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How to run weight clinics effectively in practice

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ABSTRACT: Obesity is a very common disease with serious implications, including anaesthetic complications and cardiovascular and respiratory changes.¹ When only 30% of pet owners recognise that their pet is overweight, it is the veterinary nurse's responsibility to help educate owners in improving their pet's quality and quantity of life.² That is why weight clinics should be an essential service in everyday practice. But are your current weight clinics effective?

Nurse clinics are a vital part of everyday practice, allowing the veterinary nurse to use her or his knowledge to inform clients of key information. This gives the nurse the opportunity of creating a strong relationship, enabling trust between the nurse and the client.

Obesity is a very common disease with serious implications if not dealt with promptly and effectively. These implications can include arthritis, diabetes, anaesthetic complications, cardiovascular and respiratory changes, surgical difficulties and, most importantly, quality and quantity of life.¹

Obesity is seen more frequently in females, middle-aged and neutered pets.³ Owing to the increase in pets suffering from obesity, it is essential that all veterinary practices offer a weight clinic scheme that gives clients and their pets support and guidance.⁴

Fitting weight clinics into everyday practice life

All veterinary nurses within the practice should be involved in the management of the weight clinics. This will involve advertising, contacting food representatives, communicating with clients, holding the weight clinic appointments and recording statistics from the clinics.

Ideally, in your practice you would have a separate nurses' room where you can run your nurse clinics, enabling you to offer a wide range of appointment times without interfering with the veterinary surgeons' appointments. It also gives you

the chance to display literature about obesity and case studies on other patients that attend your weight clinics.

However, if this is not possible, then you must use the consultation time you have wisely; although this does restrict the appointment times you can offer the client.

When beginning weight clinics in practice, you need to advertise them where your client base will see them. This might include your website or Facebook page, text or e-mail alerts, practice newsletters, waiting room display boards and during the vets' consultations. It is crucial to gain the clients' attention via advertising and this can be most effectively achieved by using pictures and statistics.

Although a number of practices may offer this nurse clinic as a free service, it has been pointed out that when there is a small fee in place, the compliance is enhanced.

Another way to promote your weight clinics is by writing letters to the clients who have been recommended to attend with their pets, as this gives the owner a chance to read any enclosed information at their leisure and they may feel less pressure than in the busy waiting room.

When clients have missed their pet's appointment for the weight clinics or have not returned when advised, it is a good idea to either call them or send a reminder letter to check on the patient's progress. This depends on the weight clinic nurse's relationship with the client and their pet and should be judged accordingly.

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Where to begin with your patient

The first and hardest step is to achieve client understanding and compliance. This can be gained through a vet consultation where the veterinary surgeon explains to the client that their pet is overweight and recommends for them to attend weight clinics.

At this point it is vital that the nurse either completes the first weight clinic consultation straight away, if possible, or books an appointment for as soon as possible. This is because once the client has left the surgery, you have lost your opportunity to make that initial contact face to face.

Other possible scenarios through which to introduce weight clinics can include 'weigh-and-worm' appointments, postoperative checks and patients with medical conditions, such as cruciate disease, arthritis and diabetes.

Once the client has booked the first consultation, you have gained their initial compliance and understanding that their pet is overweight. However, they may not have the motivation or financial incentives to continue, as well as being unwilling to make changes, because most people dislike change.

During the first weight clinic, you should obtain an accurate weight for the patient, decide on a Body Condition Score (BCS) – there are different scales that can be utilised, either 1 to 5 or 1 to 9, – as well as measurements around their neck and waist (**Figures 1 & 2**).

The more figures you can provide for the owner, the more satisfying and rewarding they will find the process of slimming their pet; especially because not all patients will lose weight at every weight clinic, although they may lose inches from their waist, thus altering their BCS.

You then need to collect a detailed history and understanding of the patient's circumstances – medical conditions, feeding behaviours and environmental factors, such as being in a multi-pet household, their current diet and exercise regimen.

It is a good technique to use a mixture of 'open' and 'closed' questions when requesting history from a client as this will aid in the reliability of the



▣ **Figures 1 & 2.** In addition to body condition scoring the patient, measurements should be made around their neck and waist

information gained. A method to achieve this would be to ask the client the same question in three different ways – you may glean three different answers, because some clients will not fully understand the question in one format, but may in another. This all needs to be recorded on the patient's clinical notes for the vet and other members of staff to view.

Once you have a strong knowledge of your patient, you are then in a position to make positive changes. So first decide on the correct diet. This can range from what the pet is currently being fed, a life-stage maintenance diet, or a veterinary grade weight loss diet.⁵

It is always important to listen to the client's opinion when deciding on a diet, as they may have financial restrictions that could, for instance, mitigate against beginning with a veterinary prescription diet.

The majority of owners do not weigh out their pet's food, or realise that it should be weighed out to match their pet's *ideal target* weight and not their *current* weight. If the new diet chosen is different to the current one, then it should be introduced slowly over three to five days to prevent any diarrhoea or vomiting.

The second thing to do is to recommend a suitable amount of exercise for the patient, taking into consideration any client restrictions, such as disabilities, age and available time; and any patient restrictions, such as breed and medical conditions.

When assessing a patient's current exercise regimen, it is important to remember that a 20-minute active high activity run will not be the same as a 20-minute walk around the block, with the dog ambling along by the owner's side. It is vital, therefore, to elicit all the details to be able to build a clear

Key points to remember

- always collect a full history of the patient at the first consultation
- set achievable weight targets
- always explain quantity versus quality with regards to diet and exercise
- record the progress and, if necessary, adjust diet plan
- weigh the patient every 2-4 weeks (the same nurse, if possible, to ensure continuity and understanding of that particular patient)
- remain positive and enthusiastic, no matter how little the weight loss achieved, as this will give the client the motivation to continue
- always ensure the client fully understands the changes they need to make.

understanding of the quality versus the quantity of exercise that each patient is receiving.


Finally, once you have decided on a new diet and exercise plan, ensure that the client is happy with it and make sure it is all recorded in a weight clinic diary. This should also include current weight and measurements, target weight and a space where clients can log any information or record the progress and/or problems at home.

Most weight clinic diaries should include literature for the client to read in their own time which will help them understand and remember what has been

said at the consultation, as well as the importance of their pet losing weight. At the end of a weight clinic, it is good to repeat the key points discussed – as well as the new diet plan – to ensure client understanding.

If possible, always book the next appointment while the owner is in practice as this will make it more likely that they will return for that following appointment. This can also be recorded in the weight clinic diary. Ideally, weight clinic patients should be weighed every two to four weeks, especially at the beginning of the weight loss programme, as you may need to make adjustments to their diet plan.

Summary

Although the occurrence of obesity in pets is increasing, by running weight clinics in practice as veterinary nurses we are able to educate, support and guide owners to help their pets. This gives us the chance to become involved in resolving a life-threatening medical condition simply by listening to the owner and implementing changes to their pet's lifestyle. 

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BVNA NEWS SPECIAL

VN well-being survey launched at Congress

The BVNA has been working on a number of projects this past year and a hugely important one is 'VN Well-being' and raising awareness of the support available to veterinary nurses, receptionists and support staff.

The stresses suffered by veterinary surgeons – and their alarmingly high suicide rate – have been an issue with which we, as a profession are familiar. The BVNA felt it vital also to explore the factors which cause veterinary nurses – and other staff – problems, and ensure that they know where to go for help.

The BVNA asked Congress delegates to complete the survey and we would be grateful if you also would take the time to complete it so that we can gain valuable information on the issues that veterinary nursing staff face on a daily basis.

The survey covers several 'areas', including personal pressures, as well as work-based and clinical stressors. It also

asks about the areas of your work that give you the most pleasure, which is an important aspect too!

Please note that the survey, which can be found at www.surveymonkey.com/s/BVNAwellbeingsurvey, is completely anonymous.

Your input is extremely important as it will enable us to explore health issues affecting the veterinary nursing profession and how our support services can be improved.

Thanking you in advance of your help.

The British Veterinary Nursing Association

For all our latest news and to find out more about the BVNA, visit our website at www.bvna.org.uk

