

Vet Communication Style Depends on Visit

Study shows differing professional manners, based on nature of the appointment.

Posted: June 10, 2009, 3 a.m. EDT

Veterinarians tend to focus on building a client relationship during wellness visits, an Argus Institute study found. Veterinarians communicate with clients differently in problem appointments — those in which veterinarians are discussing pet health threats — versus wellness appointments, according to a new study by the Argus Institute at Colorado State University.

In wellness visits, veterinarians tend to focus on building a relationship with their client, the study revealed. This includes engaging the client as an active partner in caring for the health of their pet, so the pet owner participates in the visit and has an opportunity to voice his or her opinion.

The study showed that veterinarians also communicate with a different tone, including more social talk, laughter, reassurance and compliments.

In problem appointments, however, veterinarians focus predominantly on medical topics. The tone reflects stress as some veterinarians are perceived as hurried and some clients as anxious and emotionally distressed, according to the study.

When a paternal communication style is used during problem appointments, there is a potential for negative consequences that could affect pets, clients and veterinarians, the institute reported.

“We know that paternalism is not an effective approach for gaining results,” said Jane Shaw, DVM, Ph.D., director of the Argus Institute. “Without engaging the client in a conversation about their pet and obtaining their opinion, they aren’t as likely to follow through on home care. They also are not as likely to build a strong relationship — and subsequent loyalty — to their veterinarian.

A strong relationship with a client improves a veterinarian’s ability to gather accurate and complete information and diagnose the problem, according to the institute. Adherence to at-home care recommendations are also improved when veterinarians encourage the client to participate, negotiate and share in the decisions.

To help clients open up during appointments, Dr. Shaw recommends that veterinarians ask open-ended questions. These may include: What questions do you have? What options have you considered? What will be the most difficult for you?

Shaw also encourages veterinarians to explore their client’s life in a broader context during problem appointments. This may help them gain a better understanding of the pet’s illness, she said.