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Next WSAVA Congress:

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Introduction

The first presentation in this series reviewed the impact of patients’ stress on the animals themselves and on the veterinary business. The second presentation outlined some simple, evidence-based approaches to patient care that may not be well known, but that can help to reduce patients’ fear and anxiety while at the clinic or at home. The present talk reviews some behavioural signs of stress, commonly encountered in veterinary practice, in cats, dogs and rodents. Video footage includes the different manifestations of stress in caged cats, and conflict behaviours in dogs.

Veterinary medicine has traditionally concerned itself with animals’ physical fitness, and veterinarians are justifiably proud of their work in this regard. However, for most owners, their animals’ feelings are also of great concern, not least when the animals are hospitalised. Meanwhile, in the busyness of the clinical day, it is understandably all too easy to overlook patients’ feelings during the handling and procedures involved in delivering a high standard of veterinary healthcare. For example, it has traditionally been quite common to regard patients with cautious resignation (e.g. patients whose records are marked ‘Nasty’, ‘Beware’ or ‘Bites’), with ignorance (e.g. telling owners whose dogs struggle wildly when restrained that the dogs are acting like naughty toddlers and need to know who’s in charge) or with misplaced moral judgement, as when a terrified animal remains completely still while undergoing a procedure such as venipuncture, and the owner is told how ‘good’ the animal has been. Meanwhile, recent research indicates that some dogs and cats experience extreme stress through being separated from their owners and kept in a cage (Dybdall et al., 2007; Välänen et al., 2005). That is, the animals undergo physiological changes such as increased heart rate and cortisol release that are associated with negative feelings such as anxiety or fear (Gregory 2004, pp 12-17), which may make them very difficult to handle. While short-term stress is not necessarily harmful physically, it creates a powerful learning experience for animals such that future visits to the clinic may be just as, or ever more, distressing. Moreover, the animals’ resultant behaviours can put them and the surrounding personnel at risk.

Signs of stress

If our collective professional assumption is that we are the experts in animal welfare, it follows that we must pay as much attention to the mental wellbeing of our patients as we do to their physical wellbeing, especially when they are in our clinic. What are the signs of stress in our patients?

Cats

Cats that are stressed by caging typically manifest this in one of three ways: by hiding in the litter tray or under the bedding (fear), by restlessness and vocalisation (frustration), or by immobility and self-neglect (depression) (BCSPCA 2004). The degree of stress can be quantified by use of the Kessler Turner Cat Stress Score (Kessler and Turner 1997) with which the observer rates each of 11 different aspects of posture, activity and vocalisation, on a scale of 1 (fully relaxed) to 7 (terrorised).

Dogs

Stress behaviours in dogs at the veterinary clinic or hospital may include any of: panting, yawning, licking the lips, auto-grooming, paw-lifting, being at the front of the kennel, restlessness, vocalisation (whining, howling, barking), a lowered body posture, and aggression (Beerda et al., 1998; Rooney et al., 2007). Conflict behaviours arise when the animal is undergoing two equally high but conflicting motivational states, or when the environment frustrates the performance of a highly motivated behaviour (Luescher 2000). An instance of conflict behaviour seen in the veterinary clinic is found in the friendly dog that is also fearful i.e. the dog has a conflict between the motivation to approach clinic personnel and the motivation to avoid them. This may result, at the least, in the animal being in a high state of arousal and thus more likely to behave aggressively, or to struggle. The fact that the animal is usually restrained or confined in the veterinary environment, which is unpredictable and uncontrollable from the patient’s point of view, exacerbates their inner conflict. In some individuals, being in ongoing situations of this kind result in stereotyped coping behaviours and a reduced arousal threshold. These behaviours can include tail-chasing, walking or running in a circle, ‘star-gazing’ and ‘fly-snapping’.

Rodents

Caged rodents are typically provided with a running wheel. They normally use it so extensively that the behaviour might be considered compulsive or a sign of stress or environmental inadequacy. Research to date suggests that, while the persistence of the behaviour...
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and the exercise involved is unlike anything seen in the wild, the behaviour is probably not a welfare concern (Sherwin 1998). Of more concern in caged rodents are the common behaviours of bar-biting (mice, gerbils, hamsters) and digging (gerbils). Research suggests that those behaviours are a response to the frustration of being confined in too small a space that does not satisfy basic behavioural needs (Wurbel 2001) such as burrowing (hamsters; Fischer et al., 2007, Hauzenberger et al., 2006), digging and/or having access to a darkened tunnel (gerbils; Wiedenmayer 1997). It is likely that many pet rodents may fare less well than their counterparts in laboratories because research on the latter is leading to stricter requirements for their housing (e.g., in Switzerland, a minimum of 30 cm (~14”) of bedding is required for golden hamsters used in the lab. (Hauzenberger et al., 2006).

Raising standards

More generally, as national legislation specifying the duties of animal caregivers becomes more common, it will be important for veterinarians to be aware of stress in their patients and to advise owners accordingly. A theoretical example under new UK legislation is that a rodent owner could be held liable for keeping their animal in conditions that could lead to suffering (e.g. a hamster in a small cage). If you had seen the cage and failed to advise the owner about using a larger cage with deeper bedding, they could sue you for negligence (c.f. Yeates 2008). Whether or not such laws are in place, we can raise our standards of care even higher by paying closer attention to signs of stress in our patients and by having policies to make their time at the clinic or in the hospital as pleasant as possible.

References