

Influencing our clients: What is possible and ethical?

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Introduction

Given that many veterinarians wish to improve the welfare of animals in their care, motivating clients to change husbandry can be a daily challenge. Encouraging uptake of best practice can be important for the health of the animal (e.g. canine obesity), for the profitability of the farmer (e.g. dairy cattle lameness) or public health (e.g. reduction in antimicrobial use).

What is possible?

Promoting behaviour change is an area of social science research that has received much attention recently. For example, many studies have looked at ways of promoting pro-environmental behaviours. Spreading best practice has also been identified as the key recommendation for the agriculture industry in order to tackle the industry's greenhouse gas emissions. Efforts to address animal welfare and environmental concerns are public goods that justify interventions to promote their uptake. It is not unreasonable to expect that the veterinary profession should help the livestock industry deliver on these public goals. Avoidable health-related losses arising from endemic disease is a good example where public goods (environment and animal welfare) coincide with private goods (farm profitability). Increased focus on the need for efficient livestock production means that poor management of disease is now a public good that should not be left to the marketplace.

Current communication skills teaching is primarily focused on transferring information between parties and avoiding misunderstandings. Influencing, however, is an active process with a specific goal in mind. In human medicine a well validated approach to communication in a 10 minute consultation setting, called motivational interviewing, has been shown to have a positive impact on health related lifestyle changes, such as diet, smoking and alcohol ¹. The technique has been developed to be applicable to a ten minute consultations so is potentially relevant in veterinary medicine.

What is ethical ?

It is important to explore the ethics of influencing clients². For animals in "our care" do we have responsibility to persuade a client who may not be providing "good practice" to do better? Or do we have a non-partisan, non judgemental role to just act as service provider as requested? Should we try to influence our clients to provide better welfare for animals? If we do feel justified in influencing our clients then shouldn't we teach all new graduates selling skills in order to promote the uptake of our well-meaning advice?

The RCVS Code to Professional Conduct describes the duties we have to our patients, our clients, general public and other colleagues. Ethical dilemmas arise when these duties conflict. For example, different treatment options may have different cost and benefits for the animals, owners and vets. The RCVS suggests that we must "ensure

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that a range of reasonable treatment options are offered and explained, including prognoses and possible side effects". If, however, you follow the RCVS first guiding principle to "make animal welfare your first consideration" then you may feel justified in going beyond just offering to strongly recommending the option that is most beneficial to the animal. Many veterinary surgeons would take this approach. For example many veterinary surgeons take an animal rather than client-focused approach for difficult euthanasia decisions. Taking this animal-focused approach further, it would seem reasonable and compliant with RCVS guidance to actively advocate interventions to our clients that improve animal welfare.

As with any other professional skill, the veterinary curriculum would need to address the potential risks as well as benefits associated with learning influencing skills. This should enable the student to identify and manage conflict of interests associated with "selling" profitable drugs or services that may also have animal welfare benefits. A virtue-theory approach to these ethical dilemmas can be used to help guide actions. In virtue ethics, the primary consideration is the motivation of the interested parties. So provided the veterinary surgeon is focused on the animal rather than their own interests then promoting services that may also benefit the veterinary practice may be justified. Of course, that would also mean that a veterinary surgeon should also promote actions that may not be of benefit to them. For example, if you are not fully confident in a particular surgical treatment then you should refer it even if it would increase your turnover or help you learn new surgical skills.

Conclusion

A debate around the ethics of influencing is healthy for the profession. The BVA's new animal welfare strategy³ highlights the role of the individual veterinarian in spreading best practice and "speaking up" for animal welfare(British Veterinary Association 2016).

References

British Veterinary Association (2016). Vets speaking up for animal welfare: BVA animal welfare strategy. BVA.

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² Yeates JW, Main DCJ. The ethics of influencing clients. J Am Vet Medl Ass 2010;237:263

³ Wensley S. Developing a BVA animal welfare strategy.Vet Rec 2015;176:27