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# What does the public really think?

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**ABSTRACT:** In this article, the public's opinion on the veterinary profession and how social media plays a part in how we're seen in the public eye has been researched. Facebook was used to ask two private groups their opinions not only on how they feel about vets, but also their knowledge on the role of a veterinary nurse.

Keywords: public; social media; opinions

## How the veterinary profession is portrayed within the public

What does the public think of the veterinary profession? As veterinary professionals we've heard all opinions, from positive feedback and praise to complaints and even verbal abuse. With people openly talking about their experiences on social media nowadays, we can get a good insight of what the public honestly think. I decided to do some research using social media. I took to Facebook and asked two private pet groups to share their opinions and experiences with me. I wanted to make sure that all opinions were respected, private and that this article remained neutral. The response was fantastic, and I received a variety of opinions.

## Social media, the good and the bad

After years of working as a veterinary nurse there has always been the question hanging over the profession's head of "do the public understand our role?" I mean, how many of us nurses have received that faithful old question "So when are you going to become a vet?" This was a question I asked among pet owners, as well as how they feel about the service they experience and whether people think that some vets are really "in it for the money". I understand that not every practice provides the exact same service and experiences so I was prepared for some varied answers.

With regards to the role of the veterinary nurse, the response was mixed. Some people did not realise the extent

of the nursing qualification, while others couldn't praise the work and dedication of nurses enough. To quote one lady, she said "Until recently I had no idea just how qualified a veterinary nurse actually is, I basically thought they were there to clean up and do basic tasks (ignorant I know). My vet practice is very good at highlighting the work vet nurses do through their social media account and that's why I am better informed" (Wear, 2017). I then asked if she would have been concerned knowing a vet nurse had carried out a procedure such as IV catheter placement, to which she responded "Yes, before I knew, it would have bothered me, I would have questioned whether they were qualified if something went wrong and have presumed the high cost of procedures was due to a qualified vet doing it. I have no issues now with vet nurses doing procedures". This is where I think social media is a great asset for practices if used properly. It can educate clients not only on the best care for their pets but also to portray what the professionals do within day-to-day practice, hopefully changing any negative opinions or worries that are out there.

Now of course everyone is entitled to their own opinion and bad experiences can contribute to this. One lady responded "I do think some vets are in it for the money, as I had a very bad experience with one vet and it will stay with me forever" (Suzy, 2017). Regardless of what happened during that visit, the client had a bad experience. It is in these instances where social media can become a breeding ground for people to voice negative opinions, portraying the profession in a bad light, and unfortunately there will always

be negative experiences, whether that is due to poor communication or client care, the rare but occasional “bad apple” staff or a misunderstanding and as much as sometimes it may seem personal or upsetting, all opinions should be respected. As professionals I believe it is our job to avoid or remain neutral and calm in social media arguments, refraining from responding in an angry way. Education within practice and social media are great and key ways to help the public understand the roles within practice and also explain how things work, giving an insight on what veterinary fees are for and why they are charged. Not many understand why we charge what we do and what for exactly. A lot of pet owners replied that they feel the cost of vet treatment is too expensive and sometimes they feel pressured into treatments they do not feel is necessary. One lady commented, “Yes I think the prices are too high, and in my experience some vets do over charge, I have been to one vet which said my dog needed surgery plus all kinds of tests done, she had a limp, went to a different vet was told I didn’t need most of the tests done and didn’t need surgery” (Stier, 2017). Opinions like this will be constant because all vets will have different ways of doing things and different levels of experience, therefore leading to different suggestions of treatment. One way I do feel that experiences such as for this particular pet’s owner can be made more positive is by clients being informed of all possible treatments, along with a clear explanation of costs and pros and cons. Yes this would take time, but would it be feasible and fair for clients to be aware of all the options available, in an ethical and well-informed manner? Personally I believe clients should get a reasonable time in consult to discuss all concerns they have rather than being rushed in and out in a 10-minute slot.

## How can we increase chances of a positive visit and change perceptions?

Another question for which I feel the answer is very important is “Do you trust your veterinary staff?” To my pleasant surprise a lot of people do, and if they don’t, they’re quick to find one that they do, which is brilliant. Trust is so

important within a vet/client relationship. An interesting answer from one lady was “I think it’s a tricky one because it’s such specific knowledge that I absolutely do not possess so I have to trust the vet” (Horne, 2017). I’m sure many people would be of the same opinion. This is why it is up to the veterinary staff to make the client feel safe and respected and eventually build up the trust. Because the cost of veterinary treatment is misunderstood by the majority, it’s easy to make clients feel as though it is just about the money when that is not the intention at all. This is where education and trust are most important. One lady who had been made to feel like the vet at one practice was only in it for the money stated “I think vets do a great job but it’s important to look around and find a practise that’s right for you. Pets are family, and, in the same way that you wouldn’t send a child to any old nursery, you wouldn’t send an animal to any old vet. I am much happier now I am more confident that the welfare of my boy is top priority rather than feeling I was just lining the surgeries wallet” (Robets, 2017). If we can take more time to explain why we recommend certain treatment and explain costs, putting the patient and client first, I believe it can build strong and positive relationships. It is our job as veterinary staff to correct any common misconceptions such as this lady who wrote “Unfortunately it’s a vicious circle between vets and insurance companies ... the insurance put their prices up because vets are putting their prices up but one always blames the other!! And if your pet is insured I’ve seen bills with completely unnecessary tests that have been put on to basically claim more money” (Grady, 2017). I asked her how she came to this conclusion and she explained that she had once worked for a cat rescue centre and had dealt with many vet practices. Are people within practice also creating negative ideas and perceptions? There was an article published in the *Daily Mail* in 2009 titled “Why I’m ashamed to be a vet” (Watkinson, 2009). This article was incredibly negative and was unfortunately shared widely over social media. For the public to read that a veterinary professional felt as though the profession was about money-making practices would surely inflame the bad “money-grabbing” opinion that some may hold. The

author of this article may have had a bad experience within the practice but most certainly tarred the entire profession with the same brush. It is important that members of the veterinary profession do not bad-mouth their profession. This may have been the reason that the volunteer at the cat rescue centre received that perception. If they’re unhappy or have concerns there is a good network of support either within practice or with the RCVS, BVA and BVNA.

## Overall verdict

The overall tone of the replies were positive and many pet owners already had a good understanding of the roles within practice. I believe a lot of practices do a fantastic job at providing great customer care and education and have protocols that ensure the clients have a good relationship with their practice and the staff. Unfortunately the negative experiences and opinions will always be around and when it comes to social media they tend to stand out more. It has been lovely to discover that many members of the public have nice things to say such as “I think you all do an absolutely wonderful job, you’re all caring and dedicated to your work”. I think if I were to ask the majority of veterinary staff what they think they publics opinion of vets is, most would think it’s negative. You’d be pleasantly surprised.

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