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John graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in 1990 and worked in mixed and small animal practice, developing a wide interest in internal medicine and obtaining a CertSAM in 2001. In 2003 he joined what was then Intervet in a technical role as veterinary advisor, supporting the company's broad product portfolio. Today he has a broad interest in preventative healthcare and remains the GB technical manager for MSD's Nobivac Companion Animal Vaccine range as well as the Pet Diabetes portfolio.

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Your transforming role in preventative healthcare

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ABSTRACT: Veterinary nurses can play a key role in preventative healthcare and this should be highlighted to clients and veterinary surgeons during VN Awareness Month. In collaboration with University of Nottingham's Centre for Evidence-based Veterinary Medicine, MSD Animal Health's Keeping Britain's Pets Healthy initiative was launched. The project revealed that neither owners nor veterinary surgeons were completely confident about what services veterinary nurses could provide. As the veterinary nursing title is not protected in the UK it is not possible to determine how many of the staff described as "veterinary nurses" were actually registered veterinary nurses. A key conclusion is that there is an urgent need for further understanding and clarity of the roles and responsibilities of nurses within small animal practices. The two-year project resulted in guidelines being created for practices to consider throughout the preventative healthcare experience of clients. An important key theme identified was the role that veterinary nurses and receptionists play in educating and engaging clients in preventative healthcare.

Keywords: preventative healthcare; veterinary team; awareness of the VN role; client education

Introduction

Keeping pets healthy is a really significant part of what modern veterinary practices do. Healthy pet examinations, a key part of vaccine consultations, are a major activity. In support of the BVNA and veterinary nurse awareness month, here we discuss opportunities to strengthen the role of veterinary nurses in a support of a more proactive and evidence-based approach to preventative healthcare in pets.

Whilst the value of pet examinations and vaccines consultations to pet health and wellbeing is often under-recognised, they are responsible for countless practice consultations and typically generate a significant portion of practice workload. It should come as little surprise therefore that recent evidence suggests that veterinary nurses have the potential to play a transformative role in the approach that small animal veterinary practices take towards preventative healthcare. Until recently, little research had been completed on the expectations pet owners and veterinary surgeons have around the veterinary nurse role and its importance in optimising preventative healthcare and wellbeing. In recognition of the importance of preventative healthcare, MSD Animal Health's Keeping Britain's Pets Healthy (KBPH) initiative inspired a

collaborative research project undertaken by the University of Nottingham's Centre for Evidence-based Veterinary Medicine (CEVM).

The KBPH initiative, launched last year, marked a step change in MSD Animal Health's emphasis on preventative healthcare. It champions the central role each member of the veterinary practice team plays as experts in educating and engaging our nation of pet lovers. It supports the partnership between the practice and its clients around the health and welfare of their pets, and the significant contribution vaccines and parasiticides make.

Evidence-based Preventative health guidelines and the importance of veterinary nurses

MSD Animal Health's KBPH initiative was launched with the backing of the first ever set of evidence-based guidelines (Robinson et al., 2019) on improving the approach to dog and cat preventative healthcare consultations. The guidelines were created following extensive research carried out in partnership with the CEVM at the University of Nottingham.

Following an evidence-based methodology the two-year project concluded by offering 18 recommendations for practices to consider implementing throughout the preventative healthcare journey that practice clients experience. All client-facing practice staff have an important role to play in optimising client care and one key theme which developed within the surveys and interviews was the role of the veterinary nurse. The role of veterinary nurses and reception staff was an important key theme that was identified (Figure 1).

The research showed that there was no universal agreement among owners or vets on which services veterinary nurses should provide suggesting that this was an area where more clarity is needed. The conclusion can only be that the poor understanding of the scope of the role both amongst vets and amongst owners must be resolved before veterinary nurses in a consulting role can have their potential fully realised. Therefore, maximising the potential of the veterinary nurse role requires improving communications with clients so they understand the full breadth and quality of the service veterinary nurses can offer.

Successful preventative healthcare consultations can be defined as those that give the best outcomes for pet, owner and practice. Positive outcomes are dependent on delivering consistent messaging and signposting throughout the client's experience from booking appointments, arriving and being greeted at the surgery, the waiting room, the consultation itself, after-consultation

Both pet owners and vets appreciated advice being available from a vet nurse in the waiting room without the need to book and appointment.

A few of the owners interviewed indicated that they had confidence that veterinary nurses could provide them with reliable pet health advice on a wide range of topics. And some had accessed veterinary nurse-led clinics following advice from a vet and were positive about the experience.

Several owners were unsure what veterinary nurses were qualified to do, or how their role fitted with that of a vet. The risk that the veterinary nurse might not be able to solve a problem, and a subsequent consultation with a vet would be needed, was the most common barrier to attending veterinary nurse-led clinics.

Figure 1. Key findings of project.

care at reception and then any follow up and reminders. Clear and consistent communication at every stage sets appropriate client expectations, enhances understanding of advice and encourages positive owner behaviours that allow pet health and wellbeing to be optimised. Such an approach depends on consistent messaging by every member of the client-facing practice team, developing every staff member's confidence and understanding, as well as the soft skills to communicate effectively.

A further important conclusion from the research was that there could be a mismatch between expectations and training so that training support of both reception and nursing staff can prove to be a pressing need in many practices. These strategies help maintain standards of care and make processes transparent to staff and clients alike, so that everyone can understand their specific role in preventative healthcare and create valuable engagement with clients on how best to keep their pets healthy.

Evolving and strengthening the role of veterinary nurses

Alongside the perceived traditional role in relation to health, wellbeing and guardians of animal welfare (Yeates, 2014), veterinary nurses now have a range of specific responsibilities. These include: performing consultations (Wilds, 2017), minor surgery (Kinnison et al., 2014), running educational interventions (Jobson, 2013), and providing complex inpatient care (Nelson & Welsh, 2015). Other less commonly documented skills however, which the vet nurse role also needs to be recognised for include building rapport, facilitating good communication and providing empathy in a client-facing setting.

Some veterinary practices may employ other staff under a range of job titles who share some of the client-facing responsibilities described above without the same training or regulatory accountability (Belshaw et al., 2018). Furthermore, many owners expressed uncertainty about the remit and status of veterinary nurses in relation to providing veterinary advice.

The CEVM research therefore revealed that neither owners nor veterinary surgeons were completely confident about the services veterinary nurses could, or should, provide, suggesting greater clarity is needed. As the veterinary nursing title is

not protected in the UK it is not possible to determine how many of the staff described as "veterinary nurses" by interviewees were actually registered veterinary nurses. This research therefore supports the potential need for the statutory protection of the veterinary nursing title in the UK, and further reinforces the urgent need for further understanding and clarity of the training, roles and responsibilities of nurses and indeed all client-facing staff within small animal practices.

The need for better clarity, training and communication are therefore at the heart of this research project's conclusions on the veterinary nurse role. Getting this right in practice is integral to the developing the future role and responsibilities of the veterinary nurse. Furthermore, getting better outcomes in pet health and improved client experience will need practices to ensure that suitably trained veterinary nurses are available before the full value of the important role they play can be realised.

Further details on KBPH and the guidelines for practices can be accessed at msd-animal-health-hub.co.uk/KBPH.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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