Client Communication that Promotes Professional Wellbeing

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Stressors Due to COVID-19

- Government restrictions
- COVID-exposures
- Team member illness
- Staff shortages
- Higher caseload
- Life uncertainty

How Communication Has Changed

- Physical distancing
- Face masks / shields
- Curbside conversations
- Phone / video calls
- Disjointed communication

Common Pet Owner Concerns

- Why can’t I get an appointment sooner?
- Why can’t I be with my pet?
- What is happening?
- Who is this new veterinarian?
- Why is this taking so long?

Impacts of the process and decision-making around companion animal euthanasia on veterinary wellbeing

Aisha R Matte, Deep K Khona, Jason B Coo, Michael P Meenan
Voluntary Recall (2019)

- When focus group participants had a positive experience navigating euthanasia decision-making with clients, their wellbeing was improved

Positive Client Experience = Improved Team Member Wellbeing
Use the Five E’s

- Explain
- Empathize
- Expectations
- Engage
- Enlist

Explain

“We will ask you to bring Fluffy to the front door to pass her off to our technician Tracy who will be working with Dr. Smith. Tracy will ask you some questions and once Dr. Smith has the chance to examine Fluffy, he will call you to go over his findings and discuss a plan. You will be welcome to ask any questions that you have during that time. How does that sound?”

Explain

“Because we want to keep our stuff as safe and healthy as possible, we are limiting our contact time with clients. In order to do that, we are asking clients to wait in their cars during the appointment. We promise that the care that you receive will be the same, despite not having a face-to-face appointment.”

Explain

“Now that you’ve told me what’s been going on with Maxy, I’m going to bring her to Dr. Smith for an exam. Once he’s done, I will call you to let you know his findings and ask you more questions. Then the two of you will make a plan together. How does that sound?”

Empathize

1) Listen to understand the client’s feelings
2) Express your understanding to the client through words and actions (nodding)
   - Name the feeling as often as possible
   - Even if you are “wrong”, the client is given the opportunity to correct you
   - Allows the client to feel seen / heard and understood
   - “I wish…” statements can be helpful

Empathize

“I can see that this was not what you were expecting today. We all wish that things would go back to normal, but for now, we are doing our best to adjust to these unprecedented times.”
**Empathize**
- "It seems that you are reluctant to leave Fluffy with us. What can we do so that you feel more comfortable?"
- "I can see that you don’t want to leave Fluffy. I know it’s hard not to be with her during the appointment, but we promise she will get lots of hugs and attention from the team and we will get her back to you as quickly as we can."

**Expectations**
- "Unfortunately, we had two emergencies this morning and our doctor is running behind. Your appointment will likely be delayed at least 30 minutes. Will that be alright?"
- "We don’t want you waiting any longer than you have to. We’ll get Penny in to see the veterinarian as soon as possible."

**Empathize**
- "It’s frustrating when you have to wait, especially when you’re worried about Max."
- "I know it is annoying to have to wait, especially when you had to wait so long for this appointment. If you have somewhere to be, you can leave Max with us, and we can call you once the veterinarian has had the chance to examine her."

**Engage**
- **Explain your role**
  - "I am Jessie, the veterinary assistant, and I’ll be helping Dr. Smith with Missy’s appointment."
  - "I am Dr. Smith, and I’m filling in for Dr. Regular. I am the veterinarian who examined Missy today."
- **Establish rapport**
  - "How are you holding up with everything?"
  - "How did Missy come into your life?"

**Engage**
- **Find a similarity or shared experience**
  - "If see you’re an Orioles fan, so am I."
  - "If used to own a poodle, they’re such great dogs."

**Engage**
- **Find out the client’s agenda**
  - "Tell me what’s been going on with Tucker."
  - "Janet, our receptionist, told me Lucky was attacked by a neighbor’s dog. That must have been scary for you. Tell me what happened."
  - "What brings you and Missy to our clinic today?"
**Engage**

- Open-ended questions
  - "Tell me more about..."
  - "What happened next?"
  - Avoid questions beginning with why
  - "What do you think is going on with Missy?"

- Reflective listening
  - "So, you're thinking Jake might have eaten something unusual that caused his vomiting?"
  - "It sounds like you're unsure about whether to go forward with treatment right now."

**Explain**

"Tracey told me a bit about what's been going on with Missy and I've had the chance to examine her. I'd like to ask you some more questions, share with you what I found, and come up with a plan together. How does that sound?"

**Assess Client Preferences**

- Start at the level of comprehension and vocabulary of the client
- "Are you the kind of person who would rather focus on the big picture or who wants all of the details?"
- Client preferences about the need for information can change with time

**Enlist**

- Negotiate with the client to tailor a diagnostic and treatment plan that best fits the patient's and family's unique situation and beliefs
- "We have some different options as to how we might treat Missy. After I explain these options, I would like to hear from you as to what would work best for you and your family."

**Sharing Bad News and Discussing Euthanasia**

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Begin with Forewarning

- "Unfortunately, I'm concerned that something serious might be going on with Misty..."
- "I've got some bad news about something I found during Misty's exam..."

Slow the Pace

- Provide information in small chunks
- Allow time to absorb the news
- Insert pauses (3 seconds) then check in with client
- "What are your thoughts on what I've said so far?"

Choose Words Wisely

- Use words that are not subject to misinterpretation such as cancer, died, dying

Attend to Feelings

- Lower voice tone to reduce anxiety
- Prepare for range of reactions
- Shock, tears, denial, anger, etc.
- Provide space for clients to react
- Support silence
- Normalize and legitimize strong emotions
- Understand that guilt is common, regardless of circumstances
- Ask the client what they need / how you can help

Empathy

- Shock: "Hearing these results about Misty is clearly a shock for you."
- Sadness: "I wish I had different news to share with you. I can see you're really hurting."
- Doubt: "I'm sure it's hard to imagine how this can possibly be true."
- Anger: "I understand you're angry about this turn of events as this wasn't what you were expecting."

Partnership

- Express message of working together as partners
- "I can see how hard this is and I'd like to do everything I can to help you through this."

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**Goals of Care Conversation**
- “What is your understanding now of your Jake’s illness?”
- “If Jake’s health worsens, what are your most important goals and wishes?”
- “What are your biggest fears and worries about Jake’s future?”
- “If Jake becomes sicker, how much are you willing to do for the possibility of gaining more time?”

**Goals of Care Conversation**
- Wish
  - “I wish I could tell you that Jake will recover enough to go home.”
- Worry
  - “I worry that Jake’s condition is continuing to worsen even though we’re doing all that we can. I worry that he might die despite our best efforts.”
- Wonder
  - “I wonder if this would be a good time to speak to the rest of your family about options for Jake such as euthanasia.”

**Treat Coping With Respect**
- Encourage client to voice needs and wishes **without fear of judgment**
  - “I know talking about this is not easy. I’m glad you feel comfortable enough to discuss your concerns.”
  - “It’s obvious to all of us how much you love Jake and how difficult this decision is for you. Know that we will support you no matter what you decide.”

**Addressing Grief**
- Convey message of **validation**
  - “This was a difficult decision for you, but it was best given the circumstances.”
  - “I would have done the same thing in your situation.”
  - Reminisce about the pet, if appropriate
  - “I am sure you have many memories that you will hold with you forever, like how Jake came into your life.”

**Follow Through**
- Be alert for signs of distress and assess client’s resources for support
  - “Is there someone you can call for support?”
- Be aware of resources within the community where clients can go for emotional support
  - Counseling services
  - Pet loss support groups
  - Social worker
  - Distress line (1-833-456-4566)
- Call the client within 72 hours of euthanasia to check-in
- Send a sympathy card

**Discussing Money**
Belief That Finances = Care & Compassion

Pet Owner Perspective
- “If you only cared enough, you would do the work without profit.”
- “You’re a veterinarian, you’re supposed to love animals.”

Veterinary Team Perspective
- “If they really want to do what’s best for their pet, they should pay for the surgery.”
- “They should not have a pet if they cannot afford to pay for its healthcare.”

Assumptions About Finances and Cost

Pet Owner Perspective
- “I’ve been a client for so long. I shouldn’t have to pay this much.”
- “The last thing I want to do is spend $2000 on my cat when she’s destroying my house. The vet will think I’m a terrible owner.”

Veterinary Team Perspective
- “He can certainly afford to pay for his dog’s care.”
- “The kids are really attached to the cat, I’m sure they’ll go forward with treatment.”

Conversations About Money
- Clarify the client’s expectations re: money
  - “Would you like to discuss what this treatment means financially?”
  - “Are these costs what you expected?”
- Have responses ready if the client is unhappy or cannot afford care
  - “I know veterinary care is costly. I can’t reduce the fees, but we can talk about some options that might be less costly.”
- Check client understanding of how their money and effort will benefit their pet
  - Include a written estimate with a breakdown of costs
- Have clear practice policies re: billing and options for owners with limited finances

Be Aware of Your Client’s Cues

“You’re being so quiet over there. Tell me what’s on your mind.”

“You mentioned some financial concerns. The treatment we’ve discussed is going to be very costly. Should we talk some more about that before we make any decisions?”

Acknowledge Financial Concerns With Compassion
- Ensure clients know they can mention any issue that is troubling them
  - “It’s important to let me know what you are thinking...”
- Let them know they can talk honestly and openly about financial issues and that they will not be judged
  - “It can be uncomfortable when balancing the care you want with the amount of money you have to spend. These decisions are hard for everyone.”
- Use the client’s words whenever possible
  - “I understand you’re feeling financially well off and want to spend your money carefully.”

Depersonalize

Step out of the situation and consider the client’s perspective
- Clients can feel guilty, sad, embarrassed, or out of control by their inability to pay
- They might direct these feelings at you, but they are not about you
- Client expectations might be unrealistic
- Clients might try to shift these emotional burdens to you
**Acknowledge Reactions with Empathy**

That's so expensive. 

You're right. Veterinary care is costly. Some of us are so used to having healthy animals that we forget how much it adds up when they get sick.

I can't afford this! 

I know that it can be hard to fit unexpected expenses into our budgets. Especially when we're forced to balance our finances against our pet's health.

**Responses for Unhappy Clients**

* Express desire to help solve the problem together
* Clarify boundaries as necessary
  * I'm happy to talk about options to reduce expenses for Molly's care. Our fees have been set with a lot of thought and we feel they are reasonable.
  * Redirect if needed
  * I know you'd like it if this treatment were less expensive. It might be helpful to talk about some less expensive options for Molly's care.

**Options for Financial Support**

* Referral for less expensive services
* Pet insurance
* Credit plan
  * Have information ready
* Rescue groups
* Family member(s) or friend(s)
* Client donations / hospital fundraising
* Community or other support services

**Angry Clients**

Move the client to a quiet and private space (if in the hospital) and stand closest to the door

Gather yourself and your thoughts
  * Take deep breaths, take a pause
  * Avoid HATE (Hungry, angry, late, tired)
  * Commit to staying present until the issue is resolved
  * Focus on the process of understanding the client's concerns (rather than achieving a particular outcome)

Responding to Angry Clients
Body Posture and Tone of Voice

- Assert calm control
- Speak slowly and softly, but remain firm
- Square your posture
- Encourage eye contact
- Be direct ("we're here to help you")

Acknowledge the Client’s Experience

- Validate and normalize the client's feelings
  - “I can understand how you would feel that way.”
- Identify the problem
  - “What are you most worried about or frustrated with in this moment?”
- Open-ended offer to help
  - “Tell me one thing I can do right now to help you.”
- Provide hope without minimizing the problem
  - “Spencer's condition is very serious, but we are doing everything we can to help him.”

De-escalate and Explore Solutions

- Focus on concrete issues (not feelings)
- Use simple language
- Admit that sometimes none of our choices are ideal
- Summarize:
  - What you know
  - What is happening now
  - What happens next
- Negotiate a mutually agreeable resolution to the problem
- Review what the client’s role is and what the expectations are

- I know you're frustrated with not being able to come into the clinic for Sadie's appointment. Our goal is to keep everyone as safe and healthy as possible and to avoid unnecessary exposure. We promise to keep you updated and to make sure Sadie is comfortable while you are not there.

- I want to help you with Sadie. For me to do that efficiently, I'm going to need you to wait outside so that I can speak to you right after I examine her. In the meantime, please be patient with us and know that we are all doing the best we can.

Set Rules and Boundaries

- Boundaries tell the world implicitly and explicitly how you expect to be treated
- State your needs first-person whenever possible
- Rather than saying:
  - “You're being rude...”
  - “You need to calm down...”
- Say:
  - “I need you to lower your voice...”
  - “I need you to stop talking and listen to me first...”

- Mrs. Jones, I'm not comfortable climbing into your vehicle to get Sadie given that she must be feeling scared right now and I could get bitten. I can lend you a carrier to use, but you'll need to put her inside of it.

- Mr. Smith, if we're going to proceed with your appointment, I'll need you to follow hospital protocol. Right now, that includes wearing a mask and physically distancing.
“Mrs. Jones, it’s hard for me to help you when you raise your voice and use profanity. I’m going to step out for a moment. When I come back, if it happens again, I will need to ask you to leave.”

“Mrs. Smith, we really want to take care of Fluffy, but in order to do so we need you to abide by hospital protocols. If you are unable to do that, we will have to ask you to seek veterinary services elsewhere.”

Don’t forget your needs!

- Recognize your triggers and stressors
- Focus on what went well within a negative situation
- Discharge the negative energy
  - Breathing, exercise, yoga, “dance party”, YouTube video
  - Limit your worry/ruminating time
- Clear brain to “let it go”
- Stay focused on the present moment
- Practice self-compassion
- Make time for self-care

Thank you!

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