Creating a safe clinic

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Creating a safe working environment is essential for any practice owner. But animals are unpredictable and can be dangerous. Staff can be bitten or scratched or knocked over by panicking or struggling animals. Understanding the animal’s point of view and handling them to minimise distress results in fewer injuries to veterinary staff while improving everyone’s experience of the veterinary clinic.

Unsettled, frightened and aggressive animals make handling difficult and stressful, not to mention dangerous. The vet staff-pet interaction is the point where clinical information is collected, owner opinions of you and your clinic are formed and animal learning occurs. Often, in the pressure of completing the examination, completing the procedure and seeing the next patient, the experience of the dog or cat you have on the table is forgotten. And it is likely that the next time the animal is in the clinic its behaviour will be worse. When owners perceive that their pet is frightened of the veterinary clinic, they delay seeking advice for veterinary concerns about their pet. Recognizing and reacting appropriately to a pet’s fear and anxiety can result in a calmer, more effective and enjoyable experience for everyone.

Many things about the vet clinic and clinical examination are frightening for animals. Luckily, dogs and cats readily communicate their fear allowing us to alter our behaviour and hopefully, altering their behaviour. The signals given by an unsure animal can be very subtle and ambiguous. The behaviours tend to fall into two groups. Displacement behaviours are seemingly out of context behaviours, such as grooming, sniffing the ground or scratching, performed because the animal is in a state of internal conflict or frustration. They are signs that the animal is not feeling sure, that their sympathetic nervous system is activated and they have energy ready to use- but they are not sure what they should do.

The other group of behaviours is termed avoidance or cut-off signals. These work to turn off threatening and or fearful behaviour from another animal. They send the message “I am not interested in fighting or interacting with you.” These are often very subtle and you have to watch for them. We often miss them in the race against the consulting room clock. But once you start looking, you will start to find it easy to see them.

The veterinary visit
The veterinary visit has several opportunities to reduce stress for the patient (and the people) resulting in more positive visits.

The last visit a patient has had at your clinic is very important as it helps you plan the next visit for that patient. For many patients, not much needs to change between visits but for some what you record can be invaluable for managing the next visit.

So, how did it go? Was is calm and pleasant or was it a rodeo? This needs to be recorded along with how the animal was to handle and whether it was comfortable enough to take the treats you offered. Was there a preference for one type of treat? Does this animal work better with some staff members than others? Just like we have preferred doctors, dentists, hair dressers etc., so do some animals. Make your and
their lives easier - record this and try and schedule visits for when these staff members are available. Record recommendations for pre visit anxiolytics or sedation.

**Booking an appointment**

Front end staff need to easily be able to see any special requirements for a patient. Not all owners will remember in detail, if at all, the vet’s recommendations for managing their pet’s stress. For some patients, thoughtful scheduling is all that is needed. Matching up animal preferences for staff and/ considering if a first or last place slot in a consulting session would be sensible. The length of the appointment may also be important. For some clients, an out of session consultation may be helpful.

Some patients will benefit from a short acting anxiolytic medication for their visit. Owners will need to be reminded to use them, how to use them and may need them dispensed.

**Travel**

We don’t have much control over how our patients travel to our clinic. But it can be worth discussing it with clients as they may not have thought about it. Some may be interested in working with their pet between visits to help them be more comfortable in the car. Some may need referral to a positive reinforcement trainer to help them tolerate car travel more.

The easiest thing a cat owner can do is leave the cat carrier available for their cat as a bed. Make it cozy and comfortable so the cat can use it all the time. This means the cat carrier is not a source of stress or a signal of an impending stressful trip.

**The waiting room**

When a patient arrives they encounter the waiting room. While not much can be done about the architecture of the waiting room, there are some things that will reduce stress for patients.

Control the flow and location of clients and pets through the space. Suggest places for people to sit to separate animals. If there are areas that tend to clog up with people, move or direct them to better places to stand. It may be possible to move things such as payment zones to discourage blockages and animals becoming stressed.

Create zones within the waiting room - separate cats and dogs and exotic pets. This can be as simple as some signs in prominent areas or more extensive with book shelves to create nooks.

Use pheromone products such as Feliway (Ceva Animal Health Pty Ltd) for cats and Adaptil (Ceva Animal Health Pty Ltd) for dogs. They can help. Adaptil spray can be put on bandanas for patients to help them settle and cats can have Feliway sprayed on a towel over their carrier.

Have a No Greeting Rule in the clinic. This sounds harsh but remember some of the animals visiting will be sick or in pain. All will be stressed. Having a young puppy bouncing up to an older, sore dog is not fair. Use signs explaining waiting room etiquette.

Have clients with boisterous, noisy or stressed dogs wait outside (give them somewhere to sit or wait) or put into a consulting room with some clinic reading material.
Have tables, benches or cubical book shelving units for people to put their pet cat and
pet carriers. Cats and birds don’t like to be down low. Rabbits get stressed in wide
open spaces with no-where to bolt to for safety. Give people a place to pop their pet
near seats while they wait.

Kids under control- enough said.

**The consultation**
We make consulting hard for ourselves. We give ourselves between 10 and 30 minutes
to make a client feel comfortable enough to tell us their concerns about their pet, get
their pet comfortable enough to let us examine them, do invasive (and to the animal
unnatural) things and then educate people who may or may not have medical
backgrounds about complex issues. No wonder we are stressed!

The first step to making a consultation calm is to be calm and relaxed yourself.
Recognise that there is a lot to do. Recognise for yourself and for your patients that
sometimes you can’t do it all in one consultation and make use of staff and tools to
make things better.
Consider having nursing staff in the consultation room to help with patients. They can
restrain and distract and reward the animal while you do the examination and also
discuss recommendations with the client.

Sometimes the fastest way to work is the slowest. If an animal is getting stressed and
upset, stop and consider a different strategy. Don’t just bull through as you might get
the job done (the nails trimmed, broken claw cut, the opened abscess emptied) but
what will the owner think of how you did it and most importantly, what will the animal
think of you? And how will that affect the next visit?

Use pain management. We have sophisticated pain relief for animals. It is not an
optional extra and should not be sold as such. Pain is debilitating and makes the
animal irritated. It wears on the body and the brain. Relieve whenever you can.

Throughout the consultation, show that you care for the pet. This will go a long way in
helping client’s listen to your recommendations and act on them.

**Tips for the consultation room (and hospital in general)**
Veterinarians often forget courtesies such as greeting our patients and letting them get
comfortable. The examination requires getting in close to the animal, invading personal
space, poking and prodding and often waving strange equipment close to the animal.
Our doctor’s and other health care professionals give us time to settle into their rooms
before leaping into to take our temperature and blood pressure. Taking a few moments
to allow settling and the exchange of courtesies with the animal helps build the animal's
confidence.

Slow down. Move slowly but with confidence. By doing this, you give the animal a
chance to read your body language.

Don’t hold eye contact. Staring is rude- especially for cats. Make short eye contact then
let your eyes slide off to the side. Look out of the corner of your eyes at the dog or the
cat.

Calmly “freeze” if the animal seems tense. Dogs meeting in the park will often do this
so they can be sure of each other’s signals.
Do something else for a bit. Talk to the owner and let the animal wander around the room. When dogs in particular want to communicate “I am not a threat” they will often do something like sniff the ground. They appear to interpret ignoring them as our ‘sniffing the ground’. Often this short chance to look around is enough for the dog to see you are a person and not a monster. And you have treats!

Let the cat come out of the carrier in its own time. Or if you need to, lift the lid off the carrier and examine the cat in the base of the carrier [1]. Much easier than trying to stop them running back in again.

In the first few moments of a feline consult, pat the cat, especially around the preauricular area and above the bridge of the nose to get their scent on you. Long, soothing strokes will often calm a cat down and allow a relaxed examination.

Take a break from the examination if you see any signs of anxiety, especially the more subtle signs like a tongue flick. Give the animal some space if necessary or just take a break and stroke the animal.

Get the owners to relax. You can do this by getting the owners to sit down. Changing one’s posture helps bring about relaxation [2]. The owners’ relaxed state will help their pet relax.

Reward relaxed behaviour. Many dogs will give a body shake to relieve tensions. You can encourage a canine body shake by ruffling up the dog’s coat and also massaging the back.

If a pet is becoming upset or aggressive, stop the consultation and try again another day. Or use a different approach such as sedation. Once a dog becomes so aroused it growls or tries to bite, it will not be in any emotional state to learn that examinations are tolerable. If the owner will not consider trying another day or sedation then record this and record that you have not been able to fully examine the animal due to its behaviour and that you have explained this to the owner. In the case of dogs, it may also be necessary to discuss the implications of owning an aggressive dog.

Handling in the hospital
Many times we start working with an animal on a procedure and it all goes awry. Sometimes you can see it happening, other times it was obvious in hindsight that it would happen. There are things we do to reduce the risk of frightened pets, and stressed (injured) staff.

Plan what you are going to do, get ready, then get the pet out.

Minimal restraint. Use the least you can. No-one likes to be restrained and it increases fear and struggling.

Use treats where you can. A tiny bit of liver may prevent a bigger issue. Frozen chicken stock or animal electrolyte mixes (e.g. Hydrate) can be given to dogs to distract them from catheter placement before surgery.

Use alternative veins. Back leg veins are as good as front leg veins and sometimes the animals will let you use these without fuss.

Have a code word to abort the procedure due to animal stress. Respect it and anyone can use it. Stop and reassess. Sometimes all that is needed is a little break. Sometimes a whole new approach is needed. A traffic light system is easily implemented.
Medications to make it easier
There are several medications that relieve anxiety and can help patients be calmer. Some are short acting and can be given at home while others can be used in the clinic.

Oral medications such as Mirtazapine, Clonidine, Trazodone and Gabapentin can all be given at home by the client to help relieve their pet’s anxiety. All are mildly sedating but still allow you to perform a decent clinical examination. They can also make sedation and general anaesthetics easier as the patient is calmer for these procedures.

Any of these can be used by the client at home before coming to the clinic. Alternatively the patient can be given an oral dose if only light sedation is needed not a full general anaesthetic. Further sedation can be given in the usual manner.

For some animals, Zylkene (Vetoquinol) may be enough to help them be calm and cope with visiting the veterinary clinic.

References

2. Morris, D., 1994 The Naked Ape Vintage

Useful websites
1. Fear Free- Fear Free provides online and in-person education to veterinary professionals, Taking the “Pet” out of Petrified. https://fearfreepets.com/

2. Low Stress Handling and Sophia Yin – some of the handling techniques and videos are great. There are some of which I am not fond. https://drsophiayin.com/