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CAT FRIENDLY CLINIC – AN IMPORTANT WAY TO REDUCE STRESS, AND PRACTICAL TIPS TO IMPROVE YOUR CLINIC

Cats have never had a more important role in clinical practice. Data from many countries demonstrate that there has been a relatively more marked growth in cat ownership (compared with dogs), and in many countries the number of pet cats has surpassed the number of dogs.

However, despite the growth in ownership of cats, sadly they receive much less veterinary attention than dogs. Major reasons for this appear to be associated with the difficulties and stress associated with the whole veterinary visit (see below '*Why do you need to approach cats and cat clients differently?*'). The mantra that 'cats are not small dogs' is often quoted, but its importance is sometimes neglected. That cats generally experience considerable stress during a veterinary visit is not surprising when you consider that (in contrast to dogs) they are not a naturally social species and are also highly territorial. The latter means that they will feel both threatened and vulnerable when removed from their home environment.

Why vets need to 'think cat'

Just as people (owners) are sometimes described as 'dog' people or 'cat' people based on their natural inclinations and likes, so too some veterinarians are either 'dog vets' or 'cat vets', although others are equally comfortable managing either species.

The differences are probably much more obvious to cat owners than to dog owners. Most dogs take a visit to the vet in their stride - they may not necessarily enjoy a clinical examination by the veterinarian, but will be quite happy (especially in the presence of their owner) to meet other people and to be in close proximity with other dogs.

The same is certainly not true for cats. Simply understanding that cats are very territorial animals with complex social structures and interactions will immediately lead to the recognition that placing a cat in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar odours, and

worse, unfamiliar odours from other cats, will lead to a huge amount of stress. There are various ways of mitigating against this, but a veterinarian who is empathetic towards the cat (and its owner) and who is able to demonstrate that empathy is far more likely to elicit a positive response from the cat and far more likely to make an impression with the owner. Such empathy from the vet is undoubtedly one of the reasons for the success of feline-only veterinary clinics in many countries. Many cat owners are able to perceive and understand that the veterinary visit is less stressful and more productive when they meet with a cat-orientated veterinarian and in an environment that is designed to meet the needs of cats (and one which is not shared by dogs). Canine-only veterinary practices are virtually non-existent, but the number and success of feline-only practices does illustrate well the special needs of cats.

Communicating with the cat owner

In developing a successful cat-orientated veterinary clinic, it is vital that veterinarians and the whole healthcare team are able to communicate effectively with cat owners. A significant part of this again relates to developing and adopting cat-friendly attitudes within the clinic, altering some of the physical aspects of the clinic to make it more cat friendly, and very importantly having staff that are truly empathetic towards cats. For example, tremendous harm can be done to the relationship between the veterinarian and the owner and the veterinarian and the cat if the first direct encounter is the vet reaching into the cat carrier and scruffing the cat to drag it out and put it on the examination table. That is guaranteed to leave a lasting impression in most cat owners' minds, but not one that will encourage them to return to the clinic.

In contrast, what impression would be left by a veterinarian who:

- asks the owner to open the cat basket on the floor,
- lets the cat come out of the basket in its own time,
- talks gently and encouragingly to the cat
- who sits down on the floor and lets the cat approach him or her
- who maybe even conducts a clinical examination on the floor with the cat?

There is a need to develop a different mindset when dealing with cats.

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If an owner initially perceives the healthcare team at the veterinary clinic to be cat friendly and empathetic, then the whole veterinary visit is far more likely to be successful.

Interestingly, studies in human medicine have shown exactly the same thing - that empathy between patient and doctor is *vital* for effective communication. A lack of empathy, and using technical terms that are not understood by patients and two prime factors resulting in poor communication and poor ability of clients to subsequently remember what was said to them. Although nowhere near as well studied in veterinary medicine, a breakdown in client communication was also reported to be responsible for most negative client experiences in one study.

Human studies have also shown that if the doctor and patient come to an agreement together about what the problems are and how to approach treatment (i.e. involvement of the client in a two-way conversation, and listening to the clients concerns and perspective), this ultimately leads to significantly better compliance and outcomes.

Handling cats

When a cat is brought into the veterinary surgery, especially if it is to be hospitalised, it will be exposed to many stressors.

- Strange cat basket
- Car journey
- Strange smells, sights and noises of the practice
- New people
- Other animals
- Handling
- Procedures
- Hospitalisation

Style of approach for handling is crucial. Cats are generally more sensitive to unfamiliar people and situations than most dogs and, because of the subtlety of their communication systems, more readily misunderstood. Handling cats well for even simple techniques is an important aspect of the cat friendly practice. Some nurses enjoy handling cats and are much better at it than others so these nurses should be

encouraged to work with other practice members to train in technique and confident handling.

General handling tips:

- Adopting a 'less is more' approach to restraint will help to prevent the cat resorting to aggression. Cats generally respond well to minimal restraint.
- Pay attention to owners' warnings that a cat is likely to bite or scratch and don't rely on owners to hold cats safely!
- Scruffing should not be used routinely and certainly not for lifting. Grabbing and immediately scruffing can be intimidating and leaves the animal no room for manoeuvre except for defensive aggression.
- Always approach a cat in a calm and soothing manner. Don't look the cat in the eye on first contact – look past it. Stroking and talking to the cat before lifting it from a cage or basket is ideal if the cat allows this.
- It is easier to use a top loading basket as the cat can be more easily lifted out.
- Rub your hands over the cat's own pheromone centres (above the bridge of the nose and the preauricular area). The cat will often then put its head in your hands – very impressive for clients!
- After removing the cat from the basket, let it settle, stroke it while having a chat or let it wander around for a few minutes.
- Avoid ringing sounds and sharp shoe noises.
- Avoid very bright lights initially while the cat settles.
- Talk to the cat calmly, slowly and with a relatively quiet tone, moving slowly and quietly and without making sudden movements. Some people find getting down on the floor with the cat can help it to relax and make handling easier.
- Perform some of the physical examination with the cat looking away from you.
- Start with the least invasive procedures first, ending with those most likely to upset the cat, such as taking the rectal temperature (and remember to use lubrication to aid insertion).
- Have items such as thick towels to hand for calm use if required.
- Being moved around on a slippery surface can be quite stressful. A towel or rubber mat which gives the cat something to grip can help.

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- Be willing to use chemical restraint to avoid/decrease stress which may be caused by using physical restraint on the patient.
- Use cotton overalls - synthetic material can lead to electrostatic effects.
- Cats often resist having their mouths opened wide and it can be easy to miss things.

Interacting with cats

Many cats respond well to human interaction. Making time for staff to play, stroke (gently, especially with the head area) and groom the patient will significantly reduce stress in many hospitalised cats. However, some cats prefer to be left alone, and these individuals need to be recognised and left in peace.

The difference between relaxation and aggression using eye contact can be very subtle! A fleeting glance with relaxed facial muscles is acceptable, whereas tense facial muscles with a prolonged stare from other cats or humans can be very intimidating or threatening. Avoid sustained eye contact by looking over the cat's head or at its chest - this can be less intimidating. A relaxed stare with slow blinking will indicate a lack of threat.

Be aware of the sounds that you use when talking to cats, for example a 'Shhh' sounds like a hiss to a cat and should be avoided. Chirruping sounds are used by cats as a friendly greeting, and mimicking these sounds when approaching a cat can help the cat to perceive you as less of a threat. A soft calm voice will be reassuring.

The waiting room/area

A cat's initial experience on entering the veterinary practice is very important as this is the time that the cat is attempting to assess the safety of this new environment. The aim of the reception area is to create a calm and unthreatening environment for the cat to wait in so that it is not stressed or frightened by the time it reaches the consultation room. Many practices are making efforts to create separate cat waiting areas, which is a great step forward. However careful thought needs to go into the location and size of this area, as well as the route that cats are taken into and out of it. Each individual practice will have a different solution to these problems depending on the size, layout and location of the practice. The key to creating a truly feline friendly waiting area is to

consider the needs of cats, what you are trying to achieve with your cat waiting area, and then carefully plan the best way of achieving it. If the layout of the practice does not make creation of a separate area an effective way of achieving these aims, there may be other solutions.

Some things to consider:

- Some small clinics with a high feline caseload may find that they rarely have cats and dogs in the waiting room at the same time and that it isn't necessary to create a separate area. It may otherwise be possible to set up times when only cat clients can attend.
- Some clinics have enough space to allow cat owners to take their cats directly into a consulting room without having to sit in the waiting room at all.
- Other clinics have a large car park or courtyard directly outside and find it more practical to ask dog owners to wait outside. Alternatively, clients may prefer to wait in their cars with their cats, and for the receptionist to call them on their mobile phones when the vet is ready to see them.
- There may be little value in having a feline-only area if cats have to pass through a noisy area to get to it and then back past all the waiting dogs to get to the consulting rooms. Some clinics are able to create a separate doorway into the consulting room so that cats can be taken directly from the cat waiting area into the consulting room without having to risk an encounter with a dog. An area right next to a busy reception, or directly opposite barking dogs, can defeat the whole object of having a cat-only area.
- Avoid locating the reception desk in a narrow area as this is asking for meetings between dogs and cats – a large space in front of the reception desk is important.
- In a large practice, a small cat waiting area can force cats to be close to each other at busy times. Direct visual contact with other cats can also be very threatening and stressful for a cat.
- If possible, prevent noises from consultation rooms reaching the waiting area.
- A dedicated cat-only part of the waiting area, preferably located where there is least human and animal traffic, can be created by erecting small partitions to separate the area. Softer lighting can be used.

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- Provide a raised ledge next to the reception area where clients can place cat baskets. Alternatively, provide an area of cages or compartments within the waiting area, which carriers can be placed into while owners are waiting to be seen, when they are paying or collecting medication.
- Clients can be encouraged to bring blankets or towels from home with a familiar smell to cover the cat's cage. This can be useful for particularly nervous cats, especially if they are forced to wait near another cat (or dog).
- Provide raised shelves or stools for clients to place cat carriers on (by the reception desk as well as in the waiting area) as cats feel insecure if they are placed at floor level. If the cats share the area with dogs, it is important that the perches are inaccessible to dogs, ideally about 1.2 m (4ft) off the ground so that the animals do not come face to face.
- Ensure the shelves are of appropriate depth so baskets do not fall off easily.
- Display notices asking clients with dogs to keep them away from cat carriers.
- Display evidence of feline-related continuing education which staff members have undertaken or membership of cat organisations.
- Put up displays of cat breeds and photographs of clients' cats etc.
- Provide a range of cat products selected for quality if space is available. Make sure that they are cat friendly and safe (eg only sell collars with safety snap release catches), suitable baskets, safe toys etc.

The consulting room

The aim of the cat-friendly consulting room is to provide a safe, non-threatening area where cats can be examined calmly and effectively.

Things that can help:

- Use Feliway® (Ceva) to impart a general relaxing mood and less threat when handling. Ensure any alarm scents left by preceding patients are removed by cleaning the consult table well and ensuring the room is well ventilated.
- Avoid loud or sudden noises and bright lights.
- Avoid stainless steel examining surfaces – they are cold, noisy, reflective and slippery. A rubber mat can help overcome some of these problems.
- Heated table tops can make sitting on the table less of an ordeal for the cat.

- Breakable or harmful items are best kept in cupboards – an agitated cat on the loose can cause damage or be injured.

Hospitalised cats

The aim of the cat-friendly ward is to keep the cat in a safe, clean, quiet environment conducive to recovery, where it can be handled with minimum stress to cat or staff. Completely separate locations for canine and feline patients are ideal. Where dogs and cats do have to be housed together using DAP® (Dog Appeasing Pheromone; Ceva) to reduce canine reactivity can have a secondary beneficial effect on feline residents. If feasible, organise a timetable that allows for different species to be admitted for routine operations and investigations at different times.

The cat cage design, positioning and materials should be considered as this can make all the difference to how warm cats are kept, how well they relax and therefore when they want to eat, and how quickly they recover. Good nursing is also known to be very important for feline morale!

Design of the cat ward:

- Cat-only – being enclosed above barking dogs is not conducive to relaxation!
- The location should be easily accessible and not require the cat to be taken through busy noisy areas to get there. However, it needs to be near enough to other areas to ensure that the cats are frequently observed, and not forgotten about.
- The ward needs to be centrally heated to provide an ambient temperature of between 22 – 24°C and a relative humidity of 35 per cent. In the summer months, if the ambient temperature rises significantly above this, air conditioning can be considered. Adequate ventilation is also important, either via extractor fans, or safely covered windows.
- The layout of the cages should prevent any visual contact between patients, i.e. cages should not be placed opposite each other for reasons of infection control and to cut down on any inter-cat stress.
- The size of the cage is also very important. A smaller cage may be acceptable for day-patients, but at the very least there should be adequate space for a litter tray, bedding and food/water bowls. Day patients admitted for minor procedures such as neutering

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or dental work need adequate space for them to be fully stretched out with their neck extended to allow a safe recovery from anaesthesia.

- The cage design should have a wide front but not be too deep, to aid accessibility. Suggested minimum sizes for day patient: 60cm Height x 60cm Width x 75cm Depth, overnight patient: 60cm Height x 70-80cm Width x 75cm Depth, longer stay patient: 70cm Height x 100cm Width x 75cm Depth (or larger).
- Get the height right for lifting in and out smoothly and for cleaning (about 90 -100 cm above floor level) so the cat is fully visible and can be retrieved easily from the cage. If two rows of cages are provided, the lower level should be raised off the ground by at least 20 cm. Cats prefer to be high up and not at floor level, and preferably not with a barking dog in the pen beneath.
- The ward room, regardless of the number of cages within it, needs to be wide enough to get cats in and out of the cages without them having to be held directly in front of another patient. If the ward isn't next to a procedures room, there may need to be space for a table where cats can be examined without having to be directly in front of the other hospitalised patients.
- There needs to be space for personnel to work and observe the cats without having to be right close up to the cage of a nervous cat.
- If possible, the ward should be large enough to contain a set of scales suitable for weighing animals up to 10 kg. This enables daily monitoring of in-patients without having to remove them from the ward.
- Hospitalised patients should be observed quietly and unobtrusively. If the room is very small with opaque walls, it is unlikely that the cats will be monitored closely. One solution to this is to have a glass wall to allow observation of the patients from a distance without having to actually be in the ward.
- It can be useful, if space allows, to have the facility of a mobile cage to give flexibility in finding a quiet place or to let a cat out in a quiet room.
- Materials in the ward need to be hard wearing and non-porous since cages need to be disinfected on an almost daily basis, especially between patients. Stainless steel is commonly used, but is quite cold to touch and may even conduct heat away from the cat. Stainless steel is also quite dark and noisy, and some cats can be frightened by reflections in the shiny surfaces. Laminate surfaces are warmer and just as easy

to disinfect. White fibreglass cages give better visibility and are quieter and warmer; those with a glossy finish are just as easy to clean.

- The front of the cage must also be easy to clean, allow good observation and prevent escape or injury. A toughened glass door allows very good visibility of the patient, reduces risk of spread of airborne infection and reduces the chances of the patient putting paws through the bars and opening the door or causing injury to itself. Consider the size of the front mesh – small kittens can get their heads stuck if the holes are too large.
- Rubber stoppers can be used on metal cage doors to reduce sharp metal banging noises when the doors are closed.

The ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic standard

The International Society of Feline Medicine (ISFM – the veterinary division of the charity International Cat Care – www.icatcare.org) has launched the new ISFM Cat Friendly Clinic (CFC) standard. This has been launched and made available across the world, and this programme is being provided in partnership with Ceva, Elanco, Royal Canin, Idexx, Boehringer Ingelheim and Zoetis.

The overall aim of the new standard is to help improve quality of care and wellbeing for cats in the veterinary clinic, to minimise difficulties and stress associated with the veterinary visit, and for clinics to be able to clearly demonstrate to clients that they think and care for cats differently.

We are providing a wealth of information at no cost to help clinics understand:

- Cats, their nature, and their behaviour in the clinic
- How the clinic can be developed to reduce stress for cats,
- What changes need to be made to meet the ISFM CFC criteria
- How to apply for accreditation under the scheme.

Accredited clinics receive a CFC window sticker and a Certificate of accreditation. Clinics are also listed on veterinary and client-facing CFCF web site. To find out more and to start the accreditation process, simply visit: www.catfriendlyclinic.org