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Josephine graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in 2008 and worked in a variety of small animal and mixed practices in Norfolk, Essex, London, Wales and the Midlands. Josephine currently works as a locum RVN allowing her to fully engage with her role on the BVNA Council. Since graduating, Josephine has undertaken further certificates in Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition, Feline Nursing and End of Life Care with Compassion Understood. Josephine also provides talks to primary school children about caring for animals and what working in a vets involves. She currently lives in Leicestershire with her husband, two children and a menagerie of animals from dogs to a horse; in any spare time she runs CaniCross with her collie and terrier.
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The elephant in the consult room: we are failing obese pets

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ABSTRACT: As a start to our series in the VNJ discussing obesity and what we as nurses can do about it, here is an insight into a debate, which was held at BVNA Congress's Fringe event by the Animal Welfare Foundation in October 2019.

Keywords: obesity, disease, malnutrition prevention

The veterinary profession has identified obesity as one of the biggest health and welfare concerns facing our pets. As an example, the Pet Food Manufacturers Association found that 51% of dogs and 44% of cats are overweight or obese. Yet despite this growing problem, veterinary professionals are struggling to acknowledge pet obesity or discuss it with their clients.

At the British Veterinary Nursing Association annual congress in October 2019, we hosted a lively discussion on obesity at BVNA Fringe. BVNA Fringe offers an opportunity to tackle controversial issues by discussing difficult topics to move forward and to work together in professional unity.

At the discussion, *'The elephant in the consult room: we are failing obese pets'*, we were joined by Professor Alex German, a specialist in small animal medicine and obesity at the University of Liverpool. Dr German argued that obesity should be regarded as a disease and gave a compelling insight into the reasons for this. BVNA Junior Vice President, Jo Oakden RVN, proposed that obesity should be approached as a symptom of malnutrition. By exploring differing views, AWF aimed to get the audience talking about various ways veterinary professionals can contribute towards curbing this growing epidemic to positively impact pet health and welfare.

Below is a list of the key points from the discussion, alongside a list of actions that vet nurses could take forward to their practices, colleagues and clients in the collaborative fight against pet obesity.

Key points made by speakers and delegates during the debate

- Research shows that medicalisation of human obesity can help with both treatment and availability of resources to tackle the problem. Human doctors who see obesity as a disease may also be less likely to engage in weight stigma – 'fat shaming'.
- If obesity is diagnosed as a disease, the condition can still benefit from preventative measures.
- Veterinary nurses cannot currently diagnose under the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct, they would have to refer to the vet if classifying obesity as a disease. This may limit efficiency in supporting clients and their pets.
- Obesity is a multifactorial issue and owners of obese pets should be respected. The profession must avoid shaming and use a more sensitive, inclusive approach to build on existing client relationships. Veterinary professionals must promote supportive consultation methods.
- Whilst some breeds can be genetically predisposed to obesity environmental factors are also key. Classifying obesity as a disease may remove some responsibility from environmental factors, such as overfeeding.
- Tackling obesity must be a shared responsibility between vets, vet nurses and pet owners. Adopting a shared approach means we can work collaboratively and across all influencing factors to assist owners in keeping their pets at an optimal, healthy weight.

Action points from the discussion and debate: what can we do to help tackle pet obesity?

1. **Prevention is key.** We must start educating from the very beginning of the client's veterinary journey. For example, first vaccination clinics and puppy/kitten clinics.
2. **Deliver the same message.** Vets and nurses must educate clients using the same messages. We must acknowledge obesity and develop positive client relationships through provision of supportive and inclusive weight clinics.
3. **Reward good behaviour.** We must shine the spotlight on owners doing a great job at keeping their pets at a healthy weight. By acknowledging healthy body condition scores, we can normalise healthy pet weights.
4. **Healthy images matter.** Vet practices and associated pet businesses should only use pets with healthy body condition scores in all their clinic communications and social media posts.
5. **Your choice of words is important.** If we communicate weight concerns in the wrong way, clients may feel shamed and be more reluctant to change. It is important to avoid words like 'fat' and 'obese' when addressing weight concerns or conducting weight clinics.
6. **Empower owners.** By including owners in our decisions, they will feel more respected and empowered to positively influence their pet's health and welfare. We must emphasise that controlled and healthy weight loss is a collaborative process and even teaching owners to BCS their own pets can reinforce shared responsibility.
7. **Keep accurate, comprehensive clinical notes.** We must regularly use body condition scores during veterinary consultations and ensure we update weight and BCS at every visit. This gives an accurate reference point and enables us to reward any positive changes.
8. **Research, research, research.** To gain a more accurate view of the factors affecting pet obesity such as genetics, owner compliance and communication techniques we must undertake more research into this complicated issue.

How can you help us?

Veterinary nurses are often placed at the forefront of tackling animal welfare issues in practice, such as pet obesity. AWF would love to hear your thoughts, opinions and suggestions on some key questions in this controversial topic.

- How do we educate pet owners on obesity, especially as we only see a proportion of pet owners on a regular basis?
- How do we change public perception of normalising overweight and obese pets and the view they are just cute and cuddly?
- What is the correct motivational approach to take with owners? How do we talk to them without being considered confrontational? Be sure to check out Discussion Forum session on Motivational Interviewing.

Why not get into contact with us via our social media channels? We would love to hear your opinions. Facebook us @awfvets or tweet us @AWF_VETS and use #AWFDebate. Any feedback can also be emailed to Sian on sian@animalwelfare-foundation.org.uk.



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