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Emma has a keen interest in promoting animal welfare and runs a company called Pet Train, which provides first-aid training to the public. She also awards the Animal Nursing Assistant qualification to students, on a distance-learning basis. In her own time, Emma is welfare officer for a branch of Cats Protection, and looks after her two children, her Labrador retriever, Hazel, three cats, and chickens and tortoises.

# Client education benefits all: patient, client and practice

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**ABSTRACT:** The education of clients by the veterinary nurse is an important role, which helps to improve animal welfare. From the very simple waiting room displays to the more time-consuming clinics and client evenings, there are methods to suit various situations with associated benefits for the patient, as well as the practice and client. Besides improving welfare, increased client transactions help to improve profit margins and the bond between client and practice. It is recognised that the human-animal bond is very strong and the education of clients on preventive medicine and disease helps to maintain that bond for as long as possible.

Over half of the households in the UK contain a pet and educating owners on their animal's welfare needs should be a priority for the veterinary nurse (Murray, 2010). There is a range of effective ways of doing this, which can include clinics, posters, leaflets and client evenings. This article will assess the benefits of such education to patients, the types of support to be offered to clients, effective communication, the benefits to practice and some consideration of limitations and ethical issues involved.

## Benefits to patients

In 2012, the PDSA published the PAW report, which explored various opinions of pet owners, children and veterinary professionals on animal welfare. It assessed perceptions of the five areas of welfare requirements: environment, diet, behaviour, companionship and health (RSPCA, 2013).

Whilst the report shows some improvements in the welfare of the Nation's pets, others unfortunately demonstrate a significant lack of understanding. With this in mind, the key focus of client education should be the improvement of patient welfare with preventive medicine being of greatest importance.

The concept of preventive medicine is to prevent disease and maintain the animal's overall health (Sirois, 2012). Historically, clients mostly visited their practice when

their animal was suffering from disease or injury; however, modern practices have introduced a more proactive attitude to preventing disease.

The key areas in which this can be achieved include:

- nutrition – feeding for an animal's life stage can help to reduce incidence of conditions such as diabetes, arthritis, obesity, heart and kidney disease
- vaccination – to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases
- parasite control
- behaviour and training
- husbandry.

## Compliance

Of course, preventive medicine is not going to be the sole reason clients come through the door; there will always be times when animals require long-term health care by means of medication or ongoing diagnostics to monitor disease progression or health status.

The veterinary nurse plays a particular role in supporting and ensuring client compliance in these cases. Studies, such as those of Dugdale (1999), into the issues that affect compliance have been widely conducted, with one of the most important factors being the time spent with the client.

Research into compliance amongst humans has found that this can be increased by nurses and doctors spending more time with patients, discussing their condition and treatment (Dugdale, 1999).

The research has found that patients who feel welcomed by 'the professional' are more likely to feel bonded and to follow their directions more rigorously. This research is also relevant to veterinary practice as the client must be encouraged to follow veterinary advice in the same way as they would choose to follow their doctor's advice.

A veterinary nurse with sound knowledge of disease processes and management techniques is more likely to be able to discuss the condition and the importance of compliance and, in turn, improve the animal's welfare.

## Client support and methods of education

### Waiting room displays & mail shots

Client education can be achieved in a variety of ways – the simplest being putting up displays in the waiting room (Figure 1).

These are a useful way of catching the attention of a high number of the clients who pass through the waiting area, and providing them with a basic level of information – and then offering them more information by means of a clinic or evening presentation.

A range of subjects can be covered over a year and it may be helpful to devise a planner with the topics that are to be covered. Subjects such as nutrition, parasites, seasonal issues and common medical conditions are useful starting points for further client education.

Figure 1. A typical waiting room display



If the practice has a specific event, such as an evening talk, direct mail shots can be a useful method of reaching a higher percentage of clients. With the introduction of computerised records it is now easier to do this and it is even possible to target certain groups specifically. For example, only the dogs aged over eight years old and not seen in the previous two years could be selected to come in for a senior pet clinic.

### Nurse clinics

Clinics are widely used in practice and these provide an opportunity to talk to the clients individually in order to ascertain the information and services that they require.

Often clients will come with a specific reason; however, a clinic appointment can provide an opportunity to give them advice about their particular query, as well as other subjects that are relevant to their pet. For example, some clients will come in for a 'flea check' because they have not been seen by a vet and they know that the practice SQP can see the animal and dispense fipronil.

However, at this stage, the SQP can take the opportunity to provide other information about preventive health measures, such as advice about the benefits of vaccination boosters, if this aspect of the pet's status is not up to date. Whilst a percentage of clients will not take up the advice, some will, and this benefits not only that individual animal but also others that it may come into contact with as it will no longer be a possible reservoir of infection.

### Client evenings

Client evenings are occasionally used by practices to engage with a larger group of clients in order to discuss a specific subject. They provide opportunities for clients who may work during the day, for young animals to socialise in a controlled environment, and for like-minded clients to come together and discuss a particular subject that is important to them.

These events can be great for practice-client bonding, because they are perceived by clients to be sessions when practice staff take time out of normal practice hours to discuss important topics.

The sessions may be used most successfully when promoting new clinics or offers; for example senior pet clinics,

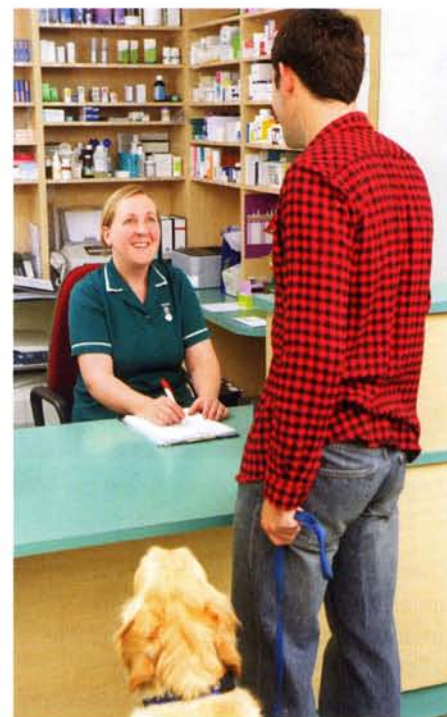


Figure 2. The bond between client and practice is an important one

which are still a novel idea and one that clients can find difficult to adopt. An evening session can be an opportunity to discuss the whole concept with them when you – and they – have enough time and no distractions.

## Benefits to the practice

Clinics help to strengthen the practice-client bond, increase sales and job satisfaction for the team running them and, most importantly, improve animal welfare.

This bond between client and practice is an important one (Figure 2), because it provides a positive environment for maximising client satisfaction and this, in turn, will improve the potential for their return to the practice.

Veterinary nurses who are able to demonstrate a sound level of knowledge are more likely to gain a client's respect and loyalty. Clients appreciate having the time set aside to discuss their pet's individual needs (Figure 3), and by asking questions such as "Is there anything you want to discuss?" nurses can make clients feel their opinions and concerns are valued by the practice.

An important factor in building a bonded client base is positive word of mouth. Providing a positive experience for the client will, hopefully, ensure that they talk to their friends about the "wonderful practice down the road".



Figure 3. Clients appreciate having the time set aside to discuss their pet's needs

Client education also provides a great opportunity to discuss and promote products that the practice has available. Some of these products may only be available from the veterinary practice and whilst clients may perceive that there are cheaper alternatives at the supermarket or pet shop, these may not be as effective and using the incorrect product for the animal may be harmful or toxic. The ability to discuss this is of benefit to both the practice and, of course, the animal's welfare.

### Should we be charging?

There is much debate as to whether nurses should be charging for their

services. Some may argue that if you provide a service for free, then the client sees little value in it. The question that needs to be asked is 'What is the service trying to achieve?' Is it simply revenue? Or improvement of animal welfare as a whole?

In an ideal world *both* would be achieved; but the reality is that many clients wouldn't come in through the door if they had to pay for all of the services we provide. So the compromise is that some of the 'basement level' services – such as flea checks, puppy and kitten clinics – are offered as a complimentary service, which will increase footfall into the practice.

As long as confident and reliable nurses are able to educate and promote products and services, then an increase in sales is likely to follow.

### Ethical and professional Issues

All qualified veterinary nurses must work within the limitations of the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) and the Veterinary Nursing Bye-Laws and, therefore, must have a clear understanding of these. It should be made clear to clients that the veterinary nurse cannot diagnose or prescribe drugs.

This is an area that clients may find difficult to understand, but it is a legal obligation and one that will result in disciplinary action if not observed properly.

Most veterinary nurses qualify with some knowledge of the key areas which enable them to give basic education on parasites, nutrition, vaccination and diseases. Being able to relay this information confidently and coherently to clients requires experience and an awareness of the need to constantly update relevant information.

To ensure that everyone is giving the same information consistently, it is beneficial for all the nurses to work as a group and agree on the best advice that can be detailed in a handbook so that all clients receive a constant and coherent message, no matter which staff member they consult. [vni](#)

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