

## CONSIDERATIONS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND TECHNIQUES AT VETERINARY STUDENTS

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### Abstract

Researches in veterinary medicine have demonstrated the importance of communication skills in veterinary practice and the necessity of teaching communication techniques to veterinary students to help them become effective communicators. Veterinary communication is a special one. By the nature of their job, veterinarians make interactions with clients of different ages, cultural backgrounds, professional qualifications: children, old people, farmers, pet owners, professional colleagues, veterinary technicians, staff members etc. They are part of a healthcare team, so effective communication extends and requires an appreciation of individuals from each group. A successful practitioner in veterinary medicine will have to exhibit a keen understanding of various communication skills and techniques that can be taught, practiced, and improved upon with experience. The purpose of the paper is to emphasize the fact that in order to become good practitioners, the veterinary students should learn how to develop and improve their communication skills (verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal, interpersonal, electronic etc.) which will bring them many benefits and satisfactions in their future veterinary activities. For educational purposes, students' training should include different practice patterns to deepen their skills in communication. It has been proved that people with good communication skills usually succeed in their carriers faster and better than others. Professional development is based on several basic communication skills that need to be learned, improved and incorporated into an individual's practice routine. Although this may seem like a daunting task at first, the reward makes the effort worthwhile.

**Key words:** veterinary communication, communication skills and techniques

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Nobody is an effective communicator from the first day of his life, but may become, due to the environment in which he grows –spiritual, cultural, intellectual-, thanks to his mentors, and last but not least, to his own availability and wish to be a better communicator in the extensive field of communication. Better communication requires effort, desire to change himself, perseverance. Effective communication skills play a significant role in achieving success in many aspects of life. Many jobs require strong communication skills and people with good communication skills usually enjoy better interpersonal relationships with employers, employees, colleagues, friends etc. Communication is a two way process, so improving communication involves both how we send and receive messages. Learning how to improve our communication has many benefits for our personal and professional development. Efficiency in communication depends, first of all, on principles and values assumed and deeply interiorized, such as: respect, integrity, sincerity, care for others, involvement, comprehension etc. At the same time, an efficient communicator

should meet several essential requirements: to be emphatic, to have a high self-esteem, to be able to manage and value his own emotions, feelings, moods.

### MATERIAL AND METHOD

Researches focused on communication skills training within schools of veterinary medicine and the practice community, have emphasized gaps in communication training of veterinary students.

In order to become good practitioners, the veterinary students should learn how to develop and improve their knowledge of communication and communication skills (verbal, paraverbal, nonverbal, interpersonal, electronic etc.). The veterinary students should be taught and, at the same time convinced about the importance of the skills and techniques necessary for effective communication with clients, owners of the animals, colleagues and support workers from their future activities. A study evaluating communication skills training in veterinary students, demonstrated that students provided with training utilize more

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communication skills during clinical interactions and are rated higher by clients with respect of using communication skills. To be effective in communication, the veterinary students should learn how to recognize the elements of communication, identify and describe the styles of communication, develop proper methods of communicating skills and techniques in explaining medical issues, use practically oriented approaches to communicating effectively with the clients, organise and deliver a good presentation, perform a prestigious code of conduct.

All of our relationships are based on communication. Communication is more than just talking. It involves listening, understanding and appreciating the other person we are speaking with. Our state of mind, our tone, our body language, our previous experiences, our schedule, etc., can all have a major impact on the effectiveness of our communication.

Researchers in veterinary communication have emphasized that good communication has a "certain anatomy" and the knowledge of that anatomy is the main precondition for using it effectively, as it is based on a number of principles, guidelines and models that provide support in communication endeavours.

Confronted with stressful life events we often forget one very important reality: "How we communicate can be louder than what we communicate". Age, gender, and cultural differences increase the need for thoughtful communication. Taking the time to work on communication skills can have great pay-back by decreasing stress and increasing success.

In their manual for vets *Communication in Practice* (2014), the authors Roeland Wessels, Theo Lam, Jolanda Jansen have pointed out that the profession of veterinary medicine has changed markedly over a period of decades, forcing the veterinarians to reinvent themselves.

Before World War II, the typical vet, Vet 1, was a prominent member of the local community. After the war, the vet evolved as Vet 2. Making sick animals better and earning a living were the major objectives of vets in those days. But this scenario has come to an end making way to a new societal role for modern vets. The technician has been replaced by the modern vet, Vet 3. In addition to clinical and commercial ambitions, the veterinarian has idealistic goals. One of these is to do business in a socially responsible way. Vet 3 not only has professional and idealistic aspirations, he seeks an acceptable balance between work and private life: in short, fulfilment as an individual, as a professional and as a business person.

Communication has been a key component of this evolution. From Vet 1's "Do what I tell you!" via Vet 2's "What can I do for you?" to Vet 3's "What can we do together to find the best solution for your animal?" From dictates to dialogue, in other words.(4)

The relationship: veterinarian – client -- patient serves as the foundation for what the vets are trying to achieve, including satisfying the client, caring for the animal and promoting professional fulfilment. One-on-one interaction with the client is a powerful tool for communication and central in veterinarian's daily work. Beginning the interview with the client by using open-ended questions and funneling to close questions as the appointment progresses, ensures that problem is well explored and all of the information desired by the veterinarian is attained. Open-ended questions are useful to solicit the clients' perspective and to learn about the clients' experience, thus allowing the clinician to gain the whole story of the client and patient's problem. Closed-ended questions are appropriate once a holistic understanding of the situation has been attained and specific information is needed to complete the clinical picture.

The interdependence of the verbal and non-verbal aspects should be explored in effective communication. Nonverbal communication is an important, often overlooked aspect of any clinical interview. Nonverbal cues are sent through posture, proximity, touch, body movements, facial expression, eye movement, speed of speech, and vocal tone. Often, verbal communication conveys conscious purposeful messages, and nonverbal communication portrays feelings and emotions. Therefore, attending to the nonverbal signs of the client can provide valuable information about the client's attitudes, thoughts and feelings, and can be used to guide the next step of the interaction.

In order to improve nonverbal communication, the practitioner should adjust his nonverbal signals according to the context. The tone of his voice should be different when he's addressing a child than when he's addressing a group of adults. He should take into account client's age and gender and the emotional state and cultural background of the person he's interacting with. Nonverbal communication should reinforce what is being said, not contradict it.

Another important element in communication is listening. Successful listening means not just understanding the words or the information being communicated, but also understanding how the speaker feels about what they are communicating. Reflective listening will help to form a partnership with the client and can help shape the direction of the appointment. Empathy statements demonstrate genuine interest in the client's experience, build trust and can contribute positively to the veterinarian-client relationship.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A great deal of communication research that has taken place in the medical field is applicable to veterinary medicine. Patterns of teaching communication have enabled veterinarians to

develop more quickly than medical practitioners by adapting the models to their profession.

Some scholars, notably Jane Shaw, Cindy Adams and colleagues have pointed out the parallels and similarities between human medicine and veterinary medicine. Both are service providers and health care professionals who work to improve patient health. In both professions success and satisfaction are dependent on interactions with humans. The structure and content of interviews with patients/clients is similar, and thus the measures used to assess and evaluate medical interactions can also be applied to veterinarians. Parallels have been observed not only in skills, but also in their delivery. For example, Shaw and colleagues have demonstrated that vet women are more relationship focussed during consultations, with better skills in establishing and building rapport, as compared with men. This gender difference replicates findings in human medicine.

Good communication was considered a mechanism for making money, and any strategies for economic success were largely anecdotal rather than based on research evidence. Studies revealed that the veterinary profession was lacking in terms of achieving results that included employee and client satisfaction. The strategy for ameliorating this situation was to teach veterinary students how to communicate, work in a team, develop and manage a good business.

With the advent of Internet, today's veterinary professionals are more often faced with educated clients. Veterinarians responsibilities in addressing questions or providing client education have increased. Given growing client expectations, the strong attachment between people and their pets, and increasing consumer knowledge, demands a shift in communication style from the traditional or classical paternalistic approach to a collaborative partnership with the client.

In their research work *Veterinary - client - patient communication patterns used during clinical appointments in companion animal practice*, the authors Shaw J.R., Bonnett, Adams C.L (2006), have described two models used in communication between vets and clients, namely paternalism and consumerism, emphasizing the advantages and drawbacks of these models, showing the importance of relationship-centred care, based on mutuality, a balance between veterinarians and clients.

Paternalism has been described as a relationship in which the veterinarian sets the agenda for the appointment, assumes that the clients' values are the same as veterinarian's, and takes on the role of a guardian. The topic of conversation is primarily biomedical in nature,

focusing on the medical condition, diagnosis, treatment and prognosis. The veterinary team does most of the talking and the client plays a passive role. At the opposite spectrum lies consumerism, which is characterized by a reversal of traditional relationship between veterinarians and the clients. The veterinary team plays the role of a technical consultancy in providing information and services on the basis of the client's demands. While the paternalism model has been criticized for ignoring the client's perspective, the consumerism model errs in limiting the role of the veterinary team. The challenge in this case is to engage with the client as a working partner and to build trust with the veterinary team to reach an agreement between the client and the veterinarian agendas.

Between the two extremes is the relationship-centred care, which represents a balance between veterinarians and the clients and is based on mutuality. In the relationship-centred model, the relationship between veterinarians and clients is characterized by negotiation between partners, resulting in the creation of a joint venture, with the veterinarian taking on the role of advisor or counsellor.

The conversation content of relationship-centred visits is broad including biomedical topics, lifestyle discussion of the pet's daily living activities and social interactions. This approach establishes a partnership, encouraging clients' involvement and participation in the animal's care, having the potential to enhance outcomes of veterinary care.

Even in a profession focused on animals, the ability to communicate effectively is vital to client and staff relationships, because effective communication is that communication which produces intended or desired results: a transfer of information, thoughts or ideas to create shared understanding between the *sender* (the veterinarian) and the *receiver* (the client).

There is strong evidence to support the importance of the veterinarian-client relationship and veterinarian-client communication as an element of successful clinical practice. A good relationship between veterinarian and client can improve loyalty, patient outcomes, and job satisfaction.

The utilization of communication skills can enhance the veterinarian-client relationship and facilitate effective communication. Using skills, including open-ended questions, active listening, checking in, and summarizing can help strengthen relationships with clients. The use of self-reflection facilitates the learning process and promotes growth and development in the area of client communication.

Pet owners should have a full understanding of the risks and complications. This should be given as a verbal and written explanation. Written client communications should be easy to read, use minimal veterinary terms, be no longer than a page, cover key home care instructions (feeding, restrictions, medications etc.) and detail what to look out for or what to expect. In many situations digital communications are easier and more convenient for clients to refer back to or share with all family members.

## CONCLUSIONS

Communication is the basic element of human interaction that allows people to establish, maintain and improve contact with others. "If you can't communicate it doesn't matter what you know". These words of wisdom summarize the importance of teaching, testing and learning communication skills in health profession education.

Without appropriate communication skills all our knowledge and intellectual efforts can easily be wasted. Communication is a learned skill that needs to be taught effectively. An effective communication ensures the interaction rather than a direct transmission process. If communication is viewed as an interactive process, the interaction is complete only if the sender receives feedback about how the message is interpreted, whether it is understood and what impact it has on the receiver.

Various reports and papers have highlighted the relevance of communication skills in the context of veterinary education, clinical science and practice. Communication has been described as a core clinical skill, as it does not only influence the client-veterinarian relationship, but also directly influences the success of the consultation, and the education and training in veterinary medicine may be better tailored to reflect the unique context of the veterinary profession.

Some of the main steps to effective veterinary communication can be summarized as follows: listen carefully, show empathy and concern, offer clear answers and instructions, seek assistance when appropriate, set realistic expectations, offer verbal and written digital communications in simple language, maintain current professional knowledge, training of staff to develop a team of well-educated communicators. By employing these communication skills and techniques in his daily interactions with clients

(and even team members), vet's problems and difficult situations may not only be improved but also completely avoided. If at the beginning these communication skills may seem artificial and uncomfortable, over time, with much exercise, perseverance and will, they'll become a more natural part of vet's interactions with clients or pet owners.

As researches have shown, good communication underpins almost every aspect of significant veterinary practice: it can increase after-care compliance, enhance pet owner satisfaction and most importantly better pet health outcomes. Despite the best veterinary care, clinical cases may not always have good outcomes. Bad outcomes combined with poor communication can lead to complaints. Risks surround veterinary professionals every day but recognizing that the greatest risk is poor communication can help veterinarians to implement processes to protect themselves and their practice. Honest and open communication is the key while informed consent is essential.

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