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MAKING EVERY CONTACT COUNT: HOW CAN WE BUILD RAPPORT AND TRUST WITH CLIENTS IN EVERY CONSULTATION

There is a developing research literature which highlights the complexity of client behaviour towards their pets – large and small – which is influenced by very complex social, cultural and psychological factors. These factors often involve the anthropomorphism of pets resulting in behaviour which may adversely affect animal health, for example, nurturing behaviour which leads to over-feeding and obesity. Given the complexity of human behaviour in caring for animals there is a growing research interest in better understanding interactions between practitioners and clients. This understanding is leading to interventions to develop communication skills which build rapport and trust with clients in every consultation.

For over 10 years, the Roter Interaction Analysis System (RIAS), a quantitative analytic methodology has been adopted in research studies to identify different communication styles within veterinary practice. RIAS codes phrases and sentences into two main categories: socio-emotional/affective and instrumental or task-focused communication. Analysing vet-client talk in consultations using RIAS has enabled researchers to identify which types of communication are associated with higher rates of adherence to vet recommendations. For example, one study involved coding veterinary-client communication styles during individual consultations involving 19 veterinarians and 83 clients and correlated these with adherence to dentistry and surgery recommendations ⁽¹⁾. Adherence to dentistry and surgery recommendations was found to be significantly higher in consultations which involved more client-centred dialogue where there were more opportunities for client questions, including those concerning lifestyle and social topics. Additionally, vet communication involving partnership and rapport building led to higher levels of client satisfaction.

Conversation analysis (CA) is another approach adopted in research which has been used to identify the micro-features of practitioner-client interaction. A CA approach focusses on different features in talk such as phrases, pauses, hesitations, volume

and pace. The analysis identifies patterns in communication across many interactions in similar contexts to identify how participants use talk to 'do action' within specific institutions or settings. Applying a CA approach has enabled researchers to identify regular and patterned behaviour within healthcare contexts. For example, in one study in a human healthcare context, researchers were able to demonstrate that replacing the word 'any' with 'some' when asking if there were other concerns patients had significantly increased the number of 'pre-visit' concerns presented by the patient ⁽²⁾. This is believed to be because the word 'any' is heard as a 'no' preferred response, which has been demonstrated in CA through the 'next turn proof procedure' across hundreds of practitioner-patient consultations. Interestingly, this research directly contradicts many professional communication skills training interventions which encourage practitioners to use the word 'any' to form open-ended questions. CA studies have also been conducted in veterinary healthcare contexts to reveal how veterinarians manage complex interactions. For example, in one CA study vets were shown to use 'doggerel' or 'secondary baby talk' towards pets to manage more difficult client interaction and establish the vet's concern for the animal thereby building rapport with owners ⁽³⁾.

There are clearly opportunities to apply the findings from communications research to 'make every contact count' in supporting clients to make healthier lifestyle choices. Extensive research is now being undertaken in human health and social care settings, which involves practitioners and support staff training in the use of communication skills which support motivational changes in clients and the adoption of healthier behaviours. One study evaluated the efficacy of a 'Healthy Conversation Skills' training programme which involved health and social care practitioners, as well as administrative workers, in developing communication skills which avoided 'advice-giving' and 'instruction', by focussing more on 'client-centred' approaches. The training resulted in practitioners and administrative staff adopting open-ended and reflective questioning techniques to build trust and rapport with clients to support them in exploring options and motivation for change, as well as reflecting on planning for that change ⁽⁴⁾. These findings were also replicated in paediatric clinical settings in programmes to prevent and manage childhood obesity ⁽⁵⁾. Research suggests that this type of client-centred intervention, on a regular basis, can produce small, but important changes in client lifestyle behaviours ⁽⁶⁾.

In this presentation, we will explore these studies in more detail and discuss the way in which they are being used to inform research being conducted by Jenny Lyden at the University of Surrey with farrier practitioners in 'making every contact count' to support horse owners to change their husbandry practices to prevent or reduce equine obesity. The presentation will include very practical approaches for integrating some of the latest communications skills research to support a wide range of practitioners and support staff in 'making every contact count'. The session is suitable for all veterinary staff, including veterinarians, veterinary technicians and support staff.

References

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