

COMMUNICATION IS A CLINICAL COMPETENCY

Veterinarian-client communication is an element of successful clinical practice.

By Kimberly S. Brown

Communication is a *clinical competency* that veterinarians need," said Colleen Best, DVM, who is doing graduate studies in clinical relationships and expectations in equine medicine in Ontario, Canada. This statement resonated with those in attendance at the AAEP Business Education Meeting held Aug. 4-6, 2013, in Charlotte, North Carolina.

AAEP President Ann Dwyer, DVM, added, "In an AAEP study last year that surveyed over 6,000 horse owners and 900 AAEP members, the largest gap identified was in communication." That means clients want veterinarians to be better communicators, and veterinarians think they already are good at communicating with their clients. Communication and business topics were key components of the Business Meeting, which was held in conjunction with the Focus on Dentistry. Both were sponsored by Merck Animal Health, Zoetis, Capps Manufacturing, Veterinary Dental Products, Equine Specialties and Horse Dental Equipment.

Best said that clients demand more from equine veterinarians today, including better communication and a deeper relationship. That is not only good for clients and patient outcome,



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Dr. Racquel Lindroth, left, and Dr. Colleen Best focused on communications.

it's good for business.

Best said research in human medicine showed that doctor-patient relationship impacted the outcome of medical encounters. With a better relationship, there was an:

- increase in patient compliance
- increase in patient loyalty

- increase in patient satisfaction
- increase in doctor satisfaction
- decrease in malpractice claims

Sometimes in veterinary medicine you can have a bad patient outcome but a good client outcome. Several examples were cited of cases where horses ended up with permanent disabilities or being euthanized, but with the client express-

ing gratitude to the veterinarian for the caring service that was provided.

Best noted that in companion animal research, the client has specific expectations of vet-client communications (which are also true in equine practice), including:

- being provided choices
- two-way communication
- discussions of cost

Further, it was discussed that veterinary satisfaction was influenced by that same vet-client relationship and by communications that were aimed at enhancing the vet-client relationship.

A survey of equine clients in 2007 showed that owners are looking for specific things from their veterinarians. The following are the top-ranked service criteria:

- vet competency
- horse handling
- doctor performance
- communication with clients

According to Best, clients want to be known and understood. They want you to acknowledge the horse's role and the client-horse relationship. They want you to attend to their needs as clients as well as the needs of their horses. And they want you to provide and discuss options, prognosis and cost with them.

Best discussed a number of communication skills that can be used by veterinarians to facilitate better communications with clients. Those include open-ended questions, reflective listening, nonverbal communication, signposting, checking in and summarizing.

Open-ended questions cannot be answered with a "yes" or "no"; they require a more thoughtful response. They

provide an opportunity for the client to fully express him/herself, and allow the clinician to gain the whole story of the client's and patient's problem. Generally these questions start with the words "how," "what" or "why," and use words or phrases such as "tell me" or "explain."

Examples of open-ended questions are:

- Tell me what has been going on with Lucky (the patient).
- What are you concerned about?

Reflective listening is a form of active listening that involves paraphrasing what the client has said, noted Best. It demonstrates that the listener is paying attention and facilitates the client sharing his/her thoughts. It also allows for clarification and indicates comprehension.

"The impact on the vet-client relationship is that it demonstrates interest, sets a tone of valuing the client's input, validates the client and alleviates anxiety," said Best.

Some examples of reflective listening phrases are:

- What I'm hearing you say ...
- If I've understood you correctly ...
- So, it sounds like ...

Best explained that the use of empathy involves the recognition of the client's emotions and the reflection of those feelings back to the client using verbal and/or nonverbal cues. She said empathy involves seeing the problem from the client's perspective, compared to sympathy, which views the problem from an outside perspective.

Best said that a small animal study found that only 7% of veterinarians used empathy statements in client interactions.

She said the impact on the vet-client relationship was that empathy statements demonstrate genuine interest and care for the client's experience, validate the client and build trust.

Some examples of empathy statements are:

- I can imagine this would be difficult for you ...
- I can see that this hasn't been an easy thing to deal with ...
- It sounds like you have really been worried about this ...

Another aspect of vet-client communications that can't be overlooked is **non-verbal communication**. Best said we give and receive non-verbal signals through:

- posture
- proximity
- touch
- body movements
- facial expression
- eye movement
- speed of speech
- vocal tone

Best noted that verbal communication relays a conscious, purposeful message, whereas non-verbal communication relates feelings and emotions.

"We need to be careful when we are distracted and recognize what signals we are giving our clients," Best warned. "Non-verbal cues win over verbal cues in communication, so be careful."

Verbal communication can be used to counteract what the client might take as a dismissive non-verbal cue on the part of the veterinarian. For instance, when the veterinarian wants to watch the horse and continue listening to the

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¹ Fretz PB, Babiuk LA, McLaughlin B. Equine Respiratory Disease on the Western Canadian Racetracks. Can Vet J 1979;20(2):58-61.

² Manley L, Caceres P. Retrospective Cohort Study of an Equine Influenza Outbreak in the Chilean Army in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago, Chile, during 2006, in Proceedings. 12th Symposium of the International Society for Veterinary Epidemiology and Economics, Durban, South Africa 2009:64.

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client, the veterinarians might say, “I’m listening, but I want to keep an eye on what is going on.”

On the other hand, when Best wants the client to recognize her attention is elsewhere, she uses non-verbal cues, too. For example, “I don’t make eye contact when I have a stethoscope in.” This should tell clients she is not listening to them, and needs to listen to the horse.

A **signpost** is a statement that introduces the next phase of the interaction, noted Best. “Think of them as road signs for what is to come,” she explained. “This allows the client to know where the appointment is headed and prepare for what is to come.”

Best says using signposts helps alleviate uncertainty and anxiety in emotional situations.

“I like to use signposting in emergencies or with clients who talk a lot,” said Best. “They can help you keep an appointment on track and keep the client engaged.”

Examples of signposting are:

- Let’s chat about what’s been going on with Simon, then I’ll take a look at him and we’ll go from there.
- I’d like to explain a little about what I think is going on; then we

can discuss what we can do to get you back riding.

Checking in is another communication tool that allows you to actively seek feedback from the client, said Best. “This helps improve compliance and outcome.”

You can use open-ended questions to ensure the client understands what you just discussed.

Some examples of checking in are:

- How does that sound?
- What are your thoughts on what we just spoke about?
- Does that make sense?

The final skill discussed by Best during the session on enhanced client communication was the value of **summary statements**, which:

- give a brief synopsis of what was discussed
- clarify that the information has been relayed
- organize the information in a logical fashion
- allow time to determine what still might need to be done or learned about a problem

If you do this, it will enhance collaboration between you and your clients, noted Best.

She also stressed that there is some veterinarian self-reflection that should go on regarding client communication. Best suggested you ask yourself these questions, and then ask yourself why:

- 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 likely to get the care it needs?
- Is the client satisfied?

Take-Home Message

Best said that vet-client communication is an element of successful clinical practice. “A strong vet-client relationship can improve client loyalty, patient outcomes and job satisfaction.”

Remember: Communication is a clinical competency that veterinarians need.