

Veterinary professionals need to change how they connect with their clients

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When advising on animal health and welfare, veterinarians often struggle to engage with the motivational needs of their clients. New research has shown a change is needed in how veterinarians communicate with and advise animal owners, to promote engagement with their advice and protect the animals in their care.

Researchers at the University of Bristol's School of Veterinary Sciences have found that when veterinarians give [advice](#) to clients with the aim of changing their behaviour—such as encouraging them to feed their pet differently- they often speak in a directive style, which is driven by a paternalistic-type relationship. This type of communication reduces a client's sense of emotional connection to their veterinarian, whilst limiting their personal choice and self-direction in the decision-making process. This consultation method, combined with its conflict with these basic motivational drives, may contribute to why low uptake of veterinary recommendations are reported throughout the profession. One solution could be the use of evidence-based communication approaches that have been tried and tested in the medical profession.

Alison Bard, PhD researcher at the School of Veterinary Sciences, said "Veterinarians are working hard to connect with their clients and promote the health of animals in their care, but being a veterinarian is not just about communicating science and methodology. Communication must also inspire motivation, prompt action and boost confidence for an animal carer to put veterinary advice into practice.

"The problem our research identified is that the perceived role of the veterinarian—to provide advice and solutions—leads to a personal communication style that leaves little room for empathy or client input. This style comes at a high cost for client engagement with advice, as we know from wider research that relational interaction and active participation of clients is essential for inspiring a change in behaviour. For the typical veterinarian, this may be surprising, as the clinical accuracy and relevance of advice has traditionally (and intuitively) been the focus of advisory services."

The research team believe a shift in veterinarian's perceptions of advisory consultations is needed to improve the uptake of advice.

Alison added: "As a profession, veterinarians can benefit from recognising that behaviour change is incredibly complex. Being provided with the 'right' advice is not always enough for clients to put veterinary recommendations into action, especially where disease management is complicated and clients have mixed feelings over treatment options. How information is communicated in these cases affects client outcomes, meaning the difference between a motivated and unmotivated client can—in fact—be shaped by the veterinarian."

The research team hope that this study will help veterinarians to think differently about their consultations by encouraging them to consider how their communication may be influencing client motivation and behaviour. As a result, they hope veterinarians will think carefully before using labels like 'unmotivated' or 'resistant to advice', and instead explore whether their clients are perhaps just in need of emotional support, [personal choice](#) or a sense of self-confidence to truly engage with veterinary recommendations.

This call for change in the veterinary profession is already underway as a result of the VetFutures project, launched in 2015. This project called

for a change in veterinary consultation style: away from a hierarchical model with the [veterinarian](#) as the expert passing on instruction, to a model centred on partnership to create empowered and motivated clients.

Bristol's research will inform this focus of the VetFutures project, and this study provides further evidence about the consequences of paternalistic communication on motivation and behaviour change in veterinary clients.

Dr Kristen Reyher, Senior Lecturer in Farm Animal Science, said: "This paper is one element of an exciting research project that will help inform and support our evolving veterinary profession. I'm confident that change can be achieved with the help of on-going research. Our interdisciplinary work is focused on whether Motivational Interviewing—an evidence-based communication method that fosters a mutualistic approach to conversations on [behaviour change](#)—can deliver the advances VetFutures imagine for our colleagues of the future.

"We look forward to providing further evidence to contribute to a professional shift that will enhance the experience and wellbeing of veterinarians, clients and the animals in their care."

More information: 'The future of veterinary communication: Partnership or persuasion? A qualitative investigation of veterinary communication in the pursuit of client behaviour change' by Alison M. Bard et al in PLOS ONE

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