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From People to Possums: The Wide Scope of the Rural Veterinary Discourse Community

Discourse can be loosely defined as any form of verbal or written communication. From a basketball team, a church group, or even a volunteer organization, groups of like-minded individuals are often united by similar interests and goals. These groups and countless others develop lines of communication specific to their needs that must be well understood and executed to be successful and fully accepted within the group, thus creating distinguishable discourse communities. These sort of ultra specific characteristics of communication are often easily observable in the scientific and medical communities. For example, over the years the veterinary community has created a very unique way of corresponding with each other and the rest of the world. Balancing scientific research, empirical values, diagnosis, and prescription with empathetic sensitivity, are at the heart of the practice of veterinary medicine. Inter-personal and interspecies connection and communication is an integral part of all veterinary discourse communities, however the added aspect of being rural creates a more complex set of rules that govern the way veterinarians communicate and interact within the workplace. Rural, small-animal veterinarians must be able to connect with a wider variety of animals, often need to find alternatives to in-office, face-to-face communication and tend have very personalized

conversations with their clients. It is this set of characteristics, and many more, which define the rural vet occupation as its own distinct discourse community within the broader veterinary field.

Perhaps the most defining aspect of the veterinary discourse community is its unique set of audiences. Similarly to the medical field, vets must be adept at communicating with each other as well as with their patients. However, because animals cannot truly communicate with their human counterparts, vets must be able to gather information from both the animal patient and the client, and must combine and process this information as a whole. It is for this reason that becoming “bodily and vocally oriented toward the animal”(Roberts 423) is of utmost importance and can define one as either a good or a bad communicator within this discourse community.

When asked about strategies for communicating with animals, Dr. Karen Novak, a small-animal vet from rural Mendocino County stated, “animals are actually fairly easy to assess in some ways through body language.” Dr. Novak went on to state that scrutinizing the way an animal moves, or doesn’t move, can offer huge clues into their underlying health conditions. For example, a dog showing listlessness while walking effectively communicates a possible health problem such as diarrhea or vomiting. Over the years, experienced vets have been able to correlate their observations of body language to specific illnesses, which often leads to a concrete medical diagnosis. To do this, they need to take into account not only how the animal communicates with them, such as wagged tail, a loud bark, or an open panting mouth, but also how the animal’s actions change in response to vets body language, such as backing away into a corner or shying away from touch.

This assumption might leave some wondering, if a vet can gather so much information from physical cues, why do they feel the need to use verbal communication such as the ever-present and field-specific baby-talk inside an exam room? Not only do vets rely on these utterances to “praise, calm, and admonish”(Roberts 422) pets, but simple phrases also help facilitate a discussion with the client that might be considered socially risqué. For example, Dr. Novak often comes across dogs that have eaten a substantial amount of marijuana. Rather than blatantly asking the owner, she may playfully tease the dog for being “smelly” or say “I wonder what you got into” to inspire an honest conversation with the owner. This a direct line of communication between an uncomfortable client and a vet attempting to maintain their professionalism.

The roles and responsibilities of a small-animal veterinarian are generally very well understood by the public. According to The Academy of Rural Veterinarians, most veterinarians will choose to specialize in large-animals, small-animals, or even a specific species or breed. Generally, post-graduate vet students will choose to either head into emergency care, surgery, or general practitioner career paths, each of which creates a more specific and fine tuned discourse community. Because more urban areas tend to have many more animal facilities, vets and vet offices that are city-based are more likely to be specialized than those which are considered rural. For instance, there are hundreds of veterinarians located within the fourteen square miles encompassing San Francisco, CA, many of which have declared specialties such as behavior, dentistry, or internal medical. In that same amount of space in Mendocino county, one would expect to find approximately one to two vets. The implications that this has on rural vets, such as

Dr. Novak, is that they must be able to combine all of the specialties into one office environment and be somewhat knowledgeable about every single one of them.

As previously mentioned, communication with animals is a vital aspect of the veterinary discourse community. For small animal vets, this would include understanding the body language of cats, dogs, rabbits, etc.. Large animal vets, on the other hand, must be well educated in relation to cows, pigs, horses, and other farm animals. While these subjects in themselves seem daunting, a rural veterinarian must be well versed in the anatomy and body language of all of these animals, plus anything else that may come into the workplace. And not only do they need to be able to relate to any animal, but they need to be able to speak and understand in terms of any specialty. When asked if she believed rural vets had more responsibility within a vet clinic, Dr. Novak, who has worked on animals ranging from goldfish to giraffes, replied with “no, you could even say specialists have more responsibility because the expectations are higher, but what is different is that I have to act as the surgeon, ophthalmologist, dermatologist etc., but in a more general way.” To achieve this, rural veterinarians often use a much broader language and vocabulary in the office.

At Village Veterinary, located in Mendocino, CA, I noticed that when a new case came into the office the vets would begin their evaluation and discussion in a very vague manner. Then as more and more information came to light, they would begin to speak with more pointed and scientific terminology. At this point they would either diagnosis and treat the condition or realize that the illness was beyond their scope, in which case they would refer the animal to a specialist.

Because of the huge informational realm of a rural veterinarian, it is an incredibly important quality for rural vets to understand when they need to learn more about a topic or ask

for help from outside resources. From my various interviews, I gathered that the three main sources of information for rural vets came from professional books and publications, online forums such as Veterinary Information System (VIM), and digital correspondence with other vets and specialists. After Dr. Novak allowed me to view multiple forum posts and a few approved email chains, I gathered that most vets communicate in a very direct and concise manner. Because as Dr. Novak put it, “there is an assumed level of expertise.” When conversing with other vets instead of clients or veterinary technicians, she is able to ask for help regarding a specific problems and get immediate and helpful responses. Phone calls, however, were much harder to classify with distinct verbal characteristics. According to Liz H. Mossop, the veterinary profession has yet to truly define professionalism when it comes to communicating with each other. From my observations, the verbal style varied entirely depending on the specialty, expertise, and location of the vet being contacted.

From my time spent at Village Veterinary, one of the most surprising features was how much time each vet spent on the phone. After assuming that Dr. Novak and her coworkers were talking with other vets, I learned that it was actually clients that they were usually speaking to. When I asked Dr. Novak how she felt about working over the phone she simply stated, “working over the phone has always been one of my least favorite parts of my job.” In fact, almost every single vet I talked to had a similar response. Before entering into the workforce, it is important for rural vets to understand that because they are often the single vet for a large region, many of their follow up conversations will have to take place over the phone. Most vets are also expected to be “on-call” due to the lack of emergency specific facilities. This entails being reachable over the phone for a period of 24 hours, which allows clients to get in touch with you in case of

emergency (Academy or Rural Veterinarians). It is this form of non face-to-face contact that veterinarians often dread because of the average person does not have the educational background to effectively understand and communicate their animal's condition with the same insight and sensitivity to body language clues that vets have developed. Vets must also be very careful with what they say and their phrasing in this situation. The client often calls with unrealistic expectations of what a vet can accomplish over the phone. Many expect the vet to be able to diagnose or even offer treatment without having ever seen the animal. Developing an understanding of how to effectively and efficiently communicate over the phone, and understanding legal limits, is perhaps one of the most important skills a rural vet needs to possess in order to successfully assess and form a treatment plan, as well as avoid mistakes, misunderstandings, or even lawsuit.

Arguably one of the most rewarding aspects of being a small animal vet is the valuable connections they make with their human and animal clients. Clearly not all veterinary hospitals are the same, but generally a more remote veterinary clinic will run with less hustle and bustle than their city-based counterparts. Rural vets often see the same patients every few months for years in a row and often form an incredibly strong personal connection with their long term clients. This statement is reinforced by the fact that rural vets are much more likely to come across their clients in everyday, small-town life. This creates a sense of trust, honesty, and understanding that is recognizable in successful veterinary practices. At Village Veterinary, I realized that almost every single appointment began with a discussion of client's kids, hobbies, recent travels, or even health problems. Dr. Fishelson, a rural relief veterinarian, knows her clients so well that she will often agree to perform house calls. This sense of interpersonal

connection allows the tone of the appointment to be friendly and open rather than cold or sterile. This is especially important when it comes to breaking bad news. According to Dr. Novak, she has known some of her clients “for over ten years, which makes the process of terminal diagnoses or euthanasia much more emotional.” With these emotions running high, it is important for vets to develop skills to break bad news in an effective manner. This may include strategies of non-verbal communication such as keeping an open body position, lowering to eye level, touching the client's arm in sympathy, and offering or accepting an empathetic hug, as well as verbal communication such as asking open ended questions, using reflective listening, and keeping a calming tone. (Dvm360.com).

The distinct characteristics of the rural veterinary community often go unknown and unappreciated in everyday life. Clients, especially those who are stressed and/or grief stricken, don't realize what is behind the intense preparation that comes before a vet walks into the room and says “we've done everything we can.” Because they remain outside of the rural vet discourse community, clients have no way of truly knowing that the moment the vet entered the exam room, he or she immediately adapted their own body language and communication strategy to the specific animal on the examination table, as well as the the perceived needs and emotions of the specific client. They typically are not aware that the vet most likely had to reach out and communicate to several vets over the phone, or poured over the results of multiple ten page-long forum discussions. The client almost certainly doesn't know the practice protocol, the expertise, and the personal attention it took for the vet to break the news to a client, albeit a one time emergency visit, a possible long term client, or even a friend. Successful navigation within this contrasting mix of objective and informed judgement, as well as subjective empathy is the

defining characteristic that makes the rural veterinary discourse community so special. The more successful they are within it, the more comfortable an outsider feels as a guest.

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