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Communicating with clients and colleagues with hearing loss

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ABSTRACT: Aside from elderly relatives, some of us may have never had any direct personal experience with a person who is deaf or hard of hearing, and so may be unfamiliar with how to effectively communicate with these people. This can make for a very awkward, frustrating and possibly embarrassing experience for both parties. This author is a wearer of hearing aids herself, and would like to share some information on hearing loss and tips on effective communication with a person with hearing loss.

Keywords: Communication; hearing loss; compliance

Introduction

One in six people in the UK live with hearing loss (Actiononhearingloss.org.uk, 2018). There are over 900 hearing dogs working in the UK, all of whom will require veterinary treatment in their lives (Hearingdogs.org.uk, 2018). These hearing dogs may possibly visit your practice with their deaf or hard-of-hearing owners. Then, of course, there are the regular pets belonging to owners who may be deaf or hard of hearing. These animals are no less deserving of first-class treatment than animals belonging to clients with normal hearing, nor are their owners less deserving of a first-class service than their normal-hearing counterparts. Good communication is the main reason clients remain loyal to a practice, with poor communication and resultant dissatisfactory service one of the biggest reasons that clients choose to take their pet elsewhere. As well as this, client compliance is also important to ensure that the animal's well-being is maintained and that treatment plans are followed through effectively by clients at home. Ineffective communication or miscommunication may result in incorrect administration of medication, missed appointments and failure to comply with treatment plans. For veterinary staff, ineffective communication or miscommunication may lead to failure meeting client expectations, complaints and malpractice claims by the client (Cipolla, Bonizzi, & Zecconi, 2015).

Communication is the ability to understand and be understood – it is a two-way process.

Communicating with our clients with hearing loss

Our clients may present to us with profound or complete hearing loss. The manner in which a deaf person communicates will depend on the age at which the individual lost their hearing and the extent and type of their hearing loss (King, 2006). It is important to realise each individual client's hearing abilities and needs, and that what works for one client may not work for another. Bear in mind that a stressful situation and a noisy environment may present further challenges to communicating, just as it would with any other client. If possible, schedule appointments with clients with hearing loss at quieter times of the day, or at least accommodate them in the quietest possible room with minimal background noise. Allow extra consulting time for these clients so that the consultation is not rushed (Actiononhearingloss.org.uk, 2018; Middleton et al., 2010). The layout of a room will have an impact upon how sound is carried. Hard floors and furnishings will cause sound to reverberate and echo, which will distort noises (Actiononhearingloss.org.uk, 2018). If possible, consider fitting an induction loop system in your practice. Individuals with partial hearing may still

be able to hear certain sounds, such as high-pitched and loud noises, but it should not be assumed from this that they can decipher speech (King, 2006). Hearing aids and cochlear implants do not mean that the person has regained perfect hearing; in some cases, hearing aids and cochlear implants may amplify background noise rather than make speech more comprehensible. Not all deaf or hard-of-hearing persons are able to lip-read. For those clients who can, ensure lighting in the consultation room is adequate but avoid positioning oneself in front of bright lights and windows, as this can cause glare and shadows and distort facial expressions and visual communication (Stevens, Dubno, Wallhagen, & Tucci, 2018). Sit or stand 3–6 feet from the client and at the same level as them (Actiononhearingloss.org.uk, 2018). Some individuals may be accompanied by a sign language interpreter. The interpreter is present solely to fulfil the purpose of interpreting for the individual. They are not there as the owner of the animal being treated. Attention must therefore still be focused on the client. Different variations of sign language exist – British Sign Language is not the same as American Sign Language, Irish Sign Language, and so on; therefore, it cannot be assumed that because one variation is known that it will be understood.

With all persons with hearing loss, always ensure that they have your attention before beginning a conversation and are aware that they are being addressed (Middleton et al., 2010). With those with profound hearing loss, attention can be gained by waving or by lightly touching the person's arm or shoulder, approaching the client from in front or from the side and never from behind (Actiononhearingloss.org.uk, 2018). Otherwise, address the client by name before commencing conversation. Ensure the topic of conversation is understood before continuing in further detail. Face the client at all times and avoid distractions while talking, for example leaning down and petting the patient (Stevens et al., 2018).

While one may be used to providing a running commentary of a physical examination of the patient, with a client with hearing loss it may be best to carry out the examination and then save discussion until one is able to then focus full attention on the client again. Maintain eye contact and keep your mouth clear and uncovered while talking

– avoid chewing on pens, chewing on chewing gum, or placing your hand over or near the mouth as this can muffle the voice or hinder the client from being able to lip-read if needed (Stevens et al., 2018). Speak slowly and clearly, avoiding exaggerating speech and raising the voice as this can sound aggressive, distort sounds, and again hinder lip-reading. Use normal lip movements and facial gestures. Avoid using waffle and jargon – keep the discussion simple and to the point. Ensure that the client is following the conversation and is understanding what is being said. If the client does not understand, then rephrase what you are saying.

Written instructions will be extremely useful in these cases and they may be tailored to include extra important details. A file with common phrases and closed questions written in plain English relating to common companion animal ailments and procedures may also be useful (Capner, 2009). Use written methods to communicate instead of the telephone, and make use of appointment cards or text message reminder systems (Stevens et al., 2018). For emergency out-of-hours care, consider special arrangements for these clients so that they do not have to worry about having to seek third-party assistance alongside getting their pet the treatment it needs (Capner, 2009).

Always be patient when communicating with hard-of-hearing clients and ensure that all members of staff are aware of how to communicate with these clients, from the reception team and support staff to surgeons and managers. If possible, a dedicated member of staff willing to learn sign language can be dedicated to caring for clients with hearing loss while they are in your practice and assume responsibility for ushering these clients to a suitable consultation room and minimising background noise. Tailoring visits to individual client needs shows respect and thoughtfulness and will increase client compliance and loyalty to your practice.

Supporting our colleagues with hearing loss

Our colleagues in practice with hearing loss will most likely have mild to moderate loss. Good communication is an integral part of any team's success, and there may be a few extra considerations

when communicating with our colleagues with hearing loss. As with our clients, ensure that our colleague has our attention before commencing further conversation. Some hearing aids can work with stethoscopes via Bluetooth, but others may need to be removed in order to put the stethoscope in the ears. At this time, it may be best to wait until your colleague has finished their task at hand and are wearing their hearing aids again before beginning discussion, especially if the topic requires particular concentration. Surgical masks will muffle the voice and present challenges to hearing.

Flashing and amplified telephones and fire alarms can be installed in the practice, which may prove to be of use to all staff in such a noisy environment. Ensure staff meetings take place in a suitable room, with carpeted flooring and soft furnishings if possible to prevent sound from echoing and reverberating and ensure that meeting notes are circulated afterwards. Consider CPD and training videos with subtitles.

Ensure that colleagues with hearing loss are included in discussions and do not feel left out. Hearing loss can present challenges to mental health, such as anxiety and lack of confidence. Some individuals may consider their hearing loss a disability, and under the Equality Act 2010 (England, Scotland and Wales) and the Disabilities Discrimination Act 2005 (Northern Ireland), workplaces are legally obliged to provide support for these staff.

Protecting our own hearing

Veterinary practices are very noisy environments – dogs barking, machines beeping and so on. This makes us in our profession very susceptible to hearing loss. Regular hearing checks are advisable, as well as taking precautionary measures to protect our hearing, such as wearing ear defenders in kennels. Hearing loss occurs as a natural ageing process, so we should ensure that we protect our hearing while we are still able so that we can enjoy it for as long as possible.

Summary

- Allow plenty of time for consultations with hard-of-hearing clients.
- Ensure you have the person's attention before commencing conversation, and

that the topic of conversation is understood before proceeding.

- Consider the room layout and avoid positioning oneself in front of bright lights. Stand or sit 3–6 feet away from the client, at the same level as them.
- Speak normally, just as you would with any other client.
- Make use of written means of communication – handouts, text message services, emails, etc.
- If the client does not understand what is being said then rephrase it. Avoid raising your voice.
- Be patient and keep your message simple and to the point.

Disclosure statement

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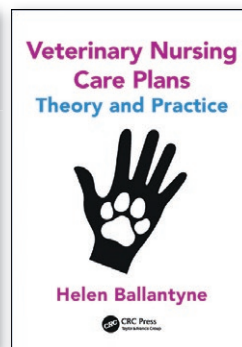
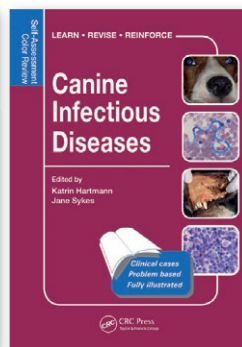
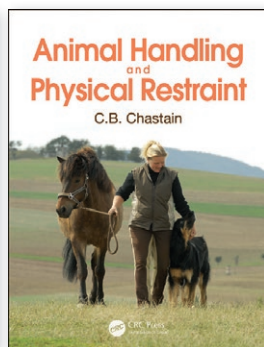
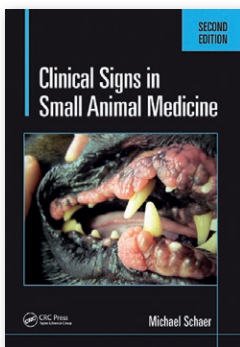
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