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A celebration of 10 years of fighting obesity

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ABSTRACT: The author reports on a day spent at the University of Liverpool's Leahurst campus, held to celebrate ten years of the joint Royal Canin Weight Management Clinic, which included attendees from all over Europe. The article offers an overview of the purpose and work of the clinic, and some key messages from the day.

Introduction

In my role as a VNJ editorial board member, I was privileged to have the opportunity to attend a Royal Canin press event in April, held to mark and celebrate ten years of their Weight Management programme, which is based at the University of Liverpool's Small Animal Teaching Hospital. It was with added relish that I accepted the opportunity, as having worked at the University for three years; it gave me the chance to catch up with some old friends and colleagues, and take in some glorious spring sunshine in the serene yet bustling surroundings of the Leahurst campus.

We were very well looked after by Royal Canin and the veterinary school, and were given presentations from members of the Weight Management Clinic team and researchers at Royal Canin. This was followed by a tour of the clinic facilities at the Small Animal Teaching Hospital,

including the waiting, clinic and DEXA scanning areas.

The main objective of the day was to disseminate information about the clinic and Royal Canin's input into the area of obesity management to a European audience; and there were attendees from, France, Spain, Poland and the Netherlands, to name but a few.

What is the weight clinic?

The clinic provides a specialist referral service for the management of overweight and obese cats and dogs, and also conducts and contributes to various clinical studies aimed at improving understanding of the pet obesity problem. It is headed by Dr Alex German, who is a Reader in Small Animal Medicine at the University, and he is supported by Shelley Holden, a veterinary nurse who performs the consultation and client advisory aspects of the work.



The group outside the Small Animal Hospital

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The clinic is run as a partnership between Royal Canin and the veterinary school with three main functions:

- To provide a clinical service for referred patients
- To raise awareness of pet obesity
- To perform clinical research

One question that was raised during the discussion on the day was whether the profession is doing enough to tackle obesity. The team at Liverpool are well equipped to raise awareness of this problem, and have gathered significant amounts of data, produced numerous research papers, appeared on television in documentaries, and given 93 talks and lectures in 51 countries to date.

A veterinary nurse who has played a vital role

The two excellent presentations given by Alex German and Shelley Holden contained information about the clinic and their achievements over the past ten years, and demonstrated the vast knowledge, experience and commitment of the team in delivering a ground-breaking service to their clients.

Alex German has been a practicing clinician for over twenty years, and is both a European and RCVS specialist in small animal medicine. Ten years ago he recognised the scale of the obesity problem and since then has focussed his career on this area of medicine. Shelley Holden qualified as a veterinary nurse in 1997, and went on to complete the advanced Pet Health Counsellor course and the BVNA Certificate in Animal Behaviour in 2003. Shelley spent many years running successful weight clinics in practice before moving to the University of Liverpool to become the first weight clinic nurse for the project. Shelley has lectured internationally and written several articles on pet obesity, and in 2009 achieved the Certificate in Small Animal Nutrition.

A striking aspect of the day was the level of input and influence that Shelley, as a veterinary nurse, has clearly had in the operation, and the respect that she commands from her colleagues both at Liverpool and Royal Canin. Alex German was clear that Shelley has been an integral part of the running of the clinics, and much of the management of consultations and supporting clients through their pet's weight loss programme has been

Shelley's remit. The success of the clinic is a testament to her dedication and commitment.

Marianne Lomberg, Marketing Manager for Royal Canin, stated that 'Shelley is a key opinion leader in pet weight management'. Of course it comes as no surprise that RVNs have an increasing input into clinical research, co-ordination, management and ultimately the success of such major projects; but it is still certainly worthy of mention and celebration. Writing as a fellow veterinary nurse I felt both admiration and pride for her achievements. Shelley has now moved on to work as a weight management specialist for Royal Canin, and the rewarding opportunity of the clinic nurse will be passed to her successor.



Shelley Holden with a patient at the clinic

Shelley has been commissioned to write an article on successful management of weight loss for the VNJ, and I very much look forward to her article. Whilst the work that has been performed at the clinic is specialised, there is much that can be taken and used in everyday practice.

Key aspects for success

The presentations shared many gems of advice on weight management – from aspects as simple as calibration of weighing scales on a regular basis to the weighing of food rations rather than use of a measuring cup, as this has been shown to be inaccurate by up to 80%, (German et al, 2011). Also discussed were the use of a 'confessions diary' and

the necessity of building a relationship and a rapport with the client in order to achieve trust and compliance. In fact this 'client relationship' aspect really stood out and struck home. We all appreciate the value of effective communication with our clients, however the discussion in the presentations was really enlightening, and left no doubt that this approach to client education can be the difference that results in success. This concept of 'helping owners to appreciate changes that will then help to motivate them' is something that can be achieved through a multimodal approach - verbal and non-verbal communication, empathy and understanding supported by the use of visual aids.

Body composition scanning

One of the specialist facilities available to the clinic is the use of DEXA (Dual-energy X-ray absorptiometry) scanning. DEXA uses protons of two differing energy levels to differentiate between the type and amount of tissue scanned, and can calculate bone mineral density (BMD), bone mineral content (BMC), fat mass and lean body mass. DEXA is safe and quick and the body scanning process only takes 3-4 minutes per medium sized dog. This provides important information to the clinician with respect to the important issue of retention of lean body mass whilst losing body fat, and it also acts as a tool to provide client motivation, as their animal's level of body fat, and its subsequent gradual loss, can be clearly visualised on the scan.



Alex German with a DEXA scan

What has been learned during the last ten years?

Alex German discussed the three key areas of learning from running the clinics that he felt were most significant, and these have been summarised below.

1. **Success feels good - for clinician, owner and PET!** This may appear to be a rather obvious statement, but the sentiment behind it was that with



A gallery showing some of the clinic's successful patients

the right approach and tools, we can achieve success in weight loss, and this benefits all parties. The Quality of Life (QoL) of overweight pets that lose weight improves, and this was a topic that was raised several times. It's something that we can forget in the science - but the crux is that a healthy weight pet will feel better and have a more *fulfilled* and longer life. QoL was looked at in terms of vitality, emotion, anxiety and pain; and research can substantiate the claim that 'Quality of life is reduced in obese dogs but improves after successful weight loss.' (German et al, 2012).

2. **Weight loss is tough for both clinician and owner - and it gets tougher!** This was discussed in the light of clinical evidence that shows that whilst weight loss may be quite rapid at the start of a programme, this loss slows significantly, to an almost painful rate towards the end of a programme, meaning that many pets may not reach their target weight unless the support, encouragement and motivation are there.
3. **The concept of tailoring.** This is a key factor in compliance and success. Dr German informed us that some patients are never going to achieve the 'ideal weight' for a variety of reasons, and it is important to modify expectations to meet this. Other factors will also influence how the individual programme is tailored, for example, concurrent disease or the age of the animal. In answer to my question, 'when do we decide how we adapt a diet for a particular animal - at the outset, or during the programme?'

Dr German said that this really needs to be tailored. In other words, whilst we start out with a certain goal, we may need to change this as we move forward, and it is important to be flexible. I know that from my own experiences, this flexibility has to occur in order to meet at a middle ground with the client in what you hope for and what you will achieve, and it was reassuring to know that this compromise is acceptable, and sometimes vital.

Alex and Shelley's presentations were followed by a further presentation from two of the leading researchers at Royal Canin, which shared the science and clinical research behind the satiety diet.

Rather than attempting to convey the complexities, I shall simply share the key messages that I took away with me.

- Maintaining lean body mass is vital in achieving successful, healthy and sustainable weight loss.
- Satiety can be defined as the disappearance of hunger and feeling full, however the science and physiology behind satiety is very complex and is still not clearly understood.
- Satiety diet is double the 'volume' of adult maintenance.
- In one trial, cats fed ad lib ate less of the satiety diet than the competitor diet (implying increased satiety) however cats also chose satiety diet over the competitor diet.
- Accurate determination of maintenance requirements is

important in preventing weight gain after successful weight loss.

Questions

One of the questions asked during the Q&A part of the presentations concerned the level of cost and potential revenue that could be brought to the practice from running weight management clinics. There appeared to be concern from some of the European delegates that whilst these clinics would take up valuable clinician and nurse time, the financial return on this would be poor. Marianne Lomberg of Royal Canin was prompt to reassure the audience that revenue raised from the sales of weight management diets had been shown to be very rewarding. I offered my opinion that nurse weight management clinics should be viewed as a client service that should be charged for and that this stance was becoming increasingly common practice in the UK. I was gratified to hear that the speakers also supported my comments.

Summary

Pet obesity is clearly a significant problem, and the increase in overweight pets walking into our practices is reaching alarming levels. The University of Liverpool/Royal Canin collaboration will continue into the next decade, with focus on tailoring weight loss. Future expansion into practices was mentioned, and this may be a vital step as, whilst the Weight Management Clinic has the expertise, experience, tools and equipment to raise the bar in weight management success and research, the key influence in slowing or halting this epidemic will ultimately come from first opinion practices. It is our duty to educate clients to feed for health in the first instance, and to help their overweight pets to lose weight and stay healthy.

References and further reading/information:

More information on the clinic, including links to relevant papers, can be found on the dedicated webpage: www.pet-slimmers.co.uk

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