

Communicating in the Veterinary Profession

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Abstract

Although communication is used every day within the veterinary field, there is always room for improvement. This isn't a typical work environment where one can limit interactions with coworkers or clients that they have trouble understanding or getting along with. The veterinary field teaches an individual how to work through a variety of scenarios to make the best decisions. The life of a patient depends on working together actively and effectively. My study explored the necessary skills for veterinarians to communicate and problem solve together as well as with clients. Through personal interviews with veterinarians and students, I evaluated how students perceive their verbal skills developing along with any disparities discussed by the doctors about their communication skills and client interactions.

Introduction

Veterinarians are passing down all of their knowledge to the fourth year veterinary students working right beside them, and along with this knowledge comes the practice of communicating with clients and other veterinarians. Proper communication improves every aspect of veterinary care and practice since "it can increase after-care compliance, enhance pet owner satisfaction, and most importantly better pet health outcomes" (Source 1). Doctors must be exceptionally careful in their daily patterns because the fourth year students look up to them and observe them closely for the way they should be communicating with clients in the future. Veterinarians and students are comfortable with medical terminology and scholarly conversations, but training is necessary for the emotional labor that comes along with patient care. Imagine how difficult it is to discuss euthanasia, or masses leading to cancer, renal failure,

liver failure, financial hardships to keep a patient alive, the list goes on. It requires practice, patience, and careful word choice to provide the best assessment of treatment for the patient while also empathizing with the client during such an emotional time. Francesca Carey, a DVM graduate from the UC Davis Veterinary school, was recognized with an award for her outstanding communication skills. During her speech she says, “Communication is vital to our profession. When clients feel listened to, it opens up channels of trust” (Source 2).

Communication skills enable the clients to have a deeper understanding to make the best well-informed decisions for their pets, while also being provided emotional comfort to show that veterinarians truly care.

The ultimate goal is to produce a well rounded doctor. I am interested in which communication skills will produce a veterinarian with an appropriate level of professional competence. According to Suzanne Kurtz, a professor with a PhD in the Faculties of Education and Medicine, there is a three part conceptual framework presented to explore

the rationale behind teaching and learning communication including the impact of communication on clinician-client interactions and the outcomes of care, the second part considers four ways to conceptualize what to teach and learn...and the last part examines how to teach communication programs including the use of models such as simulated patients, videotapes, small groups and feedback and facilitation skills workshops. (Source 3)

It is important to recognize that each student learns differently, so it is difficult to construct one model for how to learn. Discussing common communication habits and comparing preferences with other students in a veterinary course on communication allows for students to learn at their fullest potential. My research answered the following questions: What are the teaching

methodologies of the UC Davis communication courses? Are the UC Davis communication courses adequate and beneficial? What is considered a communication strength, and what skills would an individual desire to achieve? What are the top three communication skills necessary to succeed in the veterinary profession?

Background Information

As someone who is planning to attend veterinary school in a year, I am familiar with the UC Davis Veterinary School curriculum which offers a “Professional and Clinical Skills” class each semester (Source 5). Therefore, this led me to compare UC Davis to other veterinary schools to see which have classes that emphasize communication. Only a select few offer a class that focuses on professional skills and communication.

Of the top five veterinary schools in the nation, only two provide a communication course, UC Davis with “Professional and Clinical Skills” and Ohio State University with “Professional Development” (Source 9). Cornell University is ranked second after UC Davis but only offers a Fourth Year Clinical Seminar which is geared more towards routine exams in clinical rotations (Source 6). Colorado State University is ranked third and does not have a communication course (Source 7). North Carolina State University comes in fourth, and offers “Intro to Clinical Problem Solving” but this doesn’t make communication the main objective for the class and focuses more on diagnostics and treatment plans (Source 8).

Results and Discussion of Interviews

I first interviewed two veterinary students to hear about what they learned from the communication course and the methodologies used to teach them. Student 1 explained the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which is an introspective self-report questionnaire with the purpose of indicating differential preferences in how people perceive the world around them and

make decisions (Source 4). The class is then broken up into pairs of students alike to discuss how they learn best, how to work with each other, and what they strive to improve on. Student 1 appreciated this activity and felt that discussing personal preferences and experiences avoided conflicts with how they like to be spoken to. Student 2 found the “Wise Coach” acronym to be very useful when speaking with clients. This stands for:

- W**elcome,
- I**nvestigate (history)
- S**ummarize (make sure you have all information correct)
- E**xplore (discover more information with detailed questions)
- C**onvey findings
- O**utline a plan
- A**sk for feedback (make sure they understand and approve of the treatment plan, and answer any questions they might have)
- C**larify expectations, and
- H**ave the client involved in your decision making.

Student 2 considers herself an introvert and uses these steps to communicate with clients without hesitations in conversation. This makes her feel confident and well prepared by following a structural guideline. “Wise Coach” method really helps to avoid missing information for the most descriptive patient exam.

Group activities, worksheets, and video examples are commonly used in the UC Davis “Professional and Clinical Skills” course. Client simulation labs are held every Friday for one hour with scripted role plays, while a faculty veterinarian analyzes and scores the students’ responses. Classmates score their peers as well and provide feedback. The first and second year labs were to analyze and develop student-client interactions, while the third year labs introduced more challenging role plays with angry, difficult, distressed, or pessimistic clients. Student 2 found these labs nerve racking and stressful since peers are watching and she didn’t know what to expect, but she listened to the feedback given and grew from these lab participations. Student

I learned the most from the third year labs, for example how to deal with “run away clients.” This is when a pet’s owner speaks on and on and the student has difficulty collecting the useful information. Veterinarians remind students that they should be control of the room and conversation. Students need to aim for 20 minute exams, so they are taught how to and when to interrupt politely.

During their fourth year of study, students sign a waiver to be filmed unknowingly at any given time so veterinarians can evaluate their progress in a real life, non-scripted exam. Student 1 considers one of her communication strengths to be a “warm listener.” After her random filming evaluation, she realized that she is very warm and welcoming as she enters the room, but quickly jumps to business mode and begins collecting the history. She wants to improve on being more sociable and establishing a rapport with the client, take a second to breathe and meet them. Person to person connection builds trust in the patient care process. Had she not had this activity through the communication course opportunity at UC Davis, she would not have realized she needed to improve on “warm listening.”

For Student 2’s evaluation, she realized that she has trouble managing time in the appointment and is too polite to interrupt the client. It was hard to curve the “runaway” clients. She considers one of her strengths to be very empathetic and personable. She is emotionally invested to the point she sometimes “suffers from feelings” which makes her simultaneously perfect and challenged for this profession. The communication class at UC Davis gave Student 2 adequate practice with time management during appointments and more experience with emotional clients, which better prepared her for real life exams.

When asked the top three skills to succeed as a communicator in the veterinary field, Student 1 answered, 1) Attentive and reflective listening, listening to understand and not just

respond 2) Adapting your communication based on the scenario like having a “big tool belt” and being comfortable to alternate these tools, and 3) Resilience, if something goes poorly do not let it affect conversations with the next clients or the rest of your day so you can do better next time. Dwelling on mistakes isn’t the healthy to improve communication skills. Student 2 answered 1) You need empathy, show that you care and are interested in what they have to say, 2) Ability to explain things clearly and concisely, to translate medical terminology into lay terminology when necessary. Since clients have different levels of understanding with medical language, you do not want to “talk down” to them but also do not want to “out smart them.” Always ask how descriptive they want you to explain the diagnosis and treatment. 3) Time management in conversation with appointments and reporting to veterinarians.

Veterinarian 1 is impressed with how far the students have come from first year to fourth year communication. He recognized how much effort was put into the simulation labs during their third year. He admitted that he did not have a communication class opportunity during his time in veterinary school and how he had to learn on his own with practice. “It is never perfect, so there is always room for improvement. Communication is a quest, and I am still learning each day to be more comfortable collaborating with clients and making hard decisions.” It is always more difficult when it is real life and not just acting. Communication skills develop with practice and patience. Veterinarian 1 considers his strength to be reaching out to and understanding clients so he can meet their expectations. He would like to improve on collaboration with clients to keep them involved in decision making. When asked the top three skills to succeed, Veterinarian 1 answered 1) Listen without judgement, 2) Good choice of words that can’t have alternate meaning to different people, avoid misinterpretation, and 3) Collaboration with the client to make an inclusive therapeutic plan.

Veterinarian 2 is well pleased with the student's ability to communicate after the "Professional and Clinical Skills" courses. They only need to improve on time management in the appointments. She explains her strength to be connecting with clients early on when they first meet so that she is not "coming out of the blue to give bad news." Having some type of relationship basis is helpful, try to be genuine, and the communication process will go much better. She hopes to improve on communicating with emotional clients, because she is easily affected by what is happening with the patient. Empathy does build a foundation with strong heart in the veterinary profession. She listed the top three skills to be 1) Showing empathy and compassion while handling emotional clients since you are not seeing them in their best state, 2) Listen actively and involve the client with your thought process while managing time, and 3) Do not make the conversation too complicated, only say what is necessary while also answering any questions the client has. Similar to Student 2, Veterinarian 2 asks how in depth she should be speaking about the diagnosis and treatment plan. It is important to find that middle ground so they understand completely and can make the best informed decision for their pet.

Conclusion

By interviewing both UC Davis Veterinary students and actual veterinarians, I was able to investigate not only the importance of communication skills in the field of veterinary medicine but also the effectiveness of institutional and individual attempts at providing adequate communication skills for students in Veterinary school. Interviews with students revealed a common concern with individual skills in regards to their abilities to communicate empathetically and efficiently with clients while maintaining control over the conversation. A discrepancy found within this research, however, included a gap between how much students would like to see their communication skills improve and how much veterinarians perceive their

communication skills to have already been improved. This paper illuminates that veterinarians, and students who are studying to become veterinarians, need resources which they can utilize to improve communication skills. Ultimately, I have found that while veterinarians see their students communication skills to be adequate enough, the students themselves recognize where they can still improve for the reality of field work of veterinary medicine. It is also clear that UC Davis's "Professional and Clinical Skills" course is a key factor in enriching the education and training that veterinary students receive and utilize, keeping UC Davis the top ranked program for veterinary schools. I believe that communication classes should be integrated into all veterinary school curriculums. There should be a framework for thinking precisely about how to teach and how to learn communication skills systematically and intentionally.

References

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2. "Communication Skills Vital to Vet Profession." *Vet Med News*, The Regents of the University of California, Davis, www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/whatsnew/article.cfm?id=2738.
3. Kurtz, Suzanne. "Teaching and Learning Communication in Veterinary Medicine." *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*, AVMA Center for Veterinary Education Accreditation, jvme.utpjournals.press/doi/abs/10.3138/jvme.33.1.11.

4. “Myers-Briggs Type Indicator.” *Psychological Testing*, Mental Health Care Gracepoint, 2017, www.gracepointwellness.org/18-psychological-testing/article/8943-psychological-testing-myers-briggs-type-indicator.

Direct URLs to Top 5 Ranked Veterinary School Curriculums in Order

5. UC Davis Veterinary School

http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/dvm/dvm_curriculum/curriculum_glance/curriculum_design/year_1.cfm

6. Cornell University Veterinary School

<http://www.vet.cornell.edu/admissions/curriculum/docs/GraduationRequirements2018updatedsept152014.pdf>

7. Colorado State University Veterinary School <http://csu-cvmb.colostate.edu/documents/dvm-term-schedule.pdf>

8. North Carolina State University Veterinary School

<https://cvm.ncsu.edu/education/dvm/program/>

9. Ohio State University Veterinary School

<https://vet.osu.edu/sites/vet.osu.edu/files/legacy/userimages/u42/Ved%20Med%20Curriculum%20updated%20112015.pdf>