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April is a newly qualified veterinary nurse working full time in Goddard's branch in East London. She is passionate about exotic and feline nursing and is the Cat Advocate in her practice. She has an interest in anaesthesia and hopes to complete an anaesthesia course in the near future. April is a strong believer that you can achieve anything if you put your mind to it. She hopes to encourage RVNs and SVN's alike to have a voice, learn from each other and change practice for the better.

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Advising clients on choosing a pet

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ABSTRACT: As there appears to be an increase in the number of people purchasing puppies and kittens, it is important that they contact their veterinary practice to get advice before they make their choice. Veterinary nurses are best placed to talk to prospective owners about key aspects such as species, sources and age of their new pet. Ideally, we should encourage owners to consider adopting a pet rather than shopping for one. If clients still want to purchase a puppy, they should be aware of Lucy's Law that came into force in April 2020 regarding the sale of puppies

Keywords: choosing a pet; Lucy's Law; giving advice

Introduction

This is the first part of a two-part article; the first part of my article will explain the advice we should give to clients when choosing a pet and includes an interview with Marc Abraham. Marc is a veterinary surgeon, broadcaster and animal welfare campaigner and the founder of Lucy's Law. The second part of my article will focus on the rehoming process at Celia Hammond Animal Trust (CHAT). Celia founded the CHAT to provide low cost neutering and vaccination as well as a rescue and rehoming centre. I was fortunate to have an interview with Celia Hammond herself during my day's experience.

I think I speak for everyone that we have seen an increasing number of puppies and kittens in practice, especially given the COVID pandemic. Clients are now at home more often and feel this is the right time for a new addition to the family.

As stated on the BBC website, "a total of 3.2 million households in the UK have acquired a pet since the start of the pandemic, according to the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association". Due to the rise in pet ownership, UK supermarkets have warned of a shortage with some cat and dog food products.

The Pet Food Manufacturers Association mention that "under-35s account for 59% of new pet owners, while 56% of those buying a pet for the first time have children at home. However, new pet owners have said that looking after their new addition was like having a baby. It is estimated that a fifth of families with children said training their new pet was proving challenging. As a result, 5% of those who had bought a pet

during the pandemic had already given it up. 74% said their pet had helped their mental health during the pandemic".

However, some clients are not considering the long-term impacts of keeping a pet, only short term. Long term impacts include the cost of upkeep. PDSA state that "most owners will spend at least £12,000 to care for their cat over their whole lifetime". Therefore, is it vital that prospective pet owners are prepared for this commitment. If ongoing care or treatment is needed, this cost could go up to £24,000.

The cost of upkeep for a dog could be between £4,500-£13,000 during their whole lifetime, dependant on the breed. This could even go up to £30,000 if ongoing care or veterinary treatment is needed!

Also, the amount of time dedicated to caring for their pet is a factor. When clients are back to work full time and out of the house regularly, they may be oblivious that their puppy, at home, could be feeling the effects of separation anxiety. On the other hand, some cats may be increasingly stressed with their owners at home more often as their routine is interrupted. This in turn could lead to an increase in urinary tract infections, feline idiopathic cystitis and even worse, could turn into urethral obstruction if left untreated.

Challenges with sourcing a pet

Even before the pandemic, we were seeing puppies and kittens in practice who were

bought at '8 weeks old' but are in fact, only 5-6 weeks old or even younger. This is not the owner's fault as they are going by the information which the breeder has given them.

Clients may be buying pets online and from pet shops rather than rehoming centres. Clients may also be buying pets from abroad, unaware that they may be transported in cramped, unsuitable conditions and the vetting process for matching the right owners with the right pet may not be as scrupulous as rehoming centres.

Veterinary nurses can play a vital role in educating potential pet owners, so they are sourcing their pet from responsible environments. If we can educate clients on buying a new pet, then this will give clients insight on the amount of responsibility, time and commitment having a pet is.

A pet is not just for Christmas. A pet is not just to get through a pandemic. A pet is for life. We should be encouraging clients wherever possible to **ADOPT AND DON'T SHOP**.

For example, Frida (Figure 1) was rehomed from 'Paws to Rescue', who are an amazing charity. Paws to Rescue is a UK based charity that "works to relieve the plight of Romanian dogs by supporting private shelters with food and bedding, raising donations for veterinary treatments and running education and neutering programmes. They also help to find loving homes for some of these dogs across the UK and across Europe". Frida is a nervous dog who was matched with the right owners for her. Marc Abraham is one of the patrons for this charity.

Kiki (Figure 2) was rehomed from the Cats Protection and has settled into her new



Figure 1. Frida.

home really well! Kiki's owner has always rehomed her cats, past and present.

Coco (Figure 3) was rehomed from Oldies Club. They are a charity which help find older dogs their forever loving home. Coco's owner always rehomes her pets from there. Coco is such a confident boy who loves being made a fuss of.

Advice for clients

There is some basic advice we can give to clients when they are looking to buy a cat/kitten or a dog/puppy.

Cats and kittens

If the client wishes to obtain a pedigree cat/kitten, they should research about the specific breed beforehand as some breeds are prone to certain conditions. For example, Persians are prone to polycystic kidneys. The Governing Council of the Cat Fancy have rules about ethical breeding and health. <https://www.gccfcats.org/Buying-a-kitten>

Dogs and puppies

The Kennel Club has a list of reputable breeders on their website and have lots of valuable information about different breeds. <https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/getting-a-dog/>

Practices could generate their own dog/puppy and cat/kitten checklists. These would include prices for flea treatment,

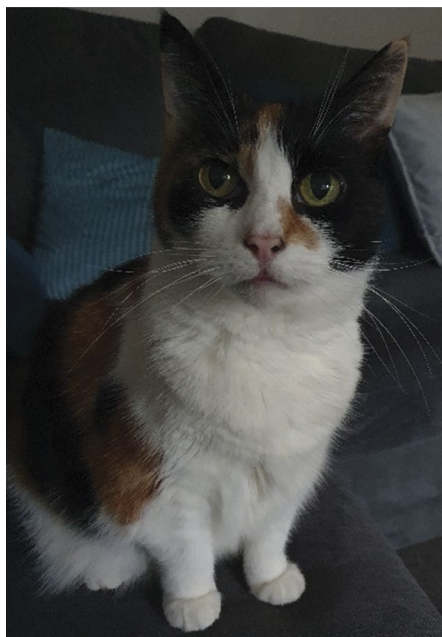


Figure 2. Kiki.

worming treatment, vaccinations, neutering, consultation fee and microchipping as well as the basic puppy and kitten care. I have witnessed many clients who were shocked to find out prices of vaccinations once they already obtained their new pet. If we can inform clients about this beforehand, then the client is aware of the cost of owning a pet and can take this factor into consideration.

Nurses could conduct a consultation with the client before they see their new addition to give them advice on how to carry out a basic head to toe health check. Giving the client the option of bringing their new addition into the practice for a health check with the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse soon after they have obtained him/her bonds the client and patient to the practice.

Before and upon visiting their new addition, clients should consider a number of aspects such as the health and behaviour of the parents, the type of environment they have been kept in and are they vaccinated or neutered (Table 1).

The National Animal Welfare Trust website have a page called 'The Puppy Buyers checklist' which has some valuable information including a list of questions for clients to ask the breeder before and when visiting their pet.



Figure 3. Coco.

Table 1. Aspects to consider before purchasing a new pet.

What is the pet's date of birth? (To ensure they are of the correct age)	How does the pet interact with their siblings? Are they properly socialised?
Will the client be able to see their pet interacting with its mother?	Any history about the father of the pet?
Was the pet raised with its mother?	Is their pet friendly or do they seem fearful?
Specific breed?	Pets environment – is it clean?
What food is their new addition on?	Is the pet neutered?
Is the mother healthy and friendly?	Is the pet up to date with vaccinations?
Is the pet up to date with flea treatment?	Is the pet up to date with worming treatment?
Is the pet microchipped?	Is the pet insured?

As well as this, clients should be considering the following:

- Age of the pet
- Lifestyle the client leads. For example, a Border Collie is an active breed of dog and therefore, clients who live an active lifestyle would be the perfect match.
- Specific breed
- Time and commitment
- Grooming – some breeds coat's need increased grooming and maintenance such as Maine Coon cats.
- Activity level
- Ensuring clients adhere to the 5 freedoms – Freedom from hunger and thirst, Freedom from fear and distress, Freedom from discomfort, Freedom to express normal behaviour and Freedom from pain, injury, suffering and disease.

I understand that although it is a challenge to entice members of the general public to speak to us for advice before obtaining a pet, there are other means of reaching the general public such as newspaper articles or advertisements on television. As well as this, social media is a fantastic tool for us. Many veterinary practices have a social media page and we can use this platform to give advice and support to those wishing to obtain a pet.

Interview with Marc Abraham

As some of you may be aware, Lucy's Law came into force on 6th April 2020. Marc Abraham (Figure 4) has been the driving force for this legislation to come into effect. I was lucky enough to have a Q & A session with Marc about this on the 7th October 2020.

Q/Hi Marc. For those who are not yet aware of Lucy's Law, can you let us know what this is and how this affects those wishing to purchase a puppy?

A/Lucy's Law is a ban on commercial third-party sellers of puppies and kittens. This means that anyone buying a pet, must now buy directly from a reputable breeder, or

acquire a pet from a rescue centre instead. Importantly, breeders are now finally accountable for their actions.

From April 2020, Lucy's Law has been in force in England, and has also now been confirmed in Wales for Spring 2021. It has been promised in Scotland too, with politicians in Northern Ireland working hard for this law to be recognised over there as well.

One of the crucial protections provided by Lucy's Law is that potential owners of puppies purchased from breeders can identify if the mother of the puppy is present and interacting with her puppies, or not.

Q/What does the new legislation mean to those working in practice? Would practices need to contact anyone if they suspect an issue?

A/Practices wouldn't need to do anything if they suspected an issue, but to let their clients know to inform their Local Council if they witness someone selling puppies without the puppy's mother present. Animal Protection Services is another relatively new organisation where we can send clients as well. This means that there is no extra work for the practice, no log books to fill out etc!

Q/What are your thoughts about Lucy's Law being widespread across different countries?

A/It is important that animal welfare improves within the different countries that make up the UK, and ideally beyond. Lucy's Law is no way a one size fits all in animal legislation, but an essential first step in eradicating puppy farming. All countries are greatly encouraged to bring in Lucy's Law ASAP. As soon as Lucy's Law is implemented across all UK countries, this would make it much more difficult for puppies to be sold without their mums bred in Ireland and Eastern Europe, as well as encouraging owners to purchase from reputable breeders or better still, consider rehoming from rescue shelters. But simply, Lucy's Law limits the public's options of where to obtain their pet to either buying direct from breeder or adopt from a rescue!

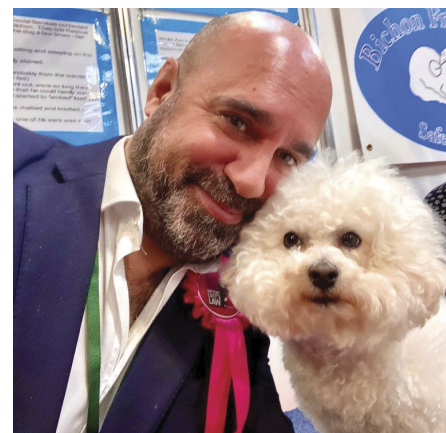


Figure 4. Marc Abraham.

Q/Also, we all hope there will be a law soon to stop pets being imported from abroad. What are your thoughts on this, and do you think we are one step closer for this to happen?

A/Yes, I think we are closer at stopping pets being imported from abroad as there is now a #BanPuppyImports campaign that's increasing pressure on the government to act. I'm currently running an e-petition to 'Ban the exploitative import of young puppies for sale in the UK' which closes December 2020, already (October 2020), we have collected over 121,000 signatures in its first few weeks! There is huge celebrity backing, media mainstream and social media support and RSPCA have fully got behind the campaign too.

However, there is an apparent, and in my opinion disturbing, obsession by various government-influencing larger animal rescue organisations, that we need to acquire as many puppies as possible, no matter where they're from, in case of a puppy shortage, given the increase in puppy sales due to lockdown and beyond. Surely the aim must be for less puppies, but which are of higher quality, rather than encouraging puppies to be imported/transported in cramped and dire conditions, from puppy farms here and abroad, and either dying or prone to diseases, not to mention the mums.

Q/As you are aware, there are still pet shops across the country who are obtaining puppies and kittens from unsuitable sources and are selling them for extortionate prices. With Lucy's Law in effect, do you think we will slowly see pet shops starting to phase out?

A/Lucy's Law makes it illegal to sell a puppy or kitten in England without their mother present – this applies to pet shops. However, there have also been examples of pet shops, i.e. commercial dealers calling themselves 'rescues'! This is clearly unlawful and due to

caring members of the public whistleblowing, councils are getting involved in these cases, which in turn has meant investigations could be started and hopefully prosecutions served as a result. The process of most laws is that if someone is suspected to have broken it, they are investigated, and if found guilty then punished accordingly – a tried and tested mechanism put in place to make things better and a framework to hold those acting unlawfully to account.

The legal definition of a pet shop is anyone in the business buying in or selling pets. It does not just apply to high street pet shops, it all depends on if that person has a licence. Historically, someone could have a pet shop license and sell puppies to the public or another third-party dealer to sell; luckily, this is now illegal in England.

Q/If you could give nurses some advice on how to educate clients about buying a new pet, what would it be and why?

A/Educate clients and encourage them to do their research. I hear of more and more practices offering pre-purchase consultations which is great; a wonderful add-on to any practice and you are clearly displaying care and kindness to the client and pet before that pet has even existed!

Also, clients can never have too much useful information. It's been proven that the more we see the same information in different formats, the more likely we are to retain it, so what's different about providing important information to clients from different sources so they know exactly

what to look out for when buying a new puppy! Veterinary practices should try and do as much as they possibly can that their resources allow. Empower clients with a simple list of useful tips to make the right decision, and always be there for them for expert support and professional advice.

Although sadly, it is often too late when clients visit the practice with their new puppy without consultation or research first, it's always important to try to reach out to clients beforehand if possible. Remember, clients will often obtain a pet out of emotion; driven by their heart rather than their head.

Educate owners on the following:

- Legal options in obtaining a dog or cat – rescue centre or reputable breeder.
- Ensuring the puppy or kitten is with its mother and closely monitor the interaction between them both in case a fake mum has been provided (which can retrospectively be prosecuted if things go wrong using DNA evidence).
- Report if things don't look right rather than just walk away, especially anything that looks unethical or immoral.
- Obtain as such information as you can about the seller – contact numbers, screenshots of adverts, online reviews etc.
- Research! Especially with crossbreeds as no large-scale equivalent of assured breeder scheme for pedigree dogs.
- Take your time, do not buy out of impulse, and try to resist paying in cash.
- Be wary of people advertising/selling more than one type/breed of dog or cat.

It has been a pleasure speaking with you Marc. Thank you for your time and answering my questions.

Conclusion

Upon reflection, I have learnt so much from writing this article. There are many ways in which we can advise clients on choosing a pet. Given the current pandemic, we should try to reach out to clients through other means of communication such as via email, phone call or via leaflets. Since this interview, the UK has banned importing puppies under six months old and heavily pregnant bitches. The next issue of the VNJ will feature the next part of my article which will focus on my time spent at CHAT as well as my Q and A session with Celia Hammond.

Acknowledgment

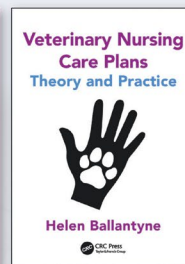
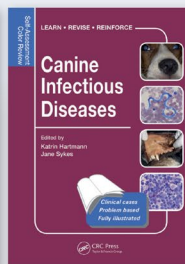
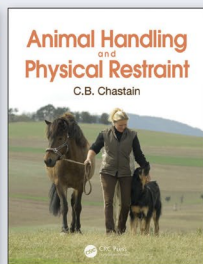
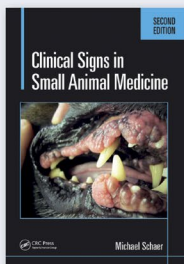
I would like to thank Marc Abraham for taking part in the Q and A and giving us an insight on the incredible work he does and continues to do.

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