

# Sessions for Students

Moderator: Israel Isenberg

## Client Perception = Your Reality Communication and Professionalism

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### Abstract

Despite a consensus of the importance of technical competence in veterinary care, clients rate the most important characteristics for choosing a veterinarian to be the ability to communicate understanding, compassion, and respect, and provide information in clear and simple language. Similarly, veterinarians value the importance of communication skills as necessary for practice success, yet many veterinarians state inadequate training in this area.

Providing quality animal care involves more than just technical competency. Regardless of the health care needs of the patient, clear and compassionate communication on the part of the veterinary team is critical to enhancing the overall experience for both animal and client, before, during and after the clinical visit. Effective communication is considered to be the essence of quality veterinary care and one of the necessary skills required in clinical practice and expected by clients.

### Résumé

Bien que tous les clients s'entendent sur l'importance de la compétence technique en soins vétérinaires, leurs critères les plus importants dans le choix d'un ou d'une vétérinaire est la capacité, chez ce professionnel, de compréhension, de compassion et de respect, tout comme sa facilité à communiquer les choses dans un langage clair et simple. De leur côté, les vétérinaires considèrent aussi que les compétences en communication sont nécessaires pour réussir dans leur métier, mais plusieurs d'entre eux jugent leur formation inadéquate à cet égard.

Fournir des soins de qualité aux animaux demande plus que des compétences techniques. Quels que soient les besoins en santé animale du patient, il est essentiel que l'équipe vétérinaire communique avec clarté et compassion pour que l'expérience vécue autant par l'animal que le client se passe de façon idéale, avant, pendant et après la visite. La communication efficace est l'essence de services vétérinaires de qualité; elle est

d'autant nécessaire en pratique clinique qu'elle est attendue par les clients.

### Overview of Communication and Professionalism

In recent years, medical education schools, organizations, and accrediting bodies in human and veterinary medicine have focused increasingly on communication and professionalism in medical training and practice. What is professionalism? Relevant topics include relationship building, communication skills, problem solving, emotional intelligence, ethics, and leadership - all of which been incorporated across veterinary school curricula and training. As the focus on communication skills training at veterinary colleges increases (for example, beginning in 2008, veterinary students have been tested on their client communications skills as part of their licensing exam), the need for professional veterinarians proficient in communication skills will continue to grow. This is already evident through the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) Council on Education (COE) requirements and curriculum standards that provide further endorsement of communication training for future veterinary practitioners. The requirements and standards of the profession are consistent with consumer expectations for high quality medical and relational care for their animals in their interactions with veterinarians.

Consider that a range of conversations that occur daily in veterinary practices and hospitals include:

- Decisions about end-of-life issues
- Sharing bad news following emergency surgery
- Decisions about euthanasia
- Weighing treatment options, risks and benefits, and associated financial costs
- Risks of obesity
- Addressing distraught clients with injured animals
- Suspected animal abuse

- Behavioral problems
- Discussions among the healthcare team to ensure patient safety and quality of care
- Food safety

Each conversation impacts the quality of the experience for the animal, client, and veterinary team. Good communication between members of veterinary teams and with clients leads to positive experiences and outcomes for animals and clients. Alternately, there is strong evidence that failure to communicate effectively is more likely to lead to poor outcomes such as client dissatisfaction, reduced likelihood to follow the veterinarian's recommendation, veterinary team dissatisfaction, and threats to patient safety.

Consumers evaluate the quality of health care they receive for themselves and their animals based on how they are treated. Their perception of how they are treated begins from the first phone contact with the veterinary practice through the array of experiences with members of the veterinary team at the front desk, exam and handling of the animal, paying their bill, going through difficult conversations about health care, and perhaps end-of-life decisions that impact their animal's and family's quality of life. Good communication is a win-win situation for clients, animals, and the veterinary team.

### **Communication Skills to Instill Trust and Credibility**

This presentation will discuss the "what" and "how" of providing veterinary care to clients and animal owners based on the importance of instilling trust and establishing credibility using strong communication principles and tools. Similar to what consumers expect in their

own health care, measures of client/owner satisfaction have become a benchmark of quality for veterinary care. If clients believe they are listened to and respected, and believe their veterinarian has credibility, they are more likely to adhere to recommendations you make for the care of their animals. Client satisfaction also has strong financial repercussions for the practice – satisfied clients are more willing to return and refer others to the practice. Proper communication is integral to ensuring correct administration of medications (e.g., route, dose, and frequency), proper home care (e.g., special diets, exercise restrictions, and bandage or wound care), and appropriate follow-up examinations (e.g., recheck visits and repeated diagnostic testing). Evidence from medicine has found that consumers file lawsuits against their physician primarily due to a breakdown in communication. Similarly, anecdotal evidence in veterinary medicine from AVMA Professional Liability Insurance Trust report that approximately 60% of the formal complaints and claims are also due to miscommunication (personal communication, AVMA PLIT, 2008). This is also consistent in Canada where 50-82% of formal complaints and malpractice cases relate to communication breakdown, including the client feeling misinformed; informed consent not obtained; client feeling disrespected and; client feeling their opinion did not matter.

### **Conclusion**

Through the use of interactive teaching techniques, case review, and discussion, Dr. Bonvicini will sustain your interest and raise your competence in this important component of your preparation for veterinary practice.