

EXAM ROOM GPS: USING SIGNPOSTS TO DIRECT THE FLOW OF CONVERSATION

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Objectives:

- Define the communication skill, signposting, and explain why its 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 signposting into the veterinary consultation and practice its use.

VETERINARY CONSULTATIONS BENEFIT FROM ROADMAPS

As veterinarians, we often see complicated cases. Patients may present with complex histories or a bunch of seemingly unrelated clinical signs. We may not be able to address every concern at each visit. Each situation would potentially benefit from a roadmap.

Think of a time that you may have gotten lost driving around a city in your car. If you do not have an old-fashioned road map – or if you managed to misplace your phone, google maps, or GPS – then you know the feeling of being utterly lost. You need assistance.

Clients often need assistance to navigate clinical conversations. When clinical cases get tough or emotions run high, it may be challenging for clients to follow along in the visit. Mapping out the consultation is a communication skill that provides a sense of direction.

DEFINING THE COMMUNICATION SKILL, SIGNPOSTING

Mapping out the consultation is sometimes referred to as signposting.

What mapping out the consultation means is that we are verbally inserting structure into the conversation. We are acknowledging where the conversation is headed. We are actively identifying what we want to discuss now versus what we will discuss later.

The purpose of signposting is to orient your client. Just like a compass tells you which direction you're facing, a consultation map tells the client the order in which consultation events will happen.

SIGNPOSTING MAY ESTABLISH THE FLOW OF A CONSULTATION NUMERICALLY

Mapping statements often begin with a numerical order:

- "First....."
- "Second..."
- "Finally..."

As in:

- "First, I'll take a patient history from you so that I am on the same page in terms of what it is you're noticing at home that is unusual."
- "Second, I'll examine your dog to see what, if anything, strikes me as out of the ordinary."

- “Third, we’ll chat about any abnormal findings.
- “Finally, we’ll decide whether or not laboratory tests or imaging is appropriate to help us get to the bottom of what you’re experiencing at home with your dog.”

Consider this alternate example:

“There are three main types of oral cancer that I am concerned about: melanoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and fibrosarcoma.”

In this example, the differential diagnoses are not numbered; however, a numerical order is implied.

SIGNPOSTING MAY ALSO OUTLINE THE CLINICIAN’S THOUGHT PROCESS:

Mapping statements may walk the client through the clinician’s thought process when discussing differential diagnoses or treatment plans.

Consider a senior cat that is newly diagnosed with chronic kidney disease. The cat is clinically ill and requires hospitalization. Mapping helps the client to understand the order and the priority of treatments that you are recommending for the patient.

As the clinician of this case, you may prepare the client by saying:

- “Our first priority is to resolve your cat’s dehydration, which at this point is life-threatening. We do this by administering IV fluids.”
- “A second priority is to correct imbalances in electrolytes that are contributing to your cat feeling punky and depressed.”
- “A third priority is to transition from injectable to oral medications to be certain that your cat can tolerate at-home medications.
- “Finally, when we are confident that your cat can be managed safely at home, we will discharge your cat to your care.”

Mapping may help this client wrap his/her head around the concept that this is not going to be an instant fix. It is going to take time and care to get the patient back to health. And even then, it’s more about getting the patient back to his or her “new normal” than to a point in time when we are cured.

SIGNPOSTING MAY ALSO BE USED TO RESPECTFULLY KEEP THE CONSULTATION ON TRACK

Sometimes we need help reining in a chatty client who is constantly straying from the topic at hand.

For example, consider a cat that presents on emergency and is subsequently diagnosed with diabetic ketoacidosis (DKA). This cat must be tended to straight away. However, the client can’t seem able to wrap his head around the urgency of the situation. Instead, he fixates on the fact that the cat is marking inappropriately around the house.

Clearly, you will need to address this, but now is not the appropriate time. The cat requires stabilization ASAP.

Mapping is a gentle way of streamlining the conversation so that you can emphasize priority talking points now and come back to “lesser” concerns at a later point in time.

It lets the client know: “I hear you... and we’re going to chat about it... We just can’t chat about it now.”

This presentation will discuss ways to signpost conversations to facilitate exam room flow.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Englar RE, Williams M, Weingand K. Applicability of the Calgary-Cambridge Guide to Dog and Cat Owners for Teaching Veterinary Clinical Communications. J Vet Med Educ. 2016;43(2):143-69.

Hunter L, Shaw JR. What's in your Communication Toolbox? Exceptional Veterinary Team. 2012(November/December):12-7.

Show A, Englar RE. Evaluating Dog and Cat Owner Preferences for Calgary-Cambridge Communication Skills: Results of a Questionnaire. J Vet Med Educ. 2018:1-10.

Silverman J, Kurtz S, Draper J. Skills for communicating with patients. Oxford, U.K.: Radcliffe Medical Press; 2008.