Difficult Clients

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Veterinary clinics are full of wonderful and amazing clients who we get to deal with each day. Unfortunately there are also clients who cause us significant stress, angst, frustration and worry for a variety of reasons. The stress caused by dealing with difficult clients should not be underestimated. Dealing with these clients can take a significant toll on vets and nurses alike, and a lot of sleep has been lost worrying about these difficult interactions.

Dealing with difficult clients is a team responsibility. Part of managing difficult clients should include debriefing after any difficult encounter and preparing for future difficult clients. Role plays and rehearsing conversation may seem a bit formulated but they can provide valuable opportunities especially for less experienced staff.

Just like the variety of clients that can be difficult, the skills required to deal with difficult clients can vary and can take some time to learn. A client who is difficult for one staff member may be much easier to deal with for another. Working together will enable you to minimise the stress associated with difficult clients.

Clients can be difficult for a wide range of reasons. They may be stressed because of their concern for the pet, they may have significant personal issues that are unrelated to the immediate situation, they may just be having a bad day or they may be consistently unpleasant to be near. People react differently to stressful situations and stress can bring out the best and worst in people.

Complaints

No matter why or how a complaint is made, they need to be managed. Remember that a client who is complaining is at least giving you an opportunity to respond. It is likely that a lot of clients who have a negative experience will never complain – directly to you. They may quietly stop using your practice but not so quietly tell their friends and people in the local dog park of their negative experience.

Always keep foremost in your mind that a complaint may be absolutely justified and the client may have every reason to complain. It may be that the client’s expectations were completely reasonable and the practice didn’t meet those expectations. The client may bring to your attention an issue which has also been a concern for other clients.

Even if a client’s complaint is not justified in your view, they still need to be managed. Any client who is complaining wants to be taken seriously and wants your attention. The quickest way to escalate a client from being slightly irritated to angry is to give them a sense that you don’t really care and that you’re not listening to their concerns.

When listening to a complaint avoid:

- Appearing distracted – e.g. looking at the computer, taking incoming phone calls, completing other tasks while pretending to listen
• Using combative language
• Getting personally involved

Approach each complaint genuinely, without prejudgement and attempt to sincerely understand the client’s point of view. Adopt a positive mindset and you will unconsciously send the right signals.

Key strategies:

• Listen carefully – don’t interrupt, let the client explain in their own words, in their own time
• Show an engaged, concerned expression and tone of voice
• Show open positive body language – don’t fold arms, closed
• Active listening – repeat, paraphrase, summarise what you have heard at the appropriate time, ask questions
• Empathise where you can – ‘I understand you’re not happy about this’
• If you resolve their issue to their satisfaction, ensure you follow through with any concession/promises you make

Dealing with a client complaint is an opportunity to demonstrate your professionalism and competence to the client. A complaint that is dealt with in an understanding, professional manner can be a very positive experience for a client (even if they don’t get exactly what they want) and it’s possible that they will be more bonded than ever to your practice. Try to approach each client complaint with this positive mindset.

Angry Clients

Having a genuinely angry client yelling in a waiting room full of clients can be a very difficult and stressful situation to deal with. The initial goal is to diffuse the situation to the point where the client can be dealt with in a calmer, more rational way.

Key strategies:

• Give them your attention
• Ask them to move to another area, such as a consult room, so you can listen to their concerns. This will also give them a sense that they are being looked after.
• Let them vent. This is an important part of the process of diffusing. Don’t interrupt and avoid phrases like ‘just calm down’.
• If the situation seems out of control, they are abusive, or you feel too personally involved – get back-up support. Often getting another staff member involved helps.

Debrief

Nurses / receptionists are the front line of client interaction in a practice and are often exposed to the worst of client behaviour. Clients sometimes talk to nurses in ways they would never talk to a vet. An angry client may have vented considerably by the time they talk to a vet and have calmed down somewhat. It can be a source of great frustration for nurses to hear a particularly nasty client change their tone when a vet becomes involved. Remember that managing difficult clients is a team activity. Debrief afterwards with your colleagues. You will have your opportunity to vent when the client has left!
Common Reasons for Complaints

- Miscommunication
- Finances
- Lack of continuity of care
- Time management

Try to be very clear with your communication. Repeat important points. Provide written instructions / information wherever possible. Record significant parts of conversations in client file.

Social Media Complaints

There has been a rapid increase of the use of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs and online forums to communicate with our clients in recent years. These provide great opportunities to inform and educate clients about practice services or products. However, they may also provide opportunities for clients to give negative feedback.

Negative feedback / complaints need to be managed, however they are received. Social media complaints can be particularly damaging because a large number of people (including loyal clients) may see negative comments in a short space of time. Issues can escalate rapidly in the online world. It is important to deal with negative comments quickly and professionally to limit the potential damage. If possible, contact the client directly (not publicly) to discuss their concerns.

Discuss and plan how the practice will deal with negative comments. All complaints are unique but having some guidelines regarding the management of clients’ input will help to ensure that complaints are dealt with promptly and effectively.

Some common guidelines include:

- Remove offensive, abusive posts immediately
- Don't remove negative comments until the client has been contacted directly
- Develop ‘house rules’ for social media channels, such as Facebook
- Nominate a staff member to be responsible for monitoring the practice’s online presence

Some clients will want to use their public exposure to cause maximum damage – just like the angry client in the waiting room full of clients. Acknowledge their concerns and try to engage with them directly (such as via a direct message).

Younger staff members of vet practices (Gen Ys) are often the most skilled, experienced and qualified in using social media. Tap into this pool of talent to get the best results for the practice.

Difficult Clients and Strategies to Deal with Them

- Aggressive / argumentative
  - Diffuse, listen, give attention, allow them to vent, guide them away from waiting room, if needed – get back up, 'you may be happier to go elsewhere'

- Know-it-all, Google expert
  - Use their knowledge to your advantage, explain that internet sources can be of good or poor quality, direct them to information which is useful, highlight your training/qualifications
• ‘Anti-nurse, pro-vet’ / ‘Anti-vet, pro-nurse’
  - Work as a team. Use every opportunity to highlight the skills, qualifications, particular strengths of the nurse / vet, “a lot of clients like her and she’s very good with cats’, she has excellent knowledge of behavioural problems and has some great practical tips’
• Forgetful
  - Provide written instructions
• Human nurse / doctor
  - Explain the great difference between species, especially potentially harmful human medication
• Chatterbox / timewasters
  - Keep them on-topic, help them keep moving, try not to offend. Vets may have to be rescued with an ‘emergency’
• Sad
  - Care, time and empathy. Be aware they may have other problems
• ‘You charged me $$$ for nothing’ ‘You are greedy, only in it for the money’
  - Explain the value of the $ spent, lab tests, medication etc., compared to human medical costs, human medical costs are often not obvious with Medicare, pet insurance, a living animal is not a car, there is no guarantee of worked done, it is the client’s decision, record all estimates, provide estimates in writing
• Partners that conflict
  - Don’t take sides, ‘in some ways you are both right’
• Drug / alcohol affected
  - Deal with quickly, good, clear records, provide information in writing
• ‘I will sue you’
  - That is your option of course. If you give us the details of your new vet we can send over the records
• The last time he yelped with the needle
  - Sometimes injections hurt but only very briefly and not too much
• Serious / organised
  - Be organised, clear concise communication, no light-hearted banter
• Zany / different / strange
  - Go along with them (to a point) if there are no consequences, they may be looking for prejudices that are not there
• Won’t pay
  - Ask for part payment, arrange payment plan, document
• Dangerous / thieves / vandals
  - Be safe. Strength in numbers. Money is not more important than people

Dealing with difficult clients can be hard, stressful work. It is a team responsibility. Working together and supporting each other is the key to managing these issues and minimising the toll these difficult interactions have on staff. Planning and preparing for these situations and having a positive approach will ensure you get the best outcome for your client and the practice.