Client-Centred Communication Skills for Veterinary Nursing Practice

Abstract
This lecture focuses on communication in veterinary practice and gives an interesting and informative discussion of the central concepts of communication and the importance of having good communication skills in practice to ensure high standards of client care and, most importantly, high standards of pet care and welfare.

Learning outcomes
By the end of this programme:
- You will have knowledge of what is meant by client-centred communication and care.
- Understand the importance of recognizing and responding to the special needs generated by human–companion animal relationships within client-centred communication.
- Have awareness of key concepts of communication within veterinary nursing practice.

Course Notes

Definitions of human-companion animal relationships

- A mutually beneficial, dynamic relationship grounded in an emotional attachment between human and non-human animals (Dawson, 2012)

Involves:
- Empathy
- Love
- Perceived non-verbal communication and understanding
- Grief at separation and loss (Dawson, 2002)

Human-Companion Animal Relationships

- Dynamic - changes over time
- Reciprocal - mutuality
- Proximity - emotional; physical
- Duration of ownership
- Time spent together during the day
- Compatibility - similarity or complimentary differences
- Empathy / emotional identification (Dawson, 2012, 2007)
Factors Affecting the Relationship

- Neoteny - infantile characteristics
- Anthropomorphism
  - (deleterious mimicry of animals often appear to mimic humans)
- Psychological representation of the animal to the owner e.g. surrogate child, friend
  (Dawson, 2007, 2012)

Implications for animal welfare

- Projection of human emotions, needs, feelings onto companion animals may have potentially - and - welfare implications
- Anthropomorphism - attributing human characteristics to pets
- Enmeshment - similar to parents being enmeshed with their children
- Personification - perceiving and relating to the companion animal as a distinct, unique individual with its own personality
- The ability to experience empathy towards a companion animal and see it as a separate being to self is pivotal in animal welfare

Welfare implications: examples from practice

- Inability to euthanise even in the face of indisputable suffering (enmeshment)
- Precipitous euthanasia due to an absence of bond / disintegration of the bond
- Animal hoarding - need to construct self as saviour/rescuer
- Pathological responses e.g. retaining animal's body after death
  (Dawson, 2012)

Avoiding a conflict of welfare interests?

- Human ignorance i.e. lack of knowledge causes the majority of animal abuse in the UK
- Animal welfare education is crucial and involves working to challenge and change attitudes, beliefs and behaviours
- Information and advice is central within this process but not enough
- Insight, understanding and an ability to communicate empathy is central in generating and supporting positive change
Relationships and Client-Centred Communication

- **Client-centred communication** involves ensuring the client knows they have been heard and understood.
- It entails recognizing and responding to the emotional needs generated from human-companion animal relationships.
- This requires a basic understanding of the psychology of HCAs.
- It involves being able to enter the client's frame of reference and understand their world from their perspective "as if" it were your own without ever losing that "as if" quality.
- **Empathy** is central within client-centred communication.

Communicating empathy

- Letting the client know that you are seeing and understanding a situation from their perspective; this doesn't mean you agree with this perspective or that their views are yours, only that you appreciate their reality.
- Techniques communicating empathy:
  - Paraphrasing
  - Summarizing
  - Reflecting back

Client-Centred Communication skills in practice

- Pre-acquisition counselling
- Eliciting information in consults
- Checking client understanding
- Delivering diagnosis and prognosis
- Advising on treatment and care
- Giving "bad news"
- Pet bereavement support
- Animal welfare education
- Offering clinics e.g. weight management, golden years
- Diffusing difficult situations
Communication

Verbal communication
- Spoken words, including sign language
- Questions: closed, open, reflective, probing, focussed, leading
- Listening: discriminative, comprehensive, therapeutic, critical and appreciative
- Passive and active listening
- Meta-communication

Non-verbal communication
- Feelings and emotions conveyed in interactions
- Non-verbal cues
- Facial movements and expressions
- Gaze and eye contact
- Body movements and posture
- Proximity
- Personal appearance
- (Kirwan, 2010)

Questions

- Closed questions – yes/no response
- Reflective questions – types of open and closed questions, a form of “softening questions” and communicating understanding; can use client’s own words or paraphrase using your own words
- Probing questions – used to follow up an initial question to gather more details enabling depth exploration; probes can include using body-language and facial expression such as raising eye brows (quizzical: tell me more)
- Focused question – neither open or closed, the purpose is to limit the scope of what is talked about but give more than a yes/no answer (Kirwan, 2010)

Leading questions and listening

- Leading questions – lead to a predictable answer think of the phrase putting words into their mouth!
- Questions can be used in different ways depending on the circumstances
- Open questions encourage opening up and expansion
- Closed questions - are useful in keeping things succinct
- Being listened to involves feeling heard and understood
- Content and emotion
- Poor listening skills are cited as a cause of many medical complaints (Rafter et al., 2002)
- Listening and attending are identified as core facets within therapy (Burnard, 1992)
- Over-talking least helpful
Meta-communication

- Involves more than hearing; it involves being fully present, attending behaviour, time, attention and genuine interest
- Involves para-linguistic elements e.g. tone of voice, pace of speech
- The clinical environment also communicates something to your client
- Communicating care – client comfort rooms
- Unconditional positive regard
- Congruence
- Acceptance and warmth
(Dawson, 2010)

Keeping boundaryed

- Be clear about your role, job description and boundaries
- Establish boundaries with people you are working with and keep to these
- Cultural considerations
- Be certain about instances where confidentiality will need to be broken e.g. suspected animal abuse, suspected child abuse
- Make sure you are familiar with BVNA and BSAVA Ethical Codes for Practice

Points to remember

- Involves having a basic understanding of the psychology of human-companion animal relationships (HCARs)
- Communicating this understanding of the unique relationship between client and companion animal; placing this as central within practice
- Responding to the emotional needs generated by HCARs
- Must integrate active/reflective listening skills within history taking, physical examination and veterinary medical problem solving
- Must be aware of culture and context
- Need to be empathic but keep boundaryed
- Communication extends to colleagues as well as clients!
- Creating a culture of care involves attention to the practice environment
References


References