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Her interests are based around injury, disease, rehabilitation, behaviour and welfare, with current research in the areas of equine euthanasia and stress in animals at public events. She is secretary of the Veterinary Wound Healing Association.

# Behavioural considerations in veterinary practice

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**ABSTRACT:** This article explores the importance of behavioural considerations in veterinary practice and identifies appropriate methods to find and employ a suitably qualified behaviourist. Following this it discusses the role of the behaviourist in practice and identifies easily implementable, small changes that can be made to increase behavioural awareness and explains the benefit of these in relation to the practice, owner and animal.

## Why is an understanding of behaviour important in veterinary practice?

Behaviour, including its causes, performance and implications, is an important consideration in veterinary practice.

First, behaviour is an external display of an animal's internal physiological processes. The behaviour and posturing offered by an animal is the product of neural and endocrine activity, stimulated by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors.

These behaviours indicate what the animal is feeling, experiencing or interpreting from its environment and can offer an indication of emotional state, and consequently, welfare status.

As well as an indication of emotional state, these behaviour patterns may be indicative of new or altering disease processes, as the pathophysiology of disease may augment behaviour. Heightened awareness of the possible causes of seemingly innocuous behavioural changes may enable earlier identification, and thus treatment, of disease.

Second, recent years have seen advances in clinical treatment options, providing the opportunity for clinicians and owners to choose pathways that prolong life. Whilst there are clearly a great many benefits to the utilisation of these treatment options, they require careful quality-of-life assessment, both before and after their implementation (Loftus, 2013).

In order to carry out an effective quality-of-life analysis, the practitioner must possess comprehensive knowledge of species ethology to enable him or her accurately to decipher and explain the behavioural indicators of quality-of-life identified in the individual animal (Billeschou, Christiansen & Forkman, 2007).

Third, research has shown that many pets display stress-linked behaviour associated with visits to the veterinary surgery. Stanford (1981) reported that nearly 70 per cent of dogs were unwilling to enter a veterinary practice and Döring *et al.* (2009) identified nearly 80 per cent displaying fear posturing during examination at the veterinary clinic.

Fear, pain and stress can lead to the performance of unwanted and potentially dangerous behaviours in practice. The ability to reduce fear, pain and stress, through utilisation of behaviour-friendly practice protocols, could reduce the expression of these undesirable behaviours and promote a positive emotional response to interactions with the clinic for those animals.

Last, the behaviour of animals in the veterinary practice can have a profound effect on all aspects of the practice; including on other animals that may be present and that may experience a less positive experience of visiting the veterinary practice if they are exposed to aggressive, agitated or other highly aroused animals during their visit.

In addition, the work environment for veterinary surgeons and nurses is

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significantly more stressful and potentially dangerous if they are consistently exposed to highly stressed animals.

The same logic applies to the owner/handler of the stressed animal and, of course, to the animal itself, whose negative associations with the veterinary practice will be reinforced if it experiences perceived aversive stimuli during the visit (NAVC PGI, 2006).

These considerations reinforce the point that the addition of an in-house behaviourist – or the building of strong links with a suitable local behaviourist – could prove very beneficial for many areas of a veterinary practice.

## How do we identify academically qualified and practically competent behaviourists?

The Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) does not make direct reference to the treatment of behavioural disorders, so anyone can legally set up in 'behavioural practice'.

Historically, veterinary schools have taught limited behavioural medicine (although the proportion of the syllabus devoted to this sphere has increased in recent years), meaning that many practices did not consider the provision of a behaviour service for clients and their pets a high priority. In recent years, however, the role of behaviour and training has seen a surge in popularity and provision is frequently out-sourced to local trainers and behaviourists.

Whilst an increase in the recognition that behaviour and training is an important aspect of veterinary provision is a very positive advance, it is vital that veterinary surgeons employ – or refer cases to – appropriately qualified behaviour counsellors and trainers (Wickens, 2007).

The vast range of behaviour qualifications available and the number of behaviour and training organisations promoting their services can be a daunting labyrinth of information to negotiate, even for those within the discipline. Consequently, those less well-versed in the wide spectrum of behaviour and training often meet with difficulty when deciding on which organisations and individuals to approach for specialist behaviour and training advice.

In short, behaviour qualifications vary markedly – from rigorously-assessed postgraduate qualifications at well-respected universities, through undergraduate courses, to online un-assessed short courses. Whilst many courses have their merits there is a growing consensus that a behaviour qualification must be demanding both academically and practically (in terms of learning and assessment) to ensure that those qualifying are fully prepared for practice.

## Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC)

The Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC) [www.abtcouncil.org.uk](http://www.abtcouncil.org.uk), has recently been formed to function as a regulatory body to promote standardisation of qualifications and professional bodies within the behaviour and training industry.

Membership organisations that promote the practice of current research-led behavioural medicine and training can apply to the ABTC for membership, provided that they satisfy the ABTC requirements in terms of their inclusion criteria for acceptance of their members.

Currently there are a number of multi-species behaviour and training associations registered as members of the ABTC. These include the Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) and the Association for the Study

of Animal Behaviour (ASAB), who accredit Certificated Clinical Animal Behaviourists (CCABs).

In addition to these, there are numerous species-specific behaviour, training and welfare organisations including the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) and the UK Register of Canine Behaviourists (UKRCB).

It is suggested that the ABTC should be the first port of call for the public and animal professionals who would like to contact a reputable behaviour counsellor or trainer. From the ABTC site, users can find links to approved behaviour associations and contact their members accordingly.

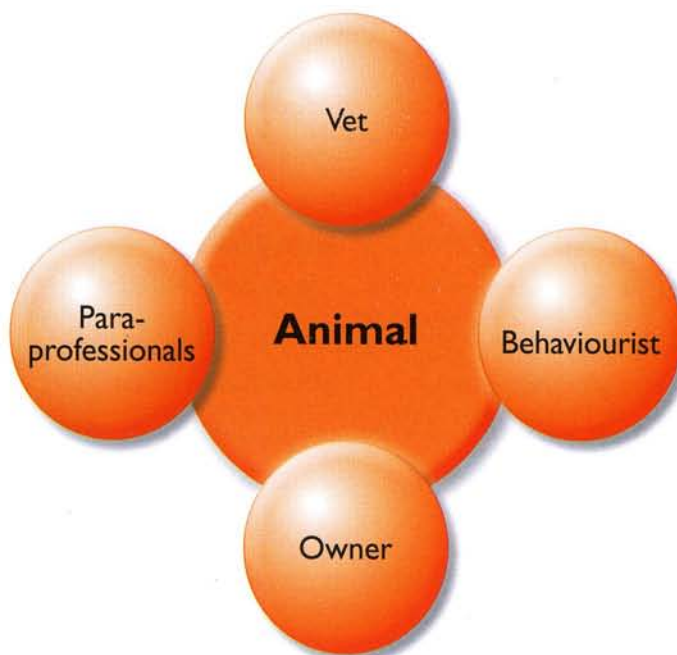
## What is the role of a behaviourist?

The behaviourist's role is as a member of an animal-centred team (Figure 1).

The behaviourist and other paraprofessionals should work under veterinary referral. This way they can identify any medical issues in the animal that may be a factor in the development of the behaviour problem, or alter the management and treatment strategies used in the case.

Behaviour problems may occur as a result of current or historic, as well as direct or indirect, medical issues. Current medical issues may have a pathophysiology that

Figure 1. The animal-centred team including the referring veterinary surgeon, behaviourist, owner and paraprofessionals (such as dental technicians, physiotherapists, chiropractors, nutritionists, osteopaths, farriers and so forth) with joint focus on the animal



directly affects behaviour, whereas others may cause pain, fear or other heightened arousal that in turn causes changes in behaviour.

Whilst current medical health issues can change behaviour, it must also be considered that historic medical issues may have resulted in learned behaviour that is often long-standing and very difficult to remedy.

The behaviourist plays a central role in coordinating information from the referring vet, the owner, animal and other paraprofessionals – such as dental technicians, farriers, physiotherapists, osteopaths and nutritionists – involved in the case.

Following initial contact from the owner and upon veterinary referral the behaviourist has a duty to offer behavioural first aid for the animal to ensure that it – and any individuals in contact with it – is safe in the interim period between referral and consultation.

After lengthy face-to-face consultation, the behaviourist then has a responsibility to provide verbal and written feedback to the owner, with copies to the referring vet and other paraprofessionals involved. Feedback often involves the suggestion of environmental and management changes for the animal, as well as a behaviour modification/training plan to deal with the behavioural issue in the animal.

## Making a practice behaviour friendly

When making changes to a practice setting to address behavioural considerations and provide additional services to clients it is important to consider a number of areas:

### Education

Offer well-run socialisation parties, education evenings, 'how to' hand-outs, training sessions and habituation sessions for clients and their pets.

### Consider entrances and exits

Ideally, have separate entrances and exits for certain species, or hold clinics at different times of day for dogs, cats and other pet species.

### The waiting room

Avoid mixing species, either by having separate appointment times/days or separate waiting areas. Manage odours carefully via thorough cleaning protocols and avoidance of heavily perfumed products.

Ensure all animals are greeted appropriately. Highly aroused animals should be offered a side room in which to wait or be allowed to wait in the car or go for a walk until called for their appointment.

Waiting times should be kept as short as possible? (Yin, 2011).

### The examination room

The examination room should cater for individual species and be well managed with regard to odours. Examination surfaces should be non-slip, soft and as low as possible to avoid inducing additional fear and stress responses.

Plenty of food rewards should be made available for animals, with owners encouraged to bring in the animal's favourite treats from home. Indeed, the provision of toys should be encouraged (AAFP & ISFM, 2011).

### The consultation

Ensure the consultation is not rushed by booking a double/extended appointment

for first visits, potentially aroused animals and complex scenarios. Have behaviour specialist nurses on hand, if required.

Provide clear, multimedia (such as e-mail, verbal, leaflets, video) instruction for owners in terms of management and treatment protocols (Loftus, 2012).

### Housing

Try to schedule elective surgeries on separate days for different species.

Provide plenty of space in the kennels and cattery, ensuring that all animals are given a place to be private. Care for emotional as well as physiological needs during the animal's stay.

### Employees

Train all employees in basic behavioural awareness, and identify specialists, if applicable.

Ensure that staff proactively support a free drop-in service for clients whereby they are encouraged to drop-in to the clinic with their pet, without an appointment, and engage (treats, games, stroking as appropriate for each animal) with reception and nursing staff to promote a positive perception of visiting the clinic in their animals.

Maintain wide-ranging communication channels (e-mail, text, telephone, letter, Facebook and so forth) especially for behavioural follow-up sessions.

Employ or develop a close working relationship with a suitable behaviourist.

## Benefits of a behaviour-friendly practice

The benefits of behaviour-friendly practice are numerous and apply to both

**Table 1.** The benefits of behaviour friendly practice

| Owner benefits  | Animal benefits   | Practice benefits  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Additional in-house services</li> <li>• Quick referral for behaviour cases</li> <li>• Help with behaviour and training</li> <li>• More focus on vet and consult when the animal is relaxed</li> <li>• Less stressful environment</li> <li>• Increased owner inclusivity</li> <li>• Practice visits welcomed</li> <li>• Education sessions offered</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Species appropriate environment</li> <li>• Improved welfare owing to lower stress</li> <li>• Potential earlier diagnosis</li> <li>• Appropriate pharmacology use</li> <li>• Less/appropriate restraint</li> <li>• Positive reinforcement techniques</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More thorough examinations on relaxed, willing animals</li> <li>• Fewer injuries to staff</li> <li>• More frequent visits</li> <li>• Clients willing to treat much-loved, easy pets</li> <li>• Good word of mouth advertising</li> <li>• Less stressful working atmosphere</li> </ul> |

the client and the animal as well as the practice. (NAVC PGI, 2006) (Table 1).

Behaviour-friendly practices often approach client care in an holistic manner, which can instil a greater feeling of inclusivity in the client and consequently increase compliance.

As with medication and lifestyle changes, behaviour modification requires high compliance in order to achieve success because it is critical for the owner to complete the treatment programme at home following the veterinary visit (Casey & Bradshaw, 2008).

## In summary

Behaviour is a significant consideration for veterinary practice from economic, medical, ethical and welfare perspectives. The inclusion of a practically capable, academically qualified behaviourist within the practice remit is key, and suitable candidates should be sourced from organisations approved by the

behaviour regulatory body, the Animal Behaviour and Training Council.

The role of the behaviourist is as a specialist within the animal care team, with cases only taken upon veterinary referral; effective communication between all professionals and the owner is critical to successful treatment.

Simple alterations to practice policies and logistics can have hugely beneficial implications for both owner loyalty and compliance, as well as animal welfare. With careful consideration, most practices can make small, inexpensive – yet very effective – changes to protocols, resulting in a more behaviourally aware and pet-friendly clinic (Casey & Bradshaw, 2008; Loftus, 2012). [vni](#)

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## NEWS REVIEW by Jean Turner

### Moving Up CPD

Moving from a purely clinical role to management can be daunting, particularly for those who are promoted within their practice and then find themselves managing their peers. With this in mind Zoetis recently ran a CPD course, as part of the company's collaboration with the SPVS/VPMA practice management programme, with the aim of giving a structured introduction to some key leadership and management techniques.

Aimed at vets, nurses and practice managers who have recently progressed to manage people or are aspiring to do so, as well as existing vets, head nurses or practice managers wanting to polish up their management and leadership skills,



the course was very interactive with various role-specific case studies and scenarios.

Fiona Sims, one of the Zoetis business consultants who delivered the CPD comments: "We knew from the work we do with veterinary practices that this type of training would be in demand, but we were overwhelmed by the response we received to the extent that we had to cap the numbers.

"As a result of this demand and the feedback we received from the CPD day, we will be repeating it on 5 November, so any vets, nurses or practice managers looking for management and leadership training should contact SPVS/VPMA to book their place."

### UFAW welfare conference

The fourth of a series of one-day conferences on 'Recent Advances in Animal Welfare Science' will be held on 26 June at the medieval Merchant Adventurers' Hall, Fossgate, York, YO1 9XD. Registration is from 8.30 with talks commencing from 9.20 with the programme ending at 17.30.

At a cost of £28 to include refreshments (but not lunch), this is incredible value.

For registration, visit [www.ufaw.org.uk](http://www.ufaw.org.uk) or contact UFAW at The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead, Herts AL4 8AN.