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Communicating with your colleagues and your clients – remember the Seven C's!

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ABSTRACT: Communication is a vital part of patient care and client relationship in today's veterinary practice. Reviewing communication from the aspects of context, content, complexity, concentration, courtesy, consistency, and compassion, the article suggests ways the veterinary nurse can improve how they talk to their clients in the consult room or other areas of interaction. Improving communication directly affects client compliance, customer experience, and so leads to improved animal welfare.

Introduction

There is an old saying, attributed to Irish dramatist George Bernard Shaw, that 'The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.' Ironically, the original version of this saying first surfaced in 1950 and had nothing to do with Shaw, being written by a journalist named William H. Whyte. If a saying on communication can't make it without being corrupted, what chance do you have of communicating effectively with your team mates and your clientele?

Just what is communication anyway? The dictionary defines communication as 'the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information' (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2016).

So what is the point of improving how we pass on our information? Certainly clients, the VDS, the RCVS and a host of CPD companies always impress upon us the need to improve how we communicate, but why should we bother?

To begin with, communication is the only way we have of understanding both our clients' and patients' mental and physical states. The only way we can find out what's wrong is to investigate, and, without getting information, this is impossible. Additionally, communication is the

only method we have for managing our outpatient care – the 'at-home' or 'post-op' instructions the clients never seem to listen to. It is also the only way to pass on instructions to a colleague or receive a patient handover – without information we simply can't do our jobs!

Better communication ensures:

- improvements in the quality of client communication, which generates significant benefits for both their pet and their relationship with their practices
- greater client satisfaction with veterinary care
- increased client compliance with treatment plans
- decreased anxiety and distress on the part of clients, and, by extension, patients and their veterinary staff
- better mental health in veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses
- improved patient health promotion and disease prevention

Complex

Communication is an incredibly complex process, and, when looking through the research, may seem incredibly inefficient. Between reading, writing, speaking and listening, there are many ways to understand and misunderstand what people

tell us or write to us. Many websites and public-speaking gurus will tell you that anywhere from 55% to 93% of your verbal communication depends on non-verbal cues. While the specific numbers are still disputed, there is actually little dispute that hundreds of factors affect how we converse in our day-to-day work. Every second of every day, people are making decisions based on what they hear and see, and many of us are guilty of 'judging a book by its cover'.

Is that complicated enough? It gets better! To transmit a concept, sentence or just say something nice about someone, a person has to convert brain waves to sound waves and then a second person has to convert those same sound waves back into brain waves so they can understand what the first person was saying. If it's written communication brain waves connect to your fingers to write words; light waves bounce off the letters; these light waves are focused by your eye's lens, absorbed by the retina and then converted back into brain waves. As long as you both speak the same language and understand the same vocabulary, things are generally fine. Miscommunication can easily crop up if you use a different language or accent, or even if you just speak too fast! Commonly, issues arise with clients when you are using veterinary terminology they either don't recognise or understand correctly.

Content

Content is also a key part of getting your point across. In view of the complexity of communication as discussed in the previous section, nobody would blame you for going back to bed and forgetting about this whole communication thing! However, what you say is just as important as how you say it.

As professionals, it is vital that what we say is effective and honest. In an ideal world, everything we do would be backed by evidence-based papers. Unfortunately, in the veterinary nursing world, the scientific evidence base can be thin, mainly because veterinary nursing is a very young profession compared, for example, to 'human' nursing. It is important not to ignore the voice of experience – if you've got effective, proven knowledge that works, it's vital to use it to ensure the patient's best interest. One would think that goes without saying – but if it was that easy, we wouldn't need disciplinary committees and the civil courts!

A second, equally important point, is to plan your communication – the classic 'think before you speak' dictum. Essentially, don't try to 'wing it' when you're delivering important news or information.

How do you decide what your content is supposed to be? When imparting new information to a colleague or client, it is best to start with simple concepts, rather than drowning them in facts and figures (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). This is not because your clients and team mates are simple, it is because new information or instructions are best given in short, easily understandable chunks.

So start planning your content. That doesn't mean that you always have to read from a script. When you meet a client or a colleague, there's usually a reason for the meeting – whether it's getting information from them, or giving them health advice or instructions, you are rarely put in a situation where you have absolutely no idea what you should say. Even if such an unlikely situation were to occur, you can always try to ascertain why you are both there by communicating with the other party!

Context

Context, in a nutshell, is fitting your information (your Content, remember?) into a given environment so that it makes sense. While this can be as simple as arranging your ideas into a logical flow of information, a more strategic view of context is to establish a culture that encourages clear, open communication between the 'stakeholders' – that's anyone with an interest in what goes on.

Context (or lack thereof) is one of the key reasons that written communication is often misunderstood. Ask anyone who's sent a text or email that seemed rushed, or rude or just plain inconsiderate, and you'll often find that the sender 'didn't mean it like that'. It seems like a cheap excuse, but we've either missed the context of the message, or the sender has failed to place the message in the correct context.

People often have trouble deciphering meaning without the physical or behavioural cues that speaking to a person give us. 'Just the facts, please' was a common plea from TV detective Columbo, but context is vital. If you don't believe me, ring your local pathology lab and ask

them how they would interpret a sample when the accompanying form doesn't say anything about the sample location, clinical history or presenting signs. Facts can fit many scenarios – and that's why your communication needs to fit into a network of context.

Concentrate

One of the biggest myths in today's world is that we can multitask effectively. Searching online reveals alarming 'statistics', claiming that multitasking could cost you 10 IQ points and up to 40% in productivity. How accurate that anecdotal information remains to be seen, as scientific data is not easy to find. That said, insurance companies everywhere can provide you with figures on how distraction is a factor in thousands of accidents every year, from a road traffic incident to drilling a hole through someone's gas line.

So how do we concentrate? People have limited attention spans, and a veterinary clinic, with hundreds of distractions a day, is worse than most when it comes to paying attention to what you're hearing or reading. Your transient attention span (your short-term attention to a sudden distraction) may be as short as 8 seconds (Dukette & Cornish, 2009), while your general ability to focus deteriorates significantly after 10 min of concentration (Hartley & Davies, 1978).

Concentrating is an active process, so take the time to focus on what your colleagues and clients are saying. Put the phone down, close the door if you have to, and discover how relaxing it is to pay attention to only one person at a time!

Courtesy

Courtesy is the grease that lubricates the wheels of society. Brilliant minds may be able to take in and pass on volumes of information, but some of society's brightest minds were a little weak on bedside manner. Certainly the veterinary profession is by no means the only place to find prima donnas!

Courtesy and a pleasant, open manner are vital to maintaining good communication – think of the times you've put off telling bad news to a colleague because they have a 'difficult' personality. That's not a crime – or if it is, then we're all guilty of being human. Certainly the truth shouldn't be hidden, but equally, we all know people

who are lacking in interpersonal skills and as a result, 'just tell it like it is' – they don't tend to be highly popular individuals.

Courtesy can be difficult to remember, especially in the high-stress world of the veterinary practice. It can be very hard to recognise what other people may consider rude, offensive or just plain inconsiderate. Fortunately, if you've made it this far in the article, you'll remember to keep an eye on the context and content of your communication; and you can also consider making the complex as simple as possible. You might also consider waiting until the person can concentrate on what you have to say to them – as anyone who's tried to have a phone conversation with a barking dog in the background can attest to!

Consistency

Transmitting information is difficult enough when you speak the same language, but what happens when different members of the team are telling clients and colleagues different things? This is a medical and client-care disaster in the making.

You don't need staff to be parroting your every word, but it is enormously helpful to get together and develop protocols and checklists for best practice in your workplace. It could be anything from what time people pick up their pets to how the handover meeting happens when the day nurses start their shift. In a nutshell, the human brain craves consistency.

Do you remember that confused, anxious feeling, when you haven't seen something before? The more frequently we see, hear or do something, the more familiar and comforting it is (Mooradian, Renzi, & Matzler, 2006). When your clients hear the same message from everyone in the practice, they will have a much higher level of trust in the team than if they receive confused messages on a regular basis (Mooradian et al., 2006). Human health researchers found that in a survey of 193 patient families, 25% of surveyed individuals reported receiving inconsistent information from hospital staff, in some cases multiple times, and treatment

decision-making and patient satisfaction were negatively affected in nearly 30% of cases (Hwang et al., 2014).

Consistency of the information from the client about the patient is also hugely important. When two people bring a dog or a cat in, but can't agree on when the pet urinated last, or when it ate the rat bait, this can make deciding on treatment protocols and care plans very difficult indeed. While the author is not aware of statistics in this area, there is little doubt that incorrect information from owners may have a significant effect on patient outcomes in a veterinary clinic.

A last word on consistency – keep your reactions to receiving information consistent. Do you have a boss who is completely calm when things are going well, but flies off the handle when given bad news? Or is it simply impossible to guess what mood they'll be in on any given day? This is a severe block to communication; if bad news will get the messenger shot, messages may be delayed, or worse, not delivered at all.

Compassion

Compassion is vitally important in the veterinary environment, although it is frequently confused with empathy. Compassion is 'a strong feeling of sympathy for people who are suffering and a desire to help them', while empathy is 'the ability to understand another person's feelings' (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2016).

Empathy is a widely used word in today's veterinary practice, with new and old veterinary and veterinary nursing graduates being encouraged to show more empathy towards clients. This is a laudable goal, but unfortunately isn't always possible. There are always going to be clients and colleagues that you cannot fully relate to. However, you'll still be well aware of their suffering or their problems, and in spite of not completely understanding their feelings you'll very likely be motivated to help and support them.

Can you run out of compassion? Most definitely – compassion fatigue, or

secondary traumatic stress, affects a large number of medical professionals, with 82% of emergency-room nurses in one study reporting burnout and nearly 86% of them reporting some form of compassion fatigue (Hooper, Craig, Janvrin, Wetsel, & Reimels, 2010).

If you feel that you cannot muster the compassion to communicate with your clients effectively, please know that compassion fatigue is an issue that many colleagues face at one time or another.

Preventing compassion fatigue is a major initiative in the UK veterinary world – the UK's recently relaunched mental health charity Vetlife (www.vetlife.org.uk) has lots of advice for people with professional or personal issues.

Conclusion

Of course, communication isn't something you'll pick up by reading a single article. So go out and practice good communication and for further help, many communications courses and sources of advice are available – both inside and outside the veterinary profession – so don't be afraid to think outside the box!

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