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Dr Yeates was the keynote speaker at last year's BVNA Congress and has kindly reproduced his lecture outlining the importance of today's RVN in the promotion of animal welfare both within veterinary practice and also in the wider community.

The role of the veterinary nurse in animal welfare

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ABSTRACT: Nurses have several roles in the animal welfare movement, and have unique skills, compassion and experience that often make them best placed to drive animal welfare improvements. RVNs have a role in patient care, can act as owners' consciences as 'Welfare Ambassadors', and can also play a role as veterinary surgeons' consciences, in particular in promoting analgesia and good handling. They are also well placed to improve welfare in the local community, volunteering for charities and at community events for animals that might never otherwise get veterinary attention. More than anything, the veterinary nursing profession can speak out about welfare issues in veterinary practice and in wider society.

First and foremost, nurses have a role in welfare-focused patient care. They provide veterinary care, under veterinary direction as well as more proactively and independently. They can provide technical services to treat certain conditions, such as minor procedures and managing weight-loss programmes.

For these patients, nurses fulfil a key role in assessing individual patient welfare, especially for hospitalised patients or outpatients attending nurse appointments. This assessment involves considering each patient's response to treatment, potential side effects and any other unpleasant experiences (e.g. fear of hospitalisation). These assessments can be made considering the animals' *feelings* and not just the pathophysiological markers of veterinary treatment. Assessing feelings requires both expert knowledge of animals and personal empathy. Such assessments are vital in *predicting* patients' welfare under different care options, which is the cornerstone of veterinary decision-making.

Nurses also play a central role in preventing patients' suffering 'wider' welfare problems. For example, they can dispense preventive treatment and provide expert health checks. Those with behavioural expertise can deliver advice on socialisation and training. RVNs can also use their general knowledge of animals' needs to advise and encourage owners to provide good care.

Importantly, nurses have a more general role with clients, helping owners to fulfil

their responsibilities to their animals – thereby helping both owner and animal. In particular, nurses can inform owners about good consumer awareness before purchasing a pet, helping them to decide which species would be best (e.g. using the PDSA's *Your Right Pet*), whether to rehome or buy (rehome, of course!), what questions to ask of the vendor (e.g. using the AWF/RSPCA puppy contract) and, indeed, whether an owner should get an animal at all based upon their particular life circumstances. Similarly, nurses can inform owners about neutering, particularly pre-pubertal neutering, and their authority can help to dispel owners' foolish beliefs that animals 'want' a litter before being neutered, or that cats under six months of age cannot breed.

Some owners may be more comfortable talking to the veterinary nurse than to the veterinary surgeon. Others may be willing to disclose information to the nurse that they would not want to tell the vet. And, in many cases, nurses simply have better understanding or communication skills than their surgeon colleagues.

For many owners, information is often not enough. Consequently, nurses also have a role in *motivating* clients to fulfil their responsibilities to their animals. There are various tricks of the trade, which experienced nurses often pick up from years of practice. For example, it is useful to involve the client actively in decision-making, ideally leading up to an explicit commitment from them to take the necessary steps to improve their

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pets' lives. At the same time, nurses can balance the tactics of providing personal contact with embodying authoritative expertise. These tactics cannot make communication 100 per cent foolproof but they can reduce non-compliance and achieve behaviour changes in more clients.

One neglected area of motivating information is how potential changes to animals' lives will affect the owners' lives. Some owners may foresee barriers to making improvements that can be discussed and discounted or avoided, such as alternative sources of food or other demands on time needed for walking or training. Others may be motivated to help their animals not only by their compassion but also by predictable tangible benefits, such as improving their health or reducing problematic behaviours such as barking or scratching.

Conversely, nurses can have a role as owners' consciences. They can remind owners to monitor welfare and to make changes. In this way they can be 'Welfare Ambassadors' to clients, going beyond the basic clinical information that accompanies a prescription or surgical discharge notes into providing a full range of advice on how to improve their pets' lives. Furthermore, this advice can extend into helping clients to improve other animals' lives. For example, promoting neutering can not only help the individual animal but also help to stem the tide of unwanted animals that enter rescue centres each year. As another example, some nurses may feel bound to mention, when advising a bland scrambled egg/chicken diet or suggesting using sausage rewards in training, that the eggs, chicken or pork should be higher welfare products like Freedom Food, to avoid helping patients while perpetuating misery to other animals.

Nurses can have a similar role as veterinary surgeons' consciences. They can advise or remind their veterinary colleagues about in-patient welfare, in particular on pain relief, good husbandry and reducing the stress caused by handling and hospitalisation. Indeed, the last decades' rise in effective analgesia is in no small part due to the mindset of veterinary nurses. This has helped thousands of animals undergoing operations or suffering chronic

conditions. In many cases, this may involve reminding veterinary surgeons that their clinical decision-making needs to focus on alleviating patient suffering – and not just biological measures of success. Obviously, this role needs to be provided tactfully and constructively.

More widely, nurses can provide a welfare role in their local community. Many volunteer at RSPCA or other charity community events, where advice and support are given for animals that would probably never otherwise come close to a veterinary practice. Some RVNs volunteer at animal centres, where their animal skills and expertise are in high demand. Such charity work can provide more enjoyment than paid work, and it can help to remind us why we work in this career in the first place. Sometimes it is useful to remind ourselves that it is legitimate to spend some time helping animals without financial reward – it is what makes us proud to be in the veterinary profession.

Veterinary nurses are an important part of the RSPCA family, playing a major role. Many nurses are employed in around 40 veterinary clinics, improving welfare through medical treatment. Some are employed in animal centres, where their expertise improves the rehabilitation of abused animals.

Nurses in private practice are also vital. Many practices provide emergency treatment in collaboration with the RSPCA, with the RSPCA paying the costs of initial emergency treatment or – where practices give additional, uncharged assistance – a contribution towards the costs of that treatment. This emergency treatment is required to fulfil RCVS Members' professional responsibilities, as required by the RCVS, and the RSPCA funding could be seen as a bonus. Nevertheless, many practices go beyond the remit of the funding provided by charities to provide more intensive treatment, or to oversee the rehoming or release of animals after veterinary care. Many practices work with a local RSPCA branch or other charity to help relinquished, stray or abused animals in their care. Others assist in neutering to help tackle the overpopulation of pets.

In cases where veterinary practices charge charities for their work, their fees are often lower than normal and, in

some cases, they are below cost price, effectively subsidising the charities' work. More rarely, but valuably, practices provide completely pro bono work. Some allocate a certain budget of staff time and resources to care for vulnerable animals that enter the practice. Others more proactively set aside time for pro bono assistance at community events and on neutering programmes. Where practices lack such corporate social responsibility initiatives, individual veterinary nurses can still give their personal time voluntarily outside work, providing much needed expertise.

Other nurses may take a role in educating their local community, on behalf of their practice or local charity or independently. Their knowledge and authority can help to disseminate important welfare messages beyond clients into the wider community. Timely communications can also help to drive footfall to the practice, especially for neutering and other preventive treatments, or to avoid welfare problems such as firework phobias.

And finally, the veterinary nursing profession as a whole has a key role to play. The professional has – with some exceptions including some notable individuals – been relatively quiet on animal welfare issues. (So have many veterinary surgeons' professional bodies until recently, where UK veterinary organisations are increasingly prominent advocates.) The profession could expand its role in speaking out about welfare issues in veterinary practice, and about welfare issues in wider society. Often, this may best be done alongside charities and veterinary surgeons, for example through the BVNA and BVA.

Nurses have unique skills, deep compassion and vast experience. In many places they are not just in a position to help animals but *best* placed to drive animal welfare improvements. This is true within charity practice, within private practice, and in the wider world. The work done already is significant – and thank you on behalf of the charity partners and the many needy animals helped so far. But there is a long way to go to prevent avoidable suffering and have a nation of happy animals. These changes need pioneering professionals to champion them – and, if not you, then who? We look forward to working with you further. 