Communicating with the Client: Enhancing Compliance

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Limited information can be found in the veterinary literature on veterinarian-client-patient communication, and what is available is based predominantly on expert opinion and anecdotal information, not peer-reviewed scientific studies. In contrast, the human medical communication literature contains a large number of empirical studies, and as a result, evidence-based recommendations inform physicians with respect to physician-patient interactions. Thus, it is the human medical communication literature that provides best practices in teaching communication skills.

For 30 years, medical researchers have been studying physician-patient interactions and a wealth of information has been gathered on physician-patient communication and its relationship to important medical outcomes. Effective communication can significantly improve medical outcomes, including patient health and satisfaction, adherence to medical recommendations, and physician satisfaction. Although such outcomes studies have not been conducted in veterinary medicine, it is hypothesized that similar clinical outcomes will be achieved through use of effective communication in the veterinary profession. Specifically, the focus of this article is on communication techniques to enhance adherence to recommendations.

Medical recommendations range from prescribing medications, to requesting follow-up appointments, to suggesting lifestyle changes. In human medicine, it is estimated that the rate of patient noncompliance with treatment plans ranges from 30% to 60%. Most researchers agree that only 50% of patients are taking their medications as prescribed. A review identified four dimensions of physician-patient communication that are associated with patient compliance: patient education, negotiation, an active role for the patient in the interaction, and physician expression of empathy and encouragement.
rate study found that patients were more likely to be compliant when their physician offered more information, used more positive talk and less negative talk, and asked fewer questions overall. Question-asking was inversely related to information-giving in that the more time physicians spent asking questions, the less time they spent providing information. A study of the patient’s perception of the emotional versus informational components of care on the patient’s compliance decisions found that the informational component was more influential. Finally, a study of patients who had been prescribed a new antidepressant medication found that when the physician used a collaborative communication style the patient’s knowledge and initial beliefs about the medication, satisfaction with the medication, and use of the medication were more positive. Little research specifically investigating compliance has been performed in veterinary medicine. Studies involving owner compliance in veterinary medicine have investigated short-term use of antimicrobials and suggested that compliance is a problem. An important determinant for adherence was that animal owners felt that the veterinarians spent enough time during the consultation. Other factors that can improve client compliance include establishing two-way communication and trusting relationships, a compassionate health care team, collaborative planning of the treatment regimen, provision of specific verbal and written instructions about medications, and timely encouragement. The American Animal Hospital Association compliance study investigated compliance with six basic health care recommendations: heartworm testing, heartworm preventative, dental prophylaxis, therapeutic diets, preanesthetic screening, and core vaccines. Noncompliance ranged from 17% to 82% and one of the primary reasons for noncompliance was lack of a recommendation due to inadequate communication.

**OBJECTIVES**

1. Describe a relationship-centered approach to the veterinary visit with shared decision-making a key component.

2. Use the conviction/confidence model to assess the client’s willingness to accept recommendations.

3. Apply effective communication techniques to enhance adherence to recommendations by
   - Establishing rapport and trust with the client
   - Developing a collaborative partnership with the client
   - Using open-ended inquiry to obtain the client’s story
   - Negotiating a mutually agreed upon agenda
   - Checking that the client understands
   - Checking that the client is willing to follow through on the plan

**RELEVANCE**

The trust and rapport that results from a healthy veterinarian-client-patient relationship has the potential to motivate clients to make appointments, show up on time, consent to treatment, follow recommendations, pay bills on time, and refer other clients. The end result is personal and professional success resulting from healthy long-term veterinarian-client-patient relationships.

**REFERENCES**

5. Buller DB, Street RL. The role of perceived effect and information in


