Dealing with complainants

Client complaints are inevitable, no matter how efficient your practice. 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. However, it can be stressful and upsetting when faced with a client who is complaining, particularly if they are angry or it is during a busy day. Having the right tools at your fingertips to deal with a complaint effectively can help smooth the process and leave you in a better 'frame of mind' with how you've handled the situation.

Definition of a complaint

When a client feels strongly enough that his or her expectations have not been met, he or she may make a complaint. A complaint is an expression of dissatisfaction that is brought to the attention of the practice where the client often expects some redress.

Definition of a complainant

Complainants are defined as clients who have had a problem, and have told a member of the practice team about it. Some complainants are determined to raise a formal complaint but others may feel that their concerns are not serious enough. In the case of the latter, clients may present with 'niggles' or drop cues to members of the team. However, if these cues are not acknowledged, the client may become a 'silent sufferer' and research shows that clients in these situations often do not take their concerns further but will pass the details of their dissatisfaction onto others which can impact on a practice's reputation.

Whether the client has logged a formal complaint or simply made a remark about the service or their concerns, it is important to deal with them otherwise the problem may escalate.

Skills

Research has shown that there are specific skills which can be used to support us when it comes to handling complaints and niggles 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 an 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. These skills also mirror those used in the consulting room.

- **Stay calm, don't get defensive**

  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. Anger stimulates our "fight or flight" response, but we need to suppress this instinct. All too often the 'fight response' inflames the client and we come over as defensive. Alternatively the 'flight response' which is common if we are not the person who can solve the problem, can leave the client feeling abandoned and that no-one is interested or taking responsibility. This response can therefore also ignite the situation. Try to breathe slowly, tell yourself it isn't personal, don't bring preconceived assumptions to the table and maintain eye contact with the client.

It is worth remembering that the client may have more going on in their life than the current problem. 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. These skills also mirror those used in the consulting room.

- **Ensure the environment is right**
  If you are in a public area take the client into a private room. If available, offer the client a seat and sit down too after checking with the client that it is OK to do so. If the client doesn't sit down initially, research shows that it is still important for you to do so. Eventually the client will take a seat providing you continue to use appropriate skills. Make sure there are no interruptions.

- **Attentive listening**
  Stop all other activity. Actively listen to the client's story. Provide genuine 'wait time' where you are not thinking about your next question or preparing an explanation. In a consultation setting research shows that on average we interrupt the clients opening statement after 18 seconds. Soft research indicates that this interruption time could be less in a confrontational situation which means we are less likely to get the client's concerns out on the table. Using neutral facilitative comments such as "uh-huh" and "um" can encourage the client to tell their story. However care needs to be exercised at the start of the dialogue as they can be seen as interrupters particularly if the tone is not right. Open body language is also important, such as relaxed posture and good eye contact while still maintaining a professional but caring demeanour. Body movements such as nodding also go hand in hand with listening and convey interest.

  Summarising, repetition and echoing all communicate to the client that you have heard them, at which point the client doesn't need to keep verbalising their concerns. This is also a highly effective practical tool to ensure accuracy as it demonstrates what you have understood and gives the client an opportunity to correct your misinterpretation. It also allows the client to add in anything they have forgotten. Following this process also ensures that you and the client have attained a mutually shared common ground.

- **Screening**
  This is the use of open ended enquiries to deliberately check with the client that you have elicited their whole story or everything they wish to discuss. In essence it is the 'anything else' question. This effective enquiry works well when it is used in conjunction with a summary. The following is an example of both summarising and screening:

  > *"So 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. Is there anything else?"*

  If you have elicited an additional concern via screening it is important to continue to screen as research shows that clients bring more than one concern to the table and the first concern is often not the most important. 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.

- **Picking up cues**
  Clients are keen to tell us about all their thoughts and feelings but research shows that when clients express their views they may do so covertly in the form of cues. These may be verbal or non-verbal and the rationale

behind this is that clients need to build up trust and a relationship before imparting all their concerns freely particularly if they are angry when making a complaint. Medical research shows that only 7% of doctors actively encourage their patients to elaborate when a cue is made. During VDS training sessions this is a skill everyone is aware of but on watching simulated encounters during our experiential learning workshops it would appear that vets and their team members are unlikely to fare better statistically. This may be because we are a problem solving profession, deemed to be in control and under time constraints. However medical research demonstrates that by exploring cues we can speed up the time spent with the patient and we are more likely to come to a satisfactory conclusion as we have explored all the patient's concerns. This is likely to hold true in the veterinary arena.

- **Empathy**

  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 we respond we 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.

- **Apologise**

  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.

- **Next stage**

  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.