Exploring and Meeting Client Expectations of the Veterinarian-Client Relationship Through the Use of Clinical Communication Skills

Colleen Best, BScH, DVM

1. Introduction
This report discusses the current research findings regarding veterinarian-client interactions and relationships and how they relate to equine veterinary practice. The application of the relationship-centered care model in equine medicine is described, and proven clinical communication skills that illustrate how to incorporate this model into equine veterinarian-client interactions are provided.\(^1\(^{–}\)\(^3\)

2. Relevance
The relationship between an equine veterinarian and a given client can be complex, with elements of collegiality, friendship, and professionalism. The nature of the industry dictates that in many cases, equine veterinarians see their clients on a frequent basis; this necessitates a strong working relationship. The veterinarian must ensure that their relationship with the client facilitates appropriate provision of care for the horse; this requires trust, comfort, and confidence on both sides. Further complexities arise when the client-horse relationship is considered. This relationship is often multifaceted: horses can be investments, athletic partners, companions, or a combination of these. The veterinarian’s understanding of the relationship between client and horse is important because it is often a driving factor in the client’s decisions. Last, it is also important to consider the relationship between veterinarian and horse. Clients differ in their comfort levels with restraint, attitudes toward their horses, and knowledge of routine procedures; therefore, the manner in which a veterinarian handles and treats their horses can influence the veterinarian-client relationship and veterinary outcomes. The relationships described above form the foundation on which the veterinarian provides appropriate and effective care for the horse and are therefore essential components of veterinary practice.

In equine medicine, there is little research-based evidence regarding client expectations, veterinarian-client communication, and veterinarian-client relationships. The role of good communication in reducing malpractice risk in equine medicine has been discussed.\(^4\(^{–}\)\(^6\) As well, in a survey of equine clients that evaluated 24 criteria of client expectations of the overall veterinary service experience, “communication with clients” was ranked fourth; “veterinary competency,” “horse handling,” and “doctor performance” were the top three.\(^6\)
study also looked at areas in which client expectations and veterinarian perceptions differed; the area that had the largest disparity was client education abilities and opportunities. These studies highlight the importance of veterinarian-client communication in equine practice; however, the expectations that clients hold of the veterinarian-client relationship or of veterinarian-client communication are unknown.

Research in companion animal medicine has investigated pet owner expectations of veterinarian-client interactions and veterinarian perceptions of clients’ expectations. One key area of expectation was veterinarian-client communication, specifically relating to client education and the provision of choice, as well as two-way communication between veterinarian and client. Expectations surrounding the monetary aspects of veterinary care have also been described; these include open discussion of costs and their context and the consideration of the client’s financial limitations. Furthermore, it has been shown that on occasion, veterinarians misperceive client expectations. When there is a disconnect between the veterinarian’s perceptions and the client’s expectations, optimal patient care is compromised and the veterinarian-client relationship is jeopardized. Therefore, it is important to recognize the gaps that exist between clients and veterinarians, such that the client’s expectations can be managed effectively, and ultimately patient care is optimized.

Several components of companion animal veterinarian-client interactions have been described in the literature and have been shown to affect client and veterinary outcomes, including veterinarian satisfaction, client satisfaction, and adherence to recommendations. Client adherence to recommendations has been positively correlated with measures of relationship-centered care and client satisfaction. This study also demonstrated that clear recommendations that were fully explained were more likely to result in client adherence when compared with ambiguous recommendations. Veterinarian satisfaction has also been positively correlated with veterinarian communication behaviors that encourage relationship development.

The value and benefits of good communication between veterinarian and client have also been demonstrated. Students provided with training utilize more communication skills during clinical interactions and are rated higher by clients with respect to use of communication skills. Specific strategies suggested for ensuring good communication include forming a relationship with the client, demonstrating empathy, educating the client, and enlisting the client as a partner in his or her horse’s care.

3. Relationship-Centered Care
Relationship-centered care is a model that outlines a framework for veterinarian-client relationships. It involves the establishment of a partnership between client and veterinarian, such that the client’s unique needs and expectations are balanced with the veterinarian’s role as the medical expert. It incorporates the three primary relationships in veterinary medicine: veterinarian-client, client-horse, and veterinarian-horse. The model of relationship-centered care in veterinary medicine is derived from patient-centered care in human medicine, which highlights the needs and concerns of the patient, such that they shape the care he or she will receive. Partnership between doctor and patient, as well as the provision of care that emphasizes the value and uniqueness of each individual in a medical setting, are important principles of patient-centered care. Given the nature and importance of the relationships in equine medicine, relationship-centered care is an appropriate model to use when seeking to form relationships with which a successful practice can be built and maintained.

Investigate the Client’s Perspective
Investigating the client’s perspective lays the foundation and sets the tone for the rest of the interaction. If, from the beginning, the client is encouraged to participate, their opinions are validated, and they believe that they are understood, then the groundwork is set for the formation of a strong partnership, which will facilitate the rest of the appointment and relationship. Fully exploring the client’s opinions and situation provides valuable information regarding what they have been experiencing, about the problem or history of the patient, and the expectations of the client. This information will also be useful later in the interaction when trying to find a mutually acceptable plan, because the plan can be put in the context of the client’s unique situation. In the event that a client is not given an opportunity to express himself or herself, problems can arise because the veterinarian does not have the full story, such as the client’s past experience with the problem or the treatments that have already been tried. Investigating the client’s perspective and history taking are not the same; however, they can be accomplished simultaneously. History-taking is more limited to information about the problem or disease process, whereas the client’s thoughts and concerns are included when investigating his or her perspective. The communication skills below can facilitate efficient and thorough exploration of the client’s perspective.

Open-Ended Questions
The manner in which questions are asked will shape the quality and quantity of the response offered by the client. There are two classes of questions—open-ended and closed-ended—which can be differentiated by the form the answer takes. Closed-ended questions can be answered with a simple yes or no, or another single word. Open-ended ques-
tions allow clients to fully express themselves and describe their experience, thus allowing the clinician to appreciate the whole story of the client and patient’s problem.1,2 At first glance, this may not seem desirable, because information that is unrelated or unnecessary is potentially provided. However, if only closed-ended or very focused questions are asked, valuable information from the client about what has been going on with the horse may be missed. Also, if the time spent learning about the horse and client is important for relationship building and rapport. Examples of open-ended questions are “What has been going on with Lucy?” and “What have you noticed that has you concerned?”

Reflective Listening
Reflective listening is a way to demonstrate that the listener is paying attention, to facilitate the client sharing his or her thoughts, and to indicate comprehension.1,2 A reflective statement is essentially paraphrasing what the client has said. This offers the client a chance to clarify or provide a correction if what was reflected was incorrect or to elaborate if there is more he or she wants to share.1 It shows clients that the veterinarian is genuinely interested in what they have to say and ensures that he or she is catching all the pertinent information being shared. This skill is particularly useful when multitasking during an appointment, because the client may have concerns that the veterinarian is not listening if a physical exam or other procedure is being conducted when he or she is speaking. In this case, reflective listening demonstrates to the client that the veterinarian is still listening despite doing another task simultaneously. Reflective listening helps to form a partnership with the client and can help direct the appointment. Examples of how reflective statements often begin are “If I heard you correctly . . .” or “It sounds like . . .”.

Pick Up and Investigate Cues
Clients often provide verbal and nonverbal cues throughout the interaction, and it is important to notice these cues and explore them with the client.1 Research has shown that doctors in primary care only respond to 21% of patient cues, while ignoring the rest. The same research also showed that when the cues are not investigated, patients brought up the same concern repeatedly; this clearly indicated that whereas the patient had not overtly stated a concern or feeling, there was an issue that needed exploration.1 Actively investigating a client’s cues by asking an open-ended question—or using a reflective listening statement—provides an opportunity for the client to share his/her thoughts and feelings openly and for the veterinarian to demonstrate his or her interest in the client’s experience.1

Common Ground
In many instances, the client and the veterinarian begin the appointment with different perspectives; one of the most important steps in a successful and satisfying encounter is bridging the gap between veterinarian and client and finding common ground.3 This process has three primary steps for the veterinarian and the client: (1) developing a shared understanding of the problem, (2) deciding on common goals for treatment, and (3) determining the role of each of them going forward.3

The ability to find common ground is contingent on an effective investigation of the client’s perspective having taken place. The predominant themes of this phase of the interaction are negotiation and sharing of information and feelings. Two-way communication is essential in this part of a client interaction; the veterinarian and client must listen actively to each other, respond appropriately, and express themselves in a way the other can understand.3

Clients often come into an interaction with ideas regarding the diagnosis3 or what the treatment should be on the basis of their own experience, Internet research, or the advice of friends. This can be challenging for veterinarians to manage if the clinical picture they see does not match the client’s ideas. The work done earlier to explore the client’s perspective can allow the veterinarian to address the discrepancies directly and tactfully. Although the veterinarian may want to simply provide information about their interpretation of the clinical picture and carry on, it is important to address the client’s ideas and frame the information that the veterinarian believes is important in a way that is meaningful to the client.3

Defining the goals of the treatment is also essential.3 In some situations, clients have unrealistic ideas of what can be done, for example, making a lame horse sound or an aging horse as vital as they once were. Open discussions as well as utilizing skills to involve the client and share information about the horse’s condition can be useful methods to bridge the client’s desires and what can be accomplished.3

Finally, the roles of each party, going forward, must be established.3 The information gained earlier in the appointment can help the veterinarian formulate a plan that will be appropriate for the client. It can often be tempting to make assumptions about what the client will or will not be willing to do; the use of communication skills that promote client involvement and promote shared decision-making are valuable to ensure that the plans made are what the client truly wants.

If common ground cannot be found in the key areas described, the likelihood that the client will be satisfied and the patient will receive the care it needs is decreased. As discussed above, open-ended questions and reflective listening are important skills that aid in gaining an understanding of the client’s perspective.1 Skills that promote good two-way communication, client involvement, and
negotiation of mutually acceptable ideas are pro-
vided below.

Checking in
This skill is used to solicit the client’s perspective, most commonly after information has been imparted or during planning of diagnostics and treatments. A check-in can be performed with respect to a number of different things, for example, level of knowledge on a given topic, understanding of an explanation, and whether there are any questions. Check-ins can take the form of closed-ended questions, for example, “Do you have any questions?”; nonverbal communication, for example, pausing after relaying information; or, most effectively, an open-ended question. The use of an open-ended question will help the inquiry sound sincere and allow the client to answer freely, for example, “How does that sound?” or “Could you tell me what you know about founder?”

It is important to actively seek feedback from the clients because it engages them in their horse’s care and can improve adherence to recommendations and treatment outcomes. Furthermore, it can help prevent disagreements because the client is more involved throughout the process. Checking in also helps prevent making incorrect assumptions about the horse and/or client. Often, the veterinarian is familiar with how their clients handle certain situations or with the decisions their client would make. However, it is critical to avoid assuming that because they did ‘y’ last time, that they will do ‘y’ again; veterinarians are bound to provide all the options every time. By checking in and saying, “Would you like to hear the options?” or “What can I tell you so you have the information to make this decision?” the client can decide for himself or herself what he or she wants or needs to hear. This skill is versatile and integral in seeking to actively engage the client in the process of their horse’s care.

Avoid Jargon
The use of medical terminology can be intimidating to clients, and it can create a barrier between veterinarian and client. Often, clients may not want to admit they do not understand and are therefore unwilling to ask questions. In these situations, the veterinarian may not know that the client has not understood; this can lead to negative outcomes such as poor adherence to recommendations or switching veterinarians. The use of terminology that is easily understood facilitates client engagement, helps to ensure their understanding, and promotes their involvement.

Shared Decision-Making
Shared decision-making requires the use of several skills, including open-ended questions, checking in, sharing thinking, and involving the client. It is also an approach that the veterinarian must embrace. All clients are different and have different levels of desired involvement. It is important to engage clients in the process and determine through open inquiry how comfortable they are with decisions being made.

Shared Thinking
“Thinking out loud” is an effective way to share information with a client in a non-intimidating, non-confrontational way. It promotes detailed and thorough information-giving to the client. It also provides the client with information about the veterinarian’s thought process and it helps clients understand why certain things are being said or done, for example, “I want to make sure that his runny nose is not because of something going on in his lungs. So I’m going to put a bag on his nose that will make him take deep breaths and make it easier for me to hear his lung sounds clearly.” Another benefit of sharing thinking is that it can reduce confusion regarding lines of questioning or suggestions, because the client has been given context for the veterinarian’s inquiries, for example, “I think she might have a joint infection, which can be caused by her not getting enough colostrum when she was born. So I’m wondering if you could tell me about what happened after she was born.” Further, it allows them to follow the reasoning behind the veterinarian’s suggestions and can eliminate some of the uncertainty or suspicion regarding the veterinarian’s recommendations.

Involving the Client
Many of the skills discussed previously promote the client’s involvement in their horse’s care. For instance, the use of open-ended questions requires the client to think before answering and provide more than a simple yes or no. A question as simple as, “What suggestions do you have?” or “How were you hoping I could help?” can be very powerful and elicit helpful information that can point to a useful path forward. It is of particular importance to involve the client when discussing diagnostic or treatment options, because this will facilitate the client feeling empowered and respected. It will also strengthen the partnership between veterinarian and client. Providing clients with choices and allowing them to determine what suits their needs necessitates their involvement. This does not mean that the veterinarian does not make recommendations or suggestions, but, through negotiation and the provision of information and choice, the client is involved in the process of their horse’s care.

4. Relationship-Building Skills
Relationship building often occurs naturally as an appointment progresses and over the duration of care of the horse; however, given the importance of a strong veterinarian-client relationship, careful attention must be paid to this process. A good relationship improves the likelihood the client will feel comfortable sharing his or her perspective, facili-
tates the process of finding common ground, and promotes adherence to recommendations; it also reduces the likelihood of conflict. In equine medicine, the relationships formed between veterinarian and client can last for the horse’s lifetime. Often veterinarians find these relationships the most satisfying aspect of practice, and they can be major contributors to client loyalty and practice success. Investigating the client’s perspective and finding common ground are important components of relationship building. However, there are additional skills that can be used at any point in the interaction to directly facilitate and support the relationship.

Empathy
Empathy has two distinct phases: first, the understanding and appreciation of another person’s situation or feelings; second, providing support by communicating that understanding back to the person. In some situations, it may seem unnecessary to comment on the client’s experiences or concerns, but an overt expression of understanding can be very meaningful. Empathy statements demonstrate genuine interest in the client’s experience, build trust, and contribute positively to the veterinarian-client relationship. Examples of empathy statements are “I can imagine this would be difficult for you,” “I can see that this hasn’t been an easy thing to deal with,” and “It sounds like you’ve been really worried about this.”

Nonverbal Communication
Nonverbal communication is an important and often overlooked aspect of any clinical interview. Nonverbal cues are sent through posture, proximity, touch, body movements, facial expression, eye movement, speed of speech, and vocal tone. Making eye contact, nodding appropriately, and having an open body posture all indicate to the client that one is paying attention and following along with what he or she is saying, in contrast to looking away, crossing one’s arms, and stepping back, which suggest disinterest. Often, verbal communication conveys conscious purposeful messages, and nonverbal communication portrays feelings and emotions. Therefore, attending to the nonverbal signs of the client can provide valuable information about the client’s attitudes, thoughts, and feelings, which can be relayed back to the client through a reflective statement or used to guide the next step of the interaction. Being aware of one’s own nonverbal cues and those of the client can enhance the quality of the interaction, provide more information, and help to form a stronger relationship.

Self-Reflection
A critical component of strengthening veterinarian-client relationships, as well as learning and improving use of communication skills, is self-reflection. It is rare that an external evaluation is provided of how well one communicates with a client or whether one’s relationship with the client is good. Instead, this information must be gained by introspection and reflection of the interaction that took place. Clinically, the outcome of a case can be used to retrospectively evaluate an antibiotic choice or a rehabilitation protocol. A similar process can be performed for interactions with clients by reviewing the clinical encounter; considering what happened, what was said, and then reflecting on how certain aspects could have been handled differently. Some helpful questions to consider are: Did I understand what the client was telling me? Did I understand what the client wanted from me? Did the client understand what I said? Did the client get what he/she needed? Is the horse going to get the care it needs? Is the client satisfied?

Take Home Messages

- There is strong evidence to support the use of relationship-centered care as a model of veterinarian-client relationships in equine medicine.
- Clinical communication skills can ensure effective veterinarian-client communication and assist in the building of strong veterinarian-client relationships.
- A good relationship between veterinarian and client can improve loyalty, patient outcomes, and job satisfaction.
- There is value in being critical of how one interacts with one’s clients and the relationships one has formed with them. Through focusing on investigating the client’s perspective, finding common ground and relationship-building strong veterinarian-client relationships can be formed.

References