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DEALING WITH AGGRESSIVE ANIMALS- PRACTICAL WAYS TO HANDLE THE DIFFICULT DOG AND CAT IN THE VETERINARY CLINIC

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Dealing with anxious or aggressive dogs and cats during a veterinary visit is one of the most confronting experiences that veterinarians and veterinary nurses face in practice every day. The way that the situation is handled will in fact determine whether this visit is a traumatic or hazardous experience (not only for the pet but also for the staff) or this visit is the first step towards making the next visit less stressful for all concerned. It may even determine if the pet is ever seen by the practice again.

The aim of all staff should be to make each visit, especially the first visit of the pet, regardless of age, extremely pleasant.

Introduction:

For years many veterinarians relied on brute force (brutacaine) (and more staff to hold down the dog or cat) to manage these potentially dangerous situations. These days are well past for ethical as well as welfare reasons. This borders on abuse and today there is NO excuse for this as behavioural medicine and concern for the animal's welfare mean that it should no longer be necessary to man handle or wrestle with the pet. Instead by working with the pet, and the owner, and recognizing why the pet may be behaving in such a manner the visits should become less stressful and more manageable for all concerned.

A visit to the veterinary hospital should not be a traumatic experience, for the pet, the owner or the veterinary hospital staff. If time is taken to observe the dog's initial reaction as it approaches, let alone walks in the front door of the veterinary hospital, many unpleasant situations may be able to be avoided.

Take the time to ask the owners when they make the appointment how their pet reacted last time.

By appreciating that the way the pet behaves at any given time is influenced by three key factors it should be possible to modify the pet's behaviour by adapting our approach to each individual dog and situation.

These three key factors are the dog's genetic make up (temperament), its previous experiences (and what it has learnt from them) and the current environment or situation in which the dog finds itself.

WHAT IS AGGRESSION?

Aggression is defined as a threat, challenge or attack that is directed towards one or more individuals. It can be intra specific or inter specific. Aggression may be normal or abnormal

depending on the context in which it occurs. Aggression is usually about protection of self and involves anxiety or fear.

What is important to remember is that aggression is a non-specific sign, that is, it may be exhibited in many different situations. It may be passive (covert) or active (overt) and it is important to recognise that several different types of aggression may occur concurrently.

The signs that are presented may be visual (eg changes in body posture, piloerection), auditory (e.g. growling), olfactory (e.g. scratching) or tactile (scratching) and may involve use of teeth and claws.

WHY ARE PETS DIFFICULT TO HANDLE AT THE VETERINARY HOSPITAL?

The first step in recognizing why a pet may be difficult to handle at the veterinary hospital is to look at the hospital from the dog's perspective. After all this is the only perspective that really counts as the pet cannot see it any other way! Always try to walk in their paws!

All dogs and cats can bite. Some need less provocation than others. The main reason that pets are aggressive in the veterinary clinic is that they are anxious or afraid. They are protecting themselves.

An anxious dog may growl, snarl, snap, lunge or bite depending on what the dog perceives as the level of the perceived threat. An anxious cat may hiss, spit, growl and or scratch. The signs exhibited and to what degree the signs are exhibited will be affected by its genetic predisposition, its experiences and the situation in which it find itself.

Anxiety has defined as the apprehension of future danger. The pet's response to anxiety provoking situations will be to fight, freeze, flee or "fiddle". Which response it uses will depend to some degree on what it has found successful in controlling the situation previously. Thus, if the dog has previously learnt that snapping at the perceived threat has lead to it having some more control over the situation it is much more likely to react this way again next time.

Another concern is the dog that has been taught that growling is an unacceptable behaviour. Owners often do this as someone misguided about a dog's behavioural repertoire has told them that dogs should never growl at people! Thus the full behaviour sequence beginning with the warning is altered and the dog may resort to snapping or biting without giving a warning.

So what makes pets anxious or fearful?

Some pets are genetically more fearful or apprehensive than others. It should be noted This is an important consideration and it is not necessarily related to breed but rather lines of dogs and cats or even individuals.

Additionally, the senses of dogs and cats very different from ours. For example the hearing of dogs and cats is about 4 times more acute than ours, and they can hear ultrasound and infrasound. Thus pets can become sensitised to the noises in a veterinary clinic and this can make them apprehensive or reactive and more difficult to handle.

A dog's sense of smell is at least 1,000 times better than ours (some dogs can detect fingerprints on glass 6 weeks after they were placed there!). Veterinary clinics have very distinct odours that can be disturbing to dogs despite having easily cleaned surfaces that are not porous. Dogs and cats can also detect various pheromones that can communicate alarm or distress.

Dogs and cats are very good at detecting very slight movement of objects and can be easily startled by them. Thus sudden movements can also increase their apprehension and so the way dogs need to be approach slowly and calmly to help make them more tractable.

Consideration also needs to be given to the surfaces that they stand or lie on. Many dogs find it frightening to walk or stand on slippery surfaces. A dog that is already apprehensive may become even more reactive unless surfaces with secure footing can be provided to decrease anxiety and reactivity.

Additionally some of the medications used in a veterinary clinic can increase reactivity. For example acepromazine increases noise sensitivity and may lead to more unpredictable behaviour.

PREVENTION

Of course a well run Puppy Preschool® class or Kitten Kindy® class at the veterinary hospital can provide a good introduction to manners in the veterinary hospital. To achieve the desirable outcome of having well mannered puppies and kittens in the veterinary hospital the classes need to be run by experienced staff who know when to intervene and not push pets into situations that are potentially frightening. Thus the classes allow the pet and the owner to become familiar with the veterinary hospital in a non threatening manner and associate it as a “friendly” place to visit.

Teach owners how to fit and head collars and muzzles at puppy class and explain why you may need to use them later.

MINIMISING PROBLEMS

If the pet is already apprehensive about coming to the veterinary hospital a different approach is necessary. At each visit the aim should be to make subsequent ones less difficult than the current visit. The attitude of the staff and the hospital environment can do much to help things run smoothly.

Remember that you do not have to put your safety or that of others at risk!

Dealing with difficult pets can be made easier by seeing the surroundings and circumstances from the pet’s perspective, i.e. “Walk in their paws!”

So what can we do to make life easier for the pet, the vet, the nurse and the owner?

Tips for handling difficult pets:

- Ask the owner how the pet reacted previously
- SAFETY FIRST
- Walk in their paws- think of the world from their perspective
- TAKE YOUR TIME!
- **DO NOT PUNISH!** Physically punishing aggressive or anxious animals may make the situation worse, especially with frightened, anxious pets.
- Have muzzles, head collars, towels ready
- Muzzle if necessary, ask the owner to do this if possible prior to coming to the clinic
- Ignore the pet and talk to the owner until the pet settles
- Never make direct eye contact with the dog
- Watch your body language

- Approach the pet quietly, calmly and slowly
- Approach from the side, not from front or behind
- Offer treats
- Speak softly, calmly
- Slowly stroke (not pat) on the chest
- Don't use physical force or aggression, it will make it worse.
- **Never** use aggression to deal with aggression.
- Use minimal restraint
- Medicate if necessary
- Use General Anaesthesia
- Anxiolytics
- DAP
- Feliway
- Pre-med the animal **prior** to putting it in the cage
- Use signs on cages to warn others eg (I Bite)
- Keep records on what works and what doesn't to make it easier for all concerned next time.
- An animal's behaviour will change day to day eg if in pain or not
- Put aggressive dogs on ground level cages and aggressive cats at body level to make it easier to get them in and out.
- Insulate metal cages with eg pink batts to decrease noise
- Use non-slip matting on examination tables to provide secure footing and decrease anxiety
- **Don't be afraid to walk away for another day!**

Further Reading

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