

Building Strong Client Partnerships through Communication

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I. RELEVANCE

MEDICAL professionals strive to maximize the health of the patient at every interaction through the provision of appropriate care and counsel. In human medicine, an effective doctor-patient relationship has been shown to significantly impact the outcome of a medical encounter.¹ Further, effective communication has been found to be positively associated with greater patient satisfaction, increased patient compliance, and improved patient outcomes.^{2,3} In human healthcare patient-centered medicine has been described as a paradigm of care that highlights the needs of the patient, such that they shape the care he/she will receive. Partnership between doctor and patient, as well as the provision of care that emphasizes the value and uniqueness of each individual in a medical setting, are important principles of patient-centered care.⁴ Patient-centered communication (PCC) is one of the most tangible ways in which patient-centered care can be provided.⁵ It has been shown that patients rate physicians who demonstrate high levels of PCC to be more trustworthy and competent than physicians with low levels of PCC.⁵ Patient-centered communication has similar benefits to those of a strong doctor-patient relationship; increased patient compliance, loyalty and satisfaction, as well as decreased malpractice risk.^{1,5}

Research in veterinary medicine has demonstrated the importance of communication skills and the necessity of teaching them to veterinary students.^{2,6-9} Studies in companion animal medicine have shown that clients have specific expectations of veterinarian-client communication, including being provided choices, two-way communication, and discussion of costs.^{8,9} These expectations support the idea that veterinary clients want to be active participants in their pets' care. The veterinarian-client relationship and communication aimed at enhancing the veterinarian-client relationship have been shown to impact the veterinarian's satisfaction with the appointment.¹⁰ A study evaluating the efficacy of communication skills training in veterinary students demonstrated that students provided with training utilize more

communication skills during clinical interactions and are rated higher by clients with respect to use of communication skills.¹¹ The literature suggests the strength of the veterinarian-client relationship is determined by the quality of the interaction that occurs between the veterinarian and client during a medical consultation. The role of good communication in reducing malpractice risk in equine practice has been discussed.^{12,13} The strategies suggested for ensuring good communication included forming a relationship with the client, demonstrating empathy, educating the client and enlisting the client as a partner in his/her horse's care.¹³ In a survey of equine clients that evaluated 24 criteria of the overall veterinary service experience, "communication with clients" was ranked fourth; veterinary competency, horse handling and doctor performance were the top three.¹⁴ It is clear that strong partnerships and relationships are formed on the back of good communication.

II. EQUINE VETERINARIAN-CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS

The relationship between the equine veterinarian and client can be complex, with elements of collegiality, friendship and professionalism. Equine veterinarians tend to see their clients on a frequent basis because of the nature of the industry; this necessitates a strong working relationship. Additionally, clients are becoming more attached to their animals,^{2,6} which can result in a higher-stakes environment than in the past. The client-horse relationship can also be multifaceted: Horses can be investments, athletic partners, companions, or a combination of the above. As the professional charged with providing healthcare to the horse, the relationship a veterinarian has with each client is important. The practitioner needs to ensure that this relationship facilitates appropriate provision of care for the horse, which requires trust, comfort and confidence on both sides. Communication is the primary way by which relationships are built and strengthened.

III. COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Good communication is based on several basic skills that need to be incorporated into an individual's practice routine. Although this may seem like a daunting task at first, the reward makes the effort worthwhile. Everyone has his/her own communication style, which has developed over time, but these basic clinical communication skills can be used regardless of communication style or personality type. The skills discussed below are proven clinical communication skills^{15,16} which will help to ensure that the exchange of information between veterinarian and client is clear and that both parties leave satisfied. It is important to differentiate

between everyday communication (e.g. with a sales clerk, your children or partner), and clinical communication, when a medical professional is conducting a clinical interview with a client. Learning new communication skills should be approached in a similar manner to learning to suture – first practice on a banana or orange, then progress to cadaver tissues, then practice with supervision and finally fly solo. Soon, using all of these skills will be second nature and they will not feel forced or fake, but during the learning progress it may be awkward and difficult. Most successful veterinarians are already good communicators; the use of communication skills can make them great.

A. *Open-ended questions*

The manner in which questions are asked will shape the quality and quantity of the response offered by the client¹⁵. There are two classes of questions – open-ended and closed, which can be differentiated by the form the answer takes. Closed-ended questions can be answered with a simple yes or no, or another single word. Open-ended questions allow clients to fully express themselves and provide the information they feel is important, requiring a more detailed response.¹⁵ At first glance, this may not seem desirable, as information that is unrelated or unnecessary is potentially provided. However, if only closed-ended or very focused questions are asked, valuable information from the client about what has been going on with the horse may be missed. Open and closed ended questions both have a place in the clinical interview. Beginning the interview with open-ended questions and funneling to close questions as the appointment progresses ensures that problem is well explored and all of the information desired by the veterinarian is attained.^{15,16} Open-ended questions are useful to solicit the clients' perspective and to learn about the clients' experience; thus allowing the clinician to gain the whole story of the client and patient's problem.^{15,16} Often while clients are telling their story, information that can help treat the horse and client more appropriately is gained. Also, the time spent learning about the horse and client is important for building partnership and rapport. Closed-ended questions are appropriate once a holistic understanding of the situation has been attained and specific information is needed to complete the clinical picture. Examples of open-ended questions would be "Tell me what has been going on with 'Lucy'?" and "What have you noticed that has you concerned?"

B. *Reflective Listening*

Reflective listening is a way to demonstrate that the listener is paying attention, to facilitate the client sharing his/her thoughts, and to indicate comprehension.^{15,16} A reflective statement is essentially paraphrasing what the client has said, or commenting on their emotional state. Reflecting what the client has said offers the client a chance to clarify or provide a correction if what was reflected was incorrect, or to elaborate if there is more to the story. Reflecting the client's feelings or emotions can help build a better relationship with the client because, by commenting on their emotional state, one expresses an understanding of the impact and effect events may be having on the individual. It can seem awkward or intrusive to comment on someone's emotional state; however,

it doesn't have to be. It can be something as simple as "Sounds like you're excited that 'Simon' is able to go back to normal turnout." Reflecting content and feeling can also become a part of the normal chatter that happens during an appointment, and can extend beyond issues directly related to the medical care of the animal, such as "I can imagine you had a great hack in this weather!" Reflective listening will help to form a partnership with the client and can help shape the direction of the appointment.

C. *Empathy*

Empathy has two distinct phases: First, the understanding and appreciation of another person's situation or feelings; second, providing support by communicating that understanding back to the person^{13,15,16}. Differentiating empathy from sympathy is important; empathy involves seeing the problem from the client's perspective, whereas sympathy views the problem from an outside perspective. In some situations, it may seem unnecessary to comment on the client's experiences or concerns, but an overt expression of understanding can be very meaningful. Empathy statements demonstrate genuine interest in the client's experience, build trust and can contribute positively to the veterinarian-client relationship^{15,16}. Examples of empathy statements would be "I can imagine this would be difficult for you", "I can see that this hasn't been an easy thing to deal with", and "It sounds like you've been really worried about this."

D. *Nonverbal Communication*

Nonverbal communication is an important, and often overlooked, aspect of any clinical interview. Nonverbal cues are sent through posture, proximity, touch, body movements, facial expression, eye movement, speed of speech, and vocal tone.^{15,16} Making eye contact, nodding appropriately and having an open body posture all indicate to the client that one is paying attention and following along with what he/she is saying; in contrast to looking away, crossing one's arms and stepping back which would suggest disinterest. Unfortunately, the interpretation of most nonverbal cues is not straightforward, yet up to 80% of what one "says" is conveyed through nonverbal signals.¹⁶ Attending to nonverbal cues when working with clients is crucial to ensure a consistent message is sent. If the verbal communication and nonverbal cues do not match, the nonverbal cues tend to be more convincing.¹⁵ When considering the nonverbal cues of the client, it's helpful to consider the types of messages that are communicated by verbal and nonverbal cues. Often, verbal communication conveys conscious purposeful messages, and nonverbal communication portrays feelings and emotions.¹⁵ Therefore, attending to the nonverbal signs of the client can provide valuable information about the client's attitudes, thoughts and feelings, which can be relayed back to the client through a reflective statement or used to guide the next step of the interaction.¹⁶ Being aware of one's own nonverbal cues and those of the client can enhance the quality of the interaction, provide more information and help to form a stronger relationship.

E. Signposting

Signposts are statements that introduce the next phase of the interaction.¹⁵ They can be thought of just like road signs – some provide distances, others warn of hazards ahead, and some identify one’s location. In communication, a signpost can be used to set an agenda at the start of an interview. For instance, “Today, I’d like to talk about what’s been going on with ‘Simon’, then take a look at him, maybe see him move, and then we’ll make a plan for how to treat him after that.” They can also be shorter statements, such as “I’m just going to ask you some questions, so I can fill out his Coggins form.” Signposting allows the client to know where the appointment is headed and prepare for what is to come which can help alleviate uncertainty and anxiety.¹⁵ Often, clients experience some level of anxiety during the appointment, either due to uncertainty about the health of their horse or about the procedures taking place. Signposting provides them with structure and can allow them to focus on what you’re doing at the time, as they have the information about when and how the appointment will proceed. It can also help the appointment progress in a structured fashion, which can ultimately lead to improved efficiency. Signposting is a skill that can be helpful in many situations and can be easy to incorporate into most appointments.

F. Checking in

This skill is used to solicit the client’s perspective.¹⁵ A check-in can be performed with respect to a number of different things, e.g. level of knowledge on a given topic, understanding of an explanation, whether there are any questions. It is important to actively seek feedback from the clients to engage them in their horses’ care and to ensure that they are on board with what is going on. This will not only help improve compliance and treatment outcomes, but can help prevent disagreements because the client is more involved throughout the process.¹³ Using open-ended questions to check in with the client will help the inquiry sound sincere and allow the client to answer freely. Examples of check-in statements are “How does that sound?” and “Could you tell me what you know about founder.” Checking in also helps prevent making incorrect assumptions about the horse and/or client. Practitioners are often familiar how their clients handle certain situations or their decisions given the frequency the veterinarian sees the client. However, it is critical to avoid assuming that because they did ‘y’ last time, that they will do ‘y’ again; veterinarians are ethically bound to provide all the options every time. By checking in and saying, “Would you like to hear the options?” or “What can I tell you so you have the information to make this decision?” the client can express what he/she wants or needs to hear. It prevents unnecessary repetition and involves the client so that actions or explanations are not based on a potentially incorrect assumption.

G. Summarizing

Summarizing, as the name suggests, is simply providing a brief synopsis of what has just been discussed. There are two types of summaries: End summaries, which are used at the end of an appointment; and internal summaries, which are used to transition between segments of the interview.¹⁵ Summarizing

is useful to clarify the information that has been relayed, organize the information in a logical fashion and allow time to determine what may still need to be done or learned about the problem. It also enhances collaboration between veterinarian and client, and is an opportunity to use reflective statements.

IV. SELF REFLECTION

A critical component of learning and improving use of communication skills is self-reflection.^{16,17} It is rare that an external evaluation is provided of how well one communicates with a client, or whether one’s relationship with the client is good. Instead, this information must be gained by introspection and reflection of the interaction that took place. Clinically, the outcome of a case can be used to retrospectively evaluate an antibiotic choice or a rehabilitation protocol. A similar process should be performed for interactions with clients, by reviewing the clinical encounter and considering what happened, and reflecting on how certain aspects could have been handled differently. Some helpful questions think about are: Did I understand what the client was telling me? Did I understand what the client wanted from me? Did the client understand what I said? Did the client get what he/she needed? Is the horse going to get the care it needs? Is the client satisfied?

TAKE HOME POINTS

- There is strong evidence to support the importance of the veterinarian-client relationship and veterinarian-client communication as an element of successful clinical practice.
- A good relationship between veterinarian and client can improve loyalty, patient outcomes, and job satisfaction.
- Communication skills can be used regardless of personality type or communication style. The utilization of communication skills can enhance the veterinarian-client relationship and facilitate effective communication.
- There is value in being critical of how one interacts with one’s clients and the relationships one has formed with them. Attending to these factors and ensuring they are effective and strong can help improve the success of one’s practice. Using skills, including open-ended questions, active listening, signposting, checking in, and summarizing can help strengthen relationships with clients. The use of self-reflection facilitates the learning process and promotes growth and development in the area of client communication.

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