Deciphering behaviour and defining success

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“Why does my dog...?” “What does it mean when my cat...?” Even if you're not “doing behaviour” vets are often faced with questions about animal behaviour. Treating behavioural illnesses leads to a second set of questions from pet owners, “Will he get better?”, “Can she be cured?” and, even more frustratingly, “How successful are you with this sort of problem?” For both types of questions, the answers are often not straightforward but are context dependent.

One of the most commonly misunderstood canine behaviours, mounting (aka humping), is a great example of a context dependent behaviour. Owners often interpret mounting as either a strictly sexual behaviour or as always a dominance gesture. Since mounting is usually a social behaviour we need to see it in the context of the dog’s social interactions to understand the motivation for the behaviour. Mounting can be a normal part of play or a play solicitation. It can be a displacement behaviour (a response to anxiety) or it can be a sexual behaviour. As veterinarians it’s important to also remember that some behaviours can be “just” behavioural or they can be medical, such as the bitch with a UTI who is “humping” blankets.

Another way to look at behaviours, whether normal or abnormal, is through the lens of Functional Behavioural Analysis (FBA). FBA looks at the A, B, Cs of behaviour where A stands for Antecedent, B stands for Behaviour and C stands for Consequences. The antecedent is what happens before the behaviour in question occurs and the consequences are what happens afterwards. If the consequence is something that the animal finds rewarding, such as getting food or attention or feeling relief from anxiety or fear, the animal will be more likely to perform this behaviour in the future when presented with the antecedent situation.

Sticking with our example, I noticed occasionally during play that my puppy was grabbing onto my arm with his forelegs and beginning pelvic thrusts. Was he trying to mate with my elbow? Not likely. When I looked closer at the antecedents for his mounting, I realised that this was only happening at night, close to bedtime. Leading me to characterize the mounting as a displacement behaviour that was happening when a young, playful puppy was not yet able to regulate his emotions and biological needs (sleep in this case).

Context needs to be applied in a slightly different manner when determining what constitutes a successful outcome in treating a clinical behaviour case. A patient’s signalment, his lifestyle, the owners’ expectations as well as the diagnosis can be much more important in figuring out what is a successful treatment than in most other branches of veterinary medicine. Just as behaviours themselves don’t occur in a vacuum, so too our treatment plans and prognoses must take into account the home in which the animal lives, who he lives with (human, conspecifics and others) and what the family expects of the patient.

The same diagnosis can have a very different prognosis depending on the size of the dog or the age of the dog. Treating stranger directed aggression can be very simple in a home with a single owner who is a bit of a hermit but if you add children or an active
social life to the equation treatment becomes much more difficult. Similarly, a dog with aggression to unfamiliar dogs is much easier to treat and manage if that dog lives in the country than in a city.

We also need to look at the welfare and quality of life of our clients as well as our patients when determining success. My experience is that they are usually closely linked. Living with a pet with significant mental illness can be very taxing on even the best owners. When that pet is aggressive to her owners, the situation may be akin to living with an abusive spouse. When faced with a situation like this, while euthanasia may not be a successful outcome, I don't believe it's a failure if the owners feel like they were able to make an informed decision based on an understanding of the diagnosis and prognosis and what would be involved in managing and treating the pet in their particular household.