

## **THE PSYCHOLOGY BEHIND THE POWER OF TRANSPARENCY (WITH CLIENTS) AND UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD (WITH EVERYONE YOU KNOW)**

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### Objectives:

- Define the communication skills, transparency and regard, and explain why their incorporation into the veterinary consultation may be of value to the companion animal practitioner.
- Use role-play to recognize opportunities for incorporating the use of transparency and regard into the veterinary consultation and practice their use.

### **COMMUNICATION BY THE HEALTHCARE TEAM INFLUENCES PATIENT OUTCOMES**

Although a strong foundation in medical knowledge is essential to the delivery of high-quality care, clinical acumen extends beyond having basic “book smarts”. The successful healthcare provider recognizes that clinical-reasoning, decision-making and instinct all play a role in patient outcomes, and that the common denominator is communication.

When clinical communication is effectual, the trickle-down effects on patient care are undeniable. Effective communication in medicine improves: (1-9)

- Rapport
- Mutual understanding
- Shared decision-making
- Diagnostic accuracy
- Patient adherence
- Patient compliance
- Patient coping skills
- Patient outcomes
  - Physical, physiologic, emotional, and mental health
  - Return to function
  - Symptom resolution
- Patient satisfaction
- Physician satisfaction

By contrast, when communication in healthcare is ineffective: (2, 10-13)

- Patients do not feel heard
- Patients that do not feel heard are more likely to disagree with the healthcare team
- Patients that disagree with the healthcare team are less likely to comply with recommendations
- Noncompliance is costly
- Misunderstandings arise because communication is unclear
- New patient concerns arise late in the consultation and may or may not be addressed

### **COMMUNICATION EQUALLY DRIVES CLIENT SATISFACTION IN VETERINARY PRACTICE**

Effective communication in veterinary medicine builds trust between the veterinarian and client.(14)  
Trust is a practice-builder:

- Clients are more likely to be retained by the practice
- Clients are more likely to return for follow-up care
- Clients are more likely to refer others to the practice

When trust is breached, the veterinary client is likely to consider litigation. Poor communication is frequently cited as the primary reason that a lawsuit is initiated.(14-17)

## **THE CALGARY-CAMBRIDGE GUIDE (CCG) AND CLINICAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Because effective communication promotes success in clinical practice, educators have introduced this professional skillset into veterinary curricula. There are many different approaches to teaching clinical communication. Most have been adopted from human healthcare training programs. A popular approach is the Calgary-Cambridge Guide (CCG). The CCG is a skills-based approach to the consultation: it outlines over 70 communication skills that can be tailored to any clinical scenario.

The CCG was adapted for use in veterinary education by Radford et al (18, 19). AVMA-accredited colleges of veterinary medicine, such as Colorado State University (CSU) and Midwestern University (MWU) make use of this approach to train students in fourteen communication skills (See Table 1). The wording of these skills was borrowed with permission from Jane Shaw of CSU.

### **ARE CURRENT VETERINARY COMMUNICATION CURRICULA COMPLETE?**

As an Assistant Professor at MWU, I conducted a pilot study to establish if the current list of teachable communication skills was complete, in the eyes of focus group participants: dog-owners and cat-owners. (10)

Participants unanimously agreed that the skillset was deficient in two areas: (10)

- 1) Compassionate transparency
- 2) Unconditional positive regard

### **WHAT IS TRANSPARENCY IN HEALTHCARE?**

Transparency in healthcare refers to openness concerning procedural errors, medical or surgical. Healthcare practices that are transparent discourage the sweeping of errors under the rug. Because errors are acknowledged and addressed, transparency improves patient safety. Patients and families are better informed. They are also better equipped to handle decision-making when something goes wrong.

Transparency also drives accountability. Standards are set to make sure that clinicians are delivering safe, high-quality care. When mistakes occur, standard operating procedures are revised to reduce risk of recurrence.

For transparency to be possible, a culture of fear must be overcome:

- Fear of being blamed
- Fear of admitting guilt
- Fear of retribution

### **HOW DOES TRANSPARENCY APPLY TO VETERINARY MEDICINE?**

Medical mistakes are not unique to human healthcare. Although incidence reports in the literature are infrequent, one study in the U.K. confirmed that veterinary errors are relatively common: 78% of graduates admitted to making a mistake that adversely impacted patient care (20, 21). When such errors

occur, veterinarians are increasingly encouraged to disclose what happened and why, the impact on the patient, and how the error will be prevented in the future (21).

However, medical mistakes are not the only circumstance when transparency may be indicated. Veterinary clients seek the truth about patient health, specifically:

- The diagnosis
- The prognosis
- The patient's quality of life
- Whether or not the patient is suffering.

Veterinary clients, particularly dog-owners, do not want facts withheld, even when they relay bad news, such as a cancer diagnosis. (10)

One participant captured this perspective best: "Don't beat around the bush. I already know it's cancer. I know what that means. So get to the point of what needs to be done. We know what needs to be done. We just need to hear you say it." (10)

When information is withheld, clients may take offense. They are also denied the opportunity to make informed decisions about their pet's care because they lack the details that would have facilitated decision-making. (10)

Directness is particularly important to cat-owners when it comes to the healthcare team admitting the unknown: "I want them to say, 'no, I really don't know.' The test for [diagnosing this condition] is \$300, the medicine is \$100, let's just give the medicine and see what happens. And if it doesn't work, we'll move on to something else. Be open to saying, 'I don't know, but this is the best course to try'." (10)

In addition to directness about diseases and ongoing disease processes, clients appreciated frank discussion about finances – what is covered by insurance, for example, versus what is not – as well as openness regarding how the veterinarian would proceed if the pet were his/her very own. (10)

Finally, transparency in veterinary medicine can extend beyond words. Transparency can be physically incorporated into a practice. The use of open floor plans, for instance, can reduce barriers between the front and back staff, and also between veterinary clients and the rest of the veterinary team. Other means of transparency in practice include performing wellness procedures in front of the client, and incorporating spaces within the layout of the treatment area for clients to visit hospitalized pets.

## **WHAT IS UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD IN HEALTHCARE?**

Unconditional positive regard is a concept that was initially coined by Carl Rogers, a leader in the field of human mental health (22). Although it is most typically used to describe the work of clinicians in psychiatry, social work, counseling, and psychology, unconditional positive regard can be ascribed to all human health professionals. The practice of unconditional positive regard suggests that the clinician approaches each patient as an individual deserving of respect (10). Patients are valued, rather than judged, and to be accepted for who they are rather than to be held to standards that they are incapable of meeting (10).

Even patients that are so-called "difficult" should not be labeled as such. Instead, the clinician should focus on shared common ground: what do both individuals want to achieve and how can they work together? (23)

## **HOW DOES UNCONDITIONAL POSITIVE REGARD APPLY TO VETERINARY MEDICINE?**

Veterinary clients fear being judged. They may not always do what is right, but they mean well. They want to be encouraged and rewarded for having good intentions rather than to be beaten down for their faults. In particular, cat-owners want to be understood as being well-intentioned, even if their actions are improper or inadequate. (10)

One participant expressed the use of unconditional positive regard at its best: “Have you ever done something stupid with your cat and you’ve got to go tell the vet you did something stupid? [Vets] don’t look at you like you’re crazy. They understand that we make mistakes.” (10)

Another gave an example of dietary indiscretion to demonstrate the use of unconditional positive regard: “[When] the cat [eats] a cardboard box and [swallows] it, [vets] don’t say, ‘why on earth did you let him eat the cardboard box?’” (10)

Clients want to be valued as individuals: “We’re not just another person. Treat me as my own person.” (10)

Dog-owners also want their pets to be catered to as individuals. One participant expressed this outright: “Respect my dog. Get on the floor with him if he’s more comfortable.” (10)

Clients’ perceptions about how they themselves are treated, or how respectfully their pets are handled, color their views of the practice itself.

Respect is a two-way street. If veterinary clients feel respected, then they are more likely to demonstrate respect towards the veterinary team. By contrast, if veterinary clients feel disrespected, then they are more likely to disrespect the veterinary team. One participant provided an example: “When [the veterinarian] cuts me off, I’m not willing to listen to what he has to say.” (10)

**WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?**

Above all, the veterinary profession is a service industry. If we are to be effective at servicing our clients, then the burden falls upon us to ask what they prefer and how we can best meet their needs.

**TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF MWU COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

Name of Communication Skill	Definition	Example
Reflective listening	Actively hearing what a client has to say, paraphrasing what was heard, and clarifying to see if what was heard is correct	“What I hear you say is...”
Empathy	Taking on the feelings of another as if they were your own	“I can’t imagine what you’re going through.”
Nonverbal cues	The use of visual clues (such as posture), touch, and spatial relationships (such as the distance between two individuals) to convey a message without speech	Sitting across from the client, facing him/her, with an open posture and eye contact
Open-ended questions or statements	The use of a question or statement that encourages a full response as opposed to a one-worded (yes/no) answer.	“Describe Darcy’s activity level over the past two weeks.”
Eliciting the client’s perspective	Asking the client to share his/her feelings or insight into a particular situation	“What about Darcy’s behavior is most concerning to you?”

Asking permission	Making a request out of respect for the client	"If it's okay with you, I would like to take Darcy to the back to get started on running those blood tests."
Signposting	Giving the client an overview of the conversation or the action plan	"First, I would like to take a history and then I would like to examine Darcy."
Easy-to-understand language	The use of terms that are easily understood as opposed to medical jargon	"Does Bailey typically have hairballs?" as opposed to "Have you noticed any trichobezoars?"
Chunk and check	Breaking up the conversation into bite-sized pieces so as not to overwhelm	"Darcy's thyroid is underactive. This means that her metabolism is very slow, causing her to gain weight and be more sedentary. This becomes a vicious cycle: the more weight she gains, the less active she wants to be. Does that make sense?"
Assessing the client's knowledge	Determining what the client's knowledge base is with regards to a particular condition or disease state, or treatment plan	"Have you ever had to manage a cat with diabetes before?"
Offering partnership	Inviting the client to engage in shared decision-making or acknowledging that the client is an important part of the veterinary team	"I want to work with you to find a solution for Bailey's vomiting."
Summarizing	Providing a recap of what was discussed or what procedures were performed	"Today, we discussed why Darcy is gaining weight and how getting her started on a medication called levothyroxine should help to correct her thyroid so that she can eventually get back to an ideal weight."
Contracting for the next steps	Making a plan for the short- and or long-term by establishing the responsibilities of both the veterinary team and the client.	"I need you to gather Bailey's records so that we can plan her next round of vaccinations. In the meantime, we will draw some blood to have her tested for heartworm disease. If she is negative for heartworm disease, then we can get her started on a monthly oral preventative to reduce her risk of contracting it."
Final check in	Reaching out to the client one last time at the conclusion of a consultation to make certain that the client's expectations were met.	"Is there anything else that I can assist you with today?"

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