“I am not paying that!”
How often do we hear that phrase in veterinary practice?

When a client feels strongly enough that his or her expectations have not been met, especially in the case of financial matters, he or she may make a complaint. Often complaining about the bill or not paying it all is the only leverage a client feels they have to make themselves heard and to be taken seriously. In addition, research in the medical arena shows that patients on average bring more than one concern to the table and often the presenting complaint is not their primary concern. This is likely to hold true in veterinary practice and complaints about the bill are often highlighted as a trigger for the complaint.

How can you prevent the complaint from escalating?

No matter how upsetting or stressful, when faced with a client who is complaining about the bill they must always be acknowledged and dealt with effectively. By ignoring or dismissing complaints, you are effectively telling the client that you don’t value their opinions. Getting in the right mind-set is import as it is easy to be defensive, particularly if you know that you have provided an excellent service and everything on the bill is justified. Therefore, when dealing with a complainant face-to-face it is important to take time to rid yourself of any ‘emotional baggage’ as conflict can trigger strong emotions and if you aren’t comfortable with your emotions or able to manage them it will be difficult to resolve the client’s problem successfully.

If the client is angry or intimidating it is important to remember that the anger may not be directed at you personally even though it may feel that way.

Getting the whole story

Even if your role in the practice means you cannot solve the client’s complaint, every member of the practice team can elicit the full story from the client. This demonstrates that you are taking the client’s concerns seriously which avoids clients passing the details of their dissatisfaction onto others which can impact on a practice’s reputation. It also:

- prevents you from coming up with a premature hypothesis or solution, which is not at the core of the client’s problem;
- avoids additional complaints from being cited at a later stage and ensures that the client feels their complaint is being taken seriously, even if on first hearing it may have appeared to have been spurious;
- helps to establish the client’s emotional state, allowing you to acknowledge the emotion and provide an empathic response;
- allows you to observe the client and pick up on verbal and non-verbal cues. It is vital that these cues are acknowledged before you explore them. If a cue is not explored it is possible that the client won’t have revealed all the information and it is important to remember that once the client’s response has been elicited you may need to explore further. This is what we mean when we talk about the **Triple Es: Explore, Explain, Explore**. All too often we Explain, Explore, Explain which can be very frustrating for the client. An example of this could be a comment from the client along the lines of “I couldn’t go through this again”. We may make an assumption that the comment relates to the stress and anxiety over a large bill and as the result we may launch into an explanation of the costs. With further exploration we could find that it relates to a different concern such as being worried that the pet will be put to sleep if the bill cannot be paid.

Skills

Research has shown that there are specific skills which can be used to support us when it comes to handling complaints face-to-face. Furthermore, research has shown that in a similar way to practising a particular piece of surgery, practising our communication skills with simulated clients prepares us for the real thing. This gives us a opportunity to rehearse confrontations and receive feedback and these encounters although not real provide feedback which is descriptive, meaningful, honest and genuine.

However, although this is the most effective and cost-efficient way in the long term to embed these skills it is also useful to raise awareness of what these skills are comprised of. This handout looks at the skills which ensures we get all the client's concerns which is essential if we are going to resolve the complaint at a later stage whether it be of a financial nature or other root cause at a later stage.

- Try to get the client into a private room. However, when inviting a client into a private area you should emphasise the benefits to the client, rather than the benefit to the practice. For example, it is more effective to use phrases such as:
  - "This will give me an opportunity to listen to all your concerns"
  - "This will allow me to give you my undivided attention"
- Remain calm and polite
- Avoid being defensive as this may continue to inflame the client particularly if you have not yet heard all their concerns
- Avoid making assumptions as there may have been a genuine misunderstanding
- Genuine attentive listening is essential. This may seem to be an obvious and essential skill, but in reality very few of us do it effectively every time. What makes someone an effective listener? There are several listening skills to consider:
  - **Actively waiting -** Making the change from speaking to listening at appropriate moments is not easy. We all too often inadvertently find ourselves preparing our next question rather than focussing on what the client is saying;
  - **Encouragement** (uh-huh, go on) - These phrases can be helpful in terms of encouraging clients to tell their whole story. However, it is important at the start of the dialogue they are not seen as interrupters. This can be the case if the tone in which they are delivered is abrupt or harsh;
  - **Use of silence -** We tend to interrupt because the wait-time feels interminable, but on checking this out with clients the common response is that it is often not long enough. During consultations the average time elapsing before a vet interrupts their client's opening comment is 18 seconds or less depending where the research has been carried out. This is likely to hold true when dealing with complaints and is nowhere near long enough and this early interruption may prevent some concerns from being elicited;"
  - **Repetition/summarising/echoing and paraphrasing -** All serve to demonstrate to the client that you have actually heard what they are saying: it avoids the client saying that "they listened, but didn't hear what I had to say". It also provides the client with an opportunity to correct anything that you may have misunderstood. The power of the word 'sorry' often comes into its own at this stage. Coupling the word 'sorry' with what you have heard can, demonstrate great empathy. For example "I'm sorry to hear that you phoned in every day and at no point did anyone update you about the bill".

    This forms part of the Triple As:

    - **Acknowledge** the client's concerns or feelings and their situation
    - **Apologise** for the fact that the incident happened without admitting to any personal contribution. Don't be afraid to say "I'm sorry," – it's not an admission of guilt. You are sorry that this has happened, and that the client is so upset. Sorry early on in the dialogue can help defuse the situation and cool the client down. Again it is important to qualify the sorry with what you have heard or seen otherwise the client may misinterpret what you are sorry for. Apologising is also part of the empathic response and will help build a meaningful relationship.
    - **Assure** the client that their complaint will be fully investigated. In addition, clients often need to be assured that lessons will be learned and what they or their pet experienced will not be repeated. Even if you are not in a position to take the complaint further, you can assure the client that you will take ownership of their concerns by passing it on to an appropriate person.

- In addition to listening, it is important to use a technique called **'screening'** which put simply is the 'anything else' question. This is a further deliberate attempt to discover all the client's concerns and get their agenda out on the table. It is equally important to listen at this juncture and continue with this line of questioning, until the client has divulged all their concerns, and you are met with a resounding "no". Screening works 'hand in glove' with summarising and an example of this would be "So, to summarise you're annoyed that we dispensed the wrong tablets for Clover's repeat prescription and this happened on two occasions, you also felt that the vet didn't listen to you and you're still concerned that Laura hasn't got to the bottom of Clover's diarrhoea and as a result of this you feel that you shouldn't pay for Clover's tests. Is there anything else?" There is also a tendency to narrow the question down e.g. asking if there is anything else about the bill. The presenting problem may be about the bill but the client's additional concern may be about something else and being this specific may prevent the client from expressing it;

- Demonstrating appropriate and open **body language**, such as maintaining good eye contact, without staring, serves to indicate genuine interest and concern, and helps us to elicit the full list of issues from the client. Head movements, such as nodding and shaking, help to convey interest but it is important that they do not give an opposing message to the verbal one, and if overly vigorous may simply aggravate the client by signifying to them they have made their point or taken up enough time;

- **Empathy** is an essential building block in building the relationship with the client and is part of the 'acceptance response' as it acknowledges the client's feelings and thoughts by naming the emotion whether it be conveyed verbally on non-verbally and reflecting that back to the client. It is worth remembering that acceptance is not agreement and doesn't mean that you concur with the client's grievance or rationale for a certain sequence of events. Attentive silences are also part of the empathic response and it is important that when you respond you avoid the tendency to do so with "yes, but…" Of all the skills, empathy is the one most often thought by learners to be a matter of personality rather than a skill. Certainly a first step in empathy is the internal motivation and commitment to understand the client's perspective. However the subsequent steps can be learned and practised. However the main key to empathy is not only being sensitive but to overtly demonstrate that sensitivity to the client so that they appreciate your understanding and support. Saying you understand without qualifying what you understand is not enough and may rile the client further because you cannot completely understand their predicament. Better to repeat back what you hear and what you see.

You are now in a position to either discuss the way forward with client, if the niggle or complaint is straightforward. However, many complaints at this stage will need further investigation and if this is the case it is important to give a time frame for when you will get back to the client. However it is important to contact the client should this time frame prove difficult. If your role in the practice means that you cannot take the complaint any further, you are now in an ideal position to take responsibility and assure the client that you will take their concerns to a more senior member of the team. This is much more satisfactory for the client than getting a senior member of the team on board in the first instance, without first eliciting their concerns and calming them down.

Once the appropriate member of the team has understood and investigated the complaint he or she is now in a position to relay their findings to the client and look at a mutually acceptable way forward. For those who find themselves in this role it may be helpful at this stage, particularly if you are a different person from the one who gathered the information, to find out the client's understanding of where they are in the process and ascertain what they were hoping to achieve. This is known as the **client's starting point** and questions such as "what is your understanding of how matters were left when speaking with my colleague?" can be helpful. Ascertaining the client's starting point is helpful for a number of reasons:

- The client may have changed their viewpoint from when the information was gathered in the first instance;
- It may be a different member of the family from the person who made the original complaint;
- It allows you to hear any additional information that you may have missed when the client's concerns were listened to initially;
- It enables you to tailor the explanation to the client's needs.

Finding out the client's starting point doesn't diminish the need for you to **summarise** your understanding of events and where you are now, in terms of the investigation. This will demonstrate to the client you are on the same page and enable you to address any gaps in the subsequent dialogue.

If you have to provide news that might be interpreted by the client as difficult or bad, it is important to provide a warning shot. This will give the client an opportunity to gather their thoughts and prepare for the next bit of information. Phrases such as "I have some difficult news", "Unfortunately it is not the outcome you had hoped for".

Furthermore, any information should be delivered in **bite sized pieces**, ensuring that your delivery is paced and easily understood. If several facts need to be relayed it can be helpful to **signpost** that you are delivering a specific amount of information e.g. "I need to cover three points".

In case the client is unhappy or doesn't understand any of the information or solutions you are relaying, it is imperative that you check their understanding and thoughts. This can be done at the end of the dialogue, but if a large amount of information or several points need to be conveyed, it is useful to check that understanding as you go along. This will give the client an opportunity to discuss their thoughts, preventing further concerns arising late in the process. On **checking the client's understanding**, it is important not to use closed questions such as "have I explained myself clearly?" or "are you happy?" Such questions may elicit "yes' as an answer even if the client is still unhappy. Obviously the client's body language can be used in these instances to help gauge the temperature. Alternatively phrases such as "I appreciate I have given you lots of information; just to ensure I have explained it thoroughly would you like to recap for me the three things we discussed? I would be very interested to hear your thoughts on the suggested way forward."

In the case of an outstanding balance it may be appropriate to ask the client for a solution rather than initially come up with one yourself such as a payment plan. This is particularly effective if the client has other concerns, in addition to money, that have been addressed. Phrases such as "what thoughts do you have on clearing the balance?" If the client has no suggestions you can go back to a more practice directed conversation and make suggestions.

At the end of the dialogue it is important to check once again that the client is content with the way forward and offer a route to open dialogue again should other concerns or questions arise at a later stage. This **safety netting** will allow you to 'nip in the bud' further concerns should they arise at a later stage.

Before listening to the webinar it may be helpful to:

- Reflect on a time when you made a complaint face to face that involved money outside the veterinary arena.
  1. **How did you feel?**
  2. **Describe the responses you received when you made the complaint?**
  3. **How did those responses make you feel?**
- Think about how you reacted the last time someone complained to you. Which listening skills highlighted in the handout did you use? Which did you not use? Why?
- Think about understanding the client's starting point as it is important in the subsequent handling of a complaint. Can you think of a situation when you did not clearly understand where the client was coming from? What effect did that have? What steps can you take in the future to make sure you understand their viewpoint at the start of every conversation?
- Reflect on the skills that you have used successfully in practice to demonstrate your empathy to clients? Why is this important and how did it helped your discussions?

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