

How to make veterinary visits better for your patients, staff and clients

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Introduction

Pets need vets. Vets need pets. This should make for a match made in heaven. Yet the veterinary visit is often very problematic for the pet, the owner as well as the vet and the veterinary staff. Although not all pets will enjoy a veterinary visit for many reasons, they should not be uncomfortable at the first visit and certainly not become less comfortable or frightened with each subsequent visit. Every effort should be made so that pets are not traumatised at any visit.

Unfortunately, this is not always the case and we as veterinarians need to work towards making every visit as pleasant as possible. This should start at the very first veterinary visit. The developmental period or the life stage of the dog as well as its senses and how it perceives the world will also affect how the pet will perceive each vet visit.

Developmental periods (Life Stages)

Each species goes through the various developmental stages at different times. In dogs and cats there are several recognised developmental periods. These include the prenatal, neonatal, socialisation, adolescent, adult and senior periods. The timing of each period is not rigidly fixed but varies with the breed of the dog as well as the individual dog. Cats also have the same life stages, but the timing of each period is different from that of dogs.

Each period brings with it its own challenges, for the veterinarian and veterinary staff, to manage so being aware of these periods of development is important.

The life stage that veterinarians and vet nurses really need to focus on first is the socialisation period. This is one of the most sensitive stages of development and one that the veterinary practice can help with a lot. This is usually the period that pets are first presented for their first visit, for a wellness check, vaccination and worming. This means that the vet visit should be long enough that the pet can settle and explore the room, the client can relax and ask questions and the vet can build a rapport with the client. Ideally the first consultation should be at least 30 minutes. A shorter period of time really does not allow sufficient time for all of the above to occur. Treats should be given at every opportunity from the moment the pet enters the waiting room until they leave the practice.

Additionally, this is the time to run Puppy Preschool classes and Kitten Kindy Classes. Ideally these are run by the most experienced staff with a veterinarian on hand. These classes are a great way to build the practice and create a strong bond with the pet and the client. The pet can also habituate to the practice and hopefully make a very positive association not only with the physical building but also with all the staff.

Behaviour is something that every client is fascinated by and they expect the veterinary team to be the same. Behavioural medicine is an important part of veterinary practice, just as dentistry, dermatology or surgery is part of veterinary practice. The puppy and kitten classes are not about training so although trainers may be helpful in teaching visual and verbal cues this is only such a small part of running these classes. Co-operative care training should also

be taught at the classes and this is where veterinary staff can work together with qualified positive reinforcement trainers.

Additionally, puppy and kitten classes allow everyone, veterinary staff and clients, to observe the pet's body language and recognise the early signs of fear or stress so that intervention can be recommended early.

If the pet is happy and comfortable coming to the vet when it is young, fit and healthy this will translate into a pet that should be happy visiting the vet at any stage of its life.

All pets regardless of age can benefit from being taught co-operative care. If we can teach non-domesticated species such as bears, lions, tigers, rhino and dolphins to present body parts for blood draws, rumps for injections and open their mouth for tooth brushing, then we should be able to do the same for our pets to make the care veterinarians need to give their patients less stressful.

For pets that are already anxious, either because this is the way they were born or because there was a traumatic event in their life, then veterinarians and their staff should also be there to help. If the pet is already anxious then different strategies may be needed. The first step is always to recognise that fear and anxiety may be normal emotional responses to some situations, for pets and people.

For these animals the preparation that vets take before the vet visit can prove invaluable. Once they are recognised as being anxious the time of the veterinary visit should be timed so that there is not a long waiting time so appointments made at quiet times of day will be important. The veterinary team should have everything organised in advance. Many of these pets will benefit from having anxiolytic medications such as trazodone, clonidine, gabapentin etc, administered at home well before the owner comes to the veterinary hospital. Sedatives are not ideal for these animals whereas anxiolytics can really help. The pet will be calmer and therefore easier to manage. If the pet is very stressed then a general anaesthetic may be necessary in order to facilitate the examination of the pet and minimise any future trauma.

Conclusion

By understanding the behaviour of animals, veterinary visits can be made pleasant experiences for not only the pet but also the people involved. Taking some easy simple steps to prevent pets becoming stressed in the first place can make all the difference. Not only at the time but also well into the future.

References

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