by work rules that exist in the form of informal or formal policies or procedures.1 The work rules most likely to impact upon relational coordination within a veterinary practice are the rules that identify which tasks belong to which role or individual in the practice. Traditionally, it has been thought that assigning very specific tasks to workers improved performance by increasing focus and role clarity.1 Despite this benefit the approach also introduces rigidity to work flow, generating a culture of “it is not my job”, which can actually impede upon work efficiency within a highly interdependent task-oriented profession such as veterinary medicine. Rather, job flexibility allows for staff to share knowledge about different areas of a veterinary hospital, build mutual trust, and reduce traditional status boundaries.1 Investing in cross-training staff within and across roles at a veterinary practice is one process that can be used to make job boundaries more flexible. However, before embarking on cross-training be aware that overlapping job boundaries can be threatening to some staff’s sense of security. It can also threaten the traditional hierarchy that may exist within a veterinary practice which may cause some members to be uncomfortable as they may perceive a reduction in their own status in the practice. Successfully creating flexible boundaries also involves achieving job flexibility within a practice while still preserving distinct areas of professional expertise.1 For example, the kennel attendant would not be permitted to perform an ovariohysterectomy; however, there is no reason a veterinarian could not pitch in and help the kennel attendant by cleaning an animal’s cage as needed.

Achieving successful veterinary teams is important for veterinarians, veterinary staff, veterinary clients and veterinary patients. Many of the work practices which support the

development of relational coordination within a veterinary team may go against the deeply engrained patterns of behaviors and relationships that can exist within veterinary practice today. Practices should be encouraged to embrace relational coordination one step at a time. The three work practices focused on above should provide a starting point for any veterinary practice looking to further activate their veterinary team in achieving optimal veterinary outcomes.

References


Clearing the hurdle: Communicating the cost of veterinary care

Jason B Coe, DVM, PhD
Associate Professor
Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
N1G 2W1

Introduction
Veterinarians currently practice in an environment where the majority of pet owners pay for veterinary care out-of-pocket. As a result, the discussion of cost (or lack thereof) is likely to have a significant day-to-day impact on the decisions owners make and the veterinary care patients receive. Research has identified cost discussions within veterinarian-client-patient interactions to be an area of potential contention for veterinarians and pet owners. A series of four veterinarian focus groups identified that the discussion of cost is a source of unease for many veterinarians. In comparison, pet owners participating in six independent focus groups expressed concern toward inadequate discussions of cost between veterinarians and their clients. Across the pet-owner focus groups, the participants indicated they expected their veterinarian to initiate cost conversations upfront because they felt a failure to discuss costs leads clients to make decisions which ultimately overextended them financially. Interestingly, a recent study found 53% of pet owners identified that the costs of veterinary care are usually much higher than they expect.

Research suggests that a failure to discuss the cost of veterinary care upfront can contribute to client suspicion and mistrust. Although there will never be a magical solution for making cost conversations easy for veterinarians or their practice teams, it is important for veterinary personnel to develop communication skills that can be used to facilitate cost conversations with clients and preserve client trust. The first step is ensuring the costs of veterinary care are communicated in a way that attends to the client’s perception of value. Utilizing specific communication skills that convey understanding of the client’s perspective and offer partnership with the client in managing the cost of veterinary care can assist veterinary personnel in overcoming many of the hurdles that can exist to communicating the cost of veterinary care.

Understanding the client's perception of value
One of the inherent hurdles that can exist when discussing the costs of veterinary care is the potential conflict of interest that exists with respect to the fact that veterinarians directly influence the care patients receive, and the fact they receive more compensation by providing more care. It has been found that a general atmosphere of suspicion exists among some pet owners in relation to the motivations behind veterinary-care recommendations. This suspicion appears to arise from the conflict between pet-owners’ perceptions of veterinary medicine as a health-care profession versus veterinary medicine as a business. To address clients’ concerns that a recommendation may be driven by business motivations rather than the health-care needs of the animal, it becomes extremely important that veterinarians proactively educate clients to the value of a recommendation in a manner that attends to the client’s perception of value.

Research suggests when costs are discussed within veterinarian-client-patient interactions, veterinarians and clients often approach the discussion of cost from different perceptions of ‘value’, with veterinarians in many situations not framing their discussions of costs in a manner that attends to a pet owner’s perception. It has been found that clients’ perception of value is closely aligned with the importance to the overall health and wellbeing of their animal whereas veterinarians often discuss the cost of veterinary care in relation to the time and service they are providing the client and their animal. An observational study involving 20 companion-animal veterinarians and the analysis of 200 video-recorded veterinarian-client-
patient interactions found 29% of the interactions included a discussion of cost. Of the interactions, 66% included at least one cost discussion framed by the veterinarian in a manner that only conveyed value in relation to the veterinarian’s time or service being provided whereas 17% involved a discussion of cost that was related to the future health and wellbeing of the animal. To communicate the costs of veterinary care in a way that is relevant and meaningful to clients, veterinarians should consider going beyond simply conveying the cost of their time and service to communicating the value of their time and service to the overall health and wellbeing of the client’s animal. For example, instead of communicating to a client “The bloodwork will run 150 dollars” taking the discussion of cost another step to include the value of the bloodwork (i.e., service) to the overall health and wellbeing of the patient is likely to lead to greater client understanding and in turn investment in the recommendation (e.g., “The bloodwork will run 150 dollars; it is a general health profile which is more than the last time when we did the surgery … if it indicates an issue with her kidneys we can discuss changing her food … in that case, changing her food should decrease the stress on her kidneys and prolong her life.”)

A tool that is used by veterinarians to assist with conveying the cost of veterinary care is a written estimate. A written estimate can be an excellent way of initiating a discussion relating to the costs of veterinary care. However, without appropriate discussion a written estimate may fall short of effectively communicating the cost of veterinary care in a manner that attends to the client’s perception of value. When using a written estimate to facilitate a cost discussion with a client, it becomes important that the veterinarian not only present the estimate (an itemized list of the veterinarian’s time and service) but that they also explain the value of the veterinarian’s time and service to the overall health and wellbeing of the patient. At the end of the day, a written estimate is only an itemized list of the veterinarian’s time and service; therefore, using an estimate without further conversation is likely to fall short of attending to the client’s perception of value.

**Communication skills for facilitating cost conversations with clients**

It has been identified that pet owners expect veterinary medicine to be a profession where the care of the animal takes precedence over monetary considerations. This potentially positions a veterinarian in a challenging role, given pet owners also expressed the expectation that veterinarians be the one to initiate cost discussions upfront. Communicating the costs of veterinary care upfront within an often emotionally charged situation can be difficult as it can be easy for the veterinarian to be construed as non-caring. Developing and utilizing a number of communication skills that can convey care within an emotionally charged environment is important for veterinarians in communicating costs in a caring manner. A number of specific communication skills have been identified in medicine for carrying out respectful conversations with clients about the costs of care.

**Empathy statements**

Empathy has been described as a key ingredient in the discussion of out-of-pocket costs. It is a communication skill that conveys understanding on the part of the veterinarian. Using empathy in relation to the costs of veterinary care can be broken down into a 2-step process. First, the veterinarian must gain an understanding and appreciation for the client’s cost awareness, the client’s financial limitations, and the client’s general beliefs with respect to the costs of the proposed care. Second, the veterinarian must verbally communicate this understanding and appreciation back to the client.

Examples of empathy statements:

“I can see that you are really upset about what has happened to Rory and you are worried about the costs associated with his care; let’s take a few minutes and revisit some of the other options available to us.”

“I know you indicated earlier that the costs associated with the surgery are a concern for you; may we take a few minutes now to discuss these costs?”

Partnership statements

By using words such as “us”, “let’s”, “together” or “we” a practitioner can convey a sense of partnership with their client in an attempt to prevent the client from feeling completely isolated and alone at a time when the cost of care may seem unmanageable. Using partnership statements does not mean the veterinarian is assuming responsibility for the cost of the patient’s care; rather, it is meant to be a reassuring signal to the client that the veterinarian is willing to work with the client to try to find a manageable solution to the situation.

Examples of partnership statements:

“I understand you did not expect to encounter these costs when you came in with Magic this afternoon; let’s explore what solutions we might be able to come up with together in order to try to manage this unexpected expense.”

“I can see you really care for Riley and you do not want anything to happen to him; to ensure you are not caught off guard by the cost of his care, let’s sit down and go through the estimated costs together.”

“I wish…” statements

It has been suggested that “I wish…” statements allow a practitioner to enter the client’s world during times of unrealistic hope in order to diminish potential conflict between the practitioner and the client. During situations of unrealistic financial hope, most often the veterinarian involved also wishes the circumstances were different, and communicating this feeling to the client can be powerful in acknowledging the emotional impact of the financial situation.

An example of an “I wish…” statement:

“I wish there were a less expensive alternative in terms of treating Max’s fracture. However, given the x-ray findings, I do not think splinting the leg is a practical or safe option for Max.”

References


Making it stick: Delivering an effective healthcare recommendation

Jason B Coe, DVM, PhD
Associate Professor
Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada
N1G 2W1

“Prescribing treatment that is not taken wastes all our efforts in assessment and diagnosis.”

Introduction
Research suggests that when a client enters an appointment with a pre-established viewpoint that is not consistent with their veterinarian’s, without the veterinarian communicating in a manner that is attentive to the client’s perspective, the client is likely to reject the veterinarian’s viewpoint in favor of their own. This reinforces the importance of not only gathering a complete medical history but also gathering information specific to the client’s perspective (e.g., their beliefs, their expectations, etc). It has been found 30% of clients who did not follow through with their veterinarian’s recommendation felt it was unnecessary, suggesting that these clients did not receive information that was relevant to their perspective. Understanding the client’s perspective provides the groundwork for educating clients and making a recommendation that has value for the client.

Research into relationship-centered veterinary care and client adherence
Using a relationship-centered approach when interacting with clients has been shown to have a positive association with a number of veterinary outcomes including veterinarian satisfaction, client satisfaction and client adherence. Relationship-centered veterinary care is dependent upon mutual understanding and exchange of information which includes having an appreciation for the client’s perspectives on the care of their pet. This approach to veterinary care recognizes the veterinarian-client-patient relationship as being essential to the successful delivery of veterinary care.

Recently, a study explored the role of relationship-centered veterinary communication as it pertains specifically to clients’ adherence to dental and surgery recommendations in companion-animal veterinary practice. A collection of 83 video-recorded veterinarian-client-patient interactions involving a dentistry recommendation, a surgery recommendation, or both were examined using the Roter Interaction Analysis System to assess the nature of both verbal and nonverbal communication used by the veterinarian and client. Client adherence was assessed 6 months after the video-recorded interaction by reviewing each patient’s medical record for an indication of whether the dental recommendation, surgical recommendation or both had been carried out by the client since the time of the video-recorded interaction.

Overall, 30% of clients had adhered to the recommendations made during the original video-recorded interaction. It was found that the relationship-centered communication scores for veterinarian-client-patient interactions leading to client adherence by the 6 month follow-up medical-record review were significantly higher than the scores for interactions where clients had not adhered by the time of the 6 month medical-record review. Relationship-centered communication scores for each interaction were established based on the nature and distribution of verbal communication by the veterinarian and client.

In addition, the study found that clients who were provided with a clear recommendation by the veterinarian during the video-recorded interaction were 7 times more likely to adhere to the recommendation than clients who had received a relatively ambiguous recommendation from the veterinarian. Providing clients with a clear recommendation does not mean that veterinarians should use an expert-in-charge (i.e., tell the client what they should do) approach.
to making a medical recommendation. Studies have also consistently shown that most pet owners expect to be provided with options regarding their pet’s health care.8,9 Veterinarians should consider working with their clients to make them aware of the available options and explore the client’s view on their options while clearly communicating to the client the recommendation that is likely to have the greatest outcome for the pet’s health and wellbeing based on the veterinarian’s medical expertise (i.e., veterinarian’s perspective).6

Utilizing specific communication skills to assess what the client already knows, to explore the client’s beliefs and values, to investigate the client’s and their pet's living situation and to engage the client in the decision-making process will assist a veterinarian in providing a recommendation that incorporates the client’s perspective.10 For example, to make a dental recommendation that does not account for the client’s financial situation or consider the client’s personal views on the procedure runs the risk of failing from the start. Evaluating and including the client’s perspective when developing a medical recommendation leads to greater client engagement in the process which fosters greater client investment in the recommendation and this sets the situation up for greater client adherence.

Communication skills for making engaging clients in relationship-centered care

Open-ended inquiry
Open-ended inquiry allows a client the opportunity to share their thoughts rather than respond to questions that the veterinarian has solely determined to be important. Using open-ended inquiry promotes a collaborative rather than expert-in-charge approach to client interactions. An open-ended inquiry is a statement framed in a manner that invites the client to share a story rather than a question that can be answered in a one-word response, typically “yes” or “no”. Questions leading to one-word answers have their role in information gathering; however, they typically are best reserved for pursuing finer details and clarifying information once a client has had the opportunity to share their initial story. By utilizing well-phrased open-ended inquiry, veterinarians will be more efficient and accurate in gathering information while ensuring they gain a more complete understanding of their client’s perspective.

Examples of open-ended inquiry:
“Tell me what PJ typically eats in a day, starting from first thing in the morning to the end of the day?”
“What are your thoughts on starting Rory on heartworm preventative year round?”
“What remaining questions do you have about Sylvester’s dental procedure?”

Exploring options for care
Research indicates 90% of pet owners want to be presented with all of their options, regardless of cost.8 In contrast, research suggests veterinarians will often initially present clients with only the option the veterinarian believes to be most appropriate.9 Applying a relationship-centered approach to decision-making would involve the veterinarian and client jointly participating in the exploration of the available options. By sharing in the decision-making process the veterinarian is positioned to offer their medical expertise while the client is positioned to offer their expertise about their animal and their own life circumstances. The strength of this approach is that, by drawing on the expertise of both parties, both the veterinarian and the client have greater involvement in the final decision which should lead to greater commitment in carrying out the jointly decided upon course of action.

Examples of exploring options for care:
“There are 3 options available: each has different benefits which I would like to go over with you...”
“Based on the information you shared with me earlier, I’ve been able to come up with a few options for changing Mokey’s diet that I would like to go over with you...”

Chunking and checking

Research indicates clients want information; however, the amount of information clients want varies from one pet owner to the next. Delivering information in a relationship-centered manner requires the veterinarian involve the client in the information-delivery process rather than just downloading to the client what the veterinarian thinks the client needs or wants to hear. Chunking and checking is a process of providing clients with small segments of information and then checking in with the client before proceeding. This approach allows the veterinarian to orient the conversation as needed to address gaps in the clients understanding or to provide additional information relevant to the client’s perspective.

Example of chunking and checking:

“I know that is a lot of information all at once; what questions do you have before we move on?”

“Before we move on, are there certain things you would like me to go into further detail about?”

“Based on this information, I think changing Rascal’s diet is in his best interest. What are your thoughts?”

References


