

Clients are always right, are they not?

On the modern veterinary profession, where vets have to be business men at the same time than animal healers, client management has become an important issue. Unfortunately, we, as vets, except in rare occasions, lack the training to deal with clients. Due to this, mostly of the practices have taken shortcuts, mostly based on the somehow true statement “client is always right”.

This statement is true when applied to a fast food restaurant chain, a supermarket or similar. If you go to a fast food restaurant from a big chain and complaint about the taste of your burger, even when there is barely nothing left; the manager will be called in and he or she will give you a new one, no questions asked. It is the same if you break a bottle of wine while in the premises of a big supermarket because you, and do not forget this, have overloaded your shopping bag and this one breaks. You will get a new one, no questions asked.

The fact in these two cases is not that the client is always right, as big companies, they do set certain protocols to confront this kind of situations. What we are not aware of are all the factors behind these protocols. They are not only economical, but also affect to other aspects like stress in their employees, issues with the company branding (think about everytime a news appears about a problem on a fast food restaurant, how even in the internet forums, there is always somebody that appears to support the big company as an individual but with a clear corporate message) etc. The reality is that for the companies is cheaper to give a new burger or bottle of wine than the time spent on arguing the case.

Bringing that to the veterinary world, we have learn just to use the statement “client is always right”, but never scratched the surface to understand what really means. For starts, as vets, we need to know what are we selling and how it is not the same to sell a bag of food than a clinical diagnosis. One is a product and the other is a service. When selling a product, you have clients, but when selling a service, you have patients.

As service sellers, we are professionals and we should understand what this involves. If your accountant does your tax return, and you end up having to pay money to the Inland Revenue; he or she will not spare the professional fees. Why then, if a surgery

goes wrong (something that happens to everybody), we do not charge the owners or give them a more than generous discount. This is client management badly understood.

In my experience, I have seen many occasions where the surgical procedure or the medical test has not given the expected results and the bill has been forgiven to the client as a “good will gesture”. This has two clear issues as it can be seen as an admission of a mistake and also, it leaves an open door to the client to move to a different practice. Instead, it would be more reasonable, if you think that you need to give a “good will gesture” to offer a discount on future bills for a period of time at the practice. In this way, your professional work is paid (and hence you are seen as a professional), you do not admit any liability and ensure future visits to benefit of the discount.

Communication is often the problem in modern society. Many vets believe that they should not upset the client/patient anyhow. Somehow, it is not nice to tell the owner that the surgery about to be performed in their pet can go wrong. Many vets believe that to let the owner know about possible bad outcomes is seen as a sign of weakness or lack of ability, when it is quite the opposite. It is crucial to explain well about the reasons for the surgery, the risks involved, the possible outcomes, but also the estimate of cost, not only for the surgery, but also for the post surgical care. It is not popular and clients do not like to hear bad news, but the fact is that, despite how skillful we can be, there are always risks in every surgery.

A client study is something explained as necessary in management books. It is also explained how to do one (classify the clients based on frequency, volume...). This study requires an investment that not all the clinics can afford. A very simple way to differentiate clients is between satisfied and non-satisfied ones. The first group of clients includes the ones that have their expectations fulfilled, while in the second group they do not have them fulfilled. The trouble here is that expectations are created by the owner, but the service is provided by the vet. So, the best advise again is: “do not be your worse enemy”; and do not forget to mention to the clients/patients that things can go wrong. It is much better to mention the risks prior to surgery, than having to face the owner after a “very simple surgery” and trying to explain the bad outcome.

Another common mistake among the vets is to think that good client management is

the same than good “bed side manner”. To be polite with the clients is something that owners expect from us as vets. To greet them on arrival with a hand shake, to be approachable, communicative... it is something good for the client management, but it is as important as having a protocol to deal with complaints, for example. It will also help if things go wrong, to have a good relation with your clients/patients, but we should not rely only on it.

Client management involves to all the members of the staff, from the receptionists, to the vets. The whole team needs to receive training on how to deal with clients when things go as expected, and more importantly, what to do when things do not go as expected.

In my opinion it is important to have a person to deal with the complaints. This person needs to be a senior member of staff, but to be the partner does not immediately qualifies to deal with complaints. Training is crucial for this job. The person in charge should be contacted as soon as a client wants to make a complaint. A good record of the whole proceedings is necessary, so on the first place, it is important to keep good clinical records.

If on your records you have “routine bitch spay” as the whole clinical notes of the surgery, if the wound breaks down, you will not be able to argue that the technique and material used is recommended on the books and has a determined success rate, so the problem has to be something else as that the animal has not been cage resting or wearing the buster collar as recommended. In this case, you will be responsible just because you have no records.

When an owner wants to complaint, do not hide behind the usual “send as a letter”, but try to arrange a meeting. It will show your will to find a solution. If this is not possible, ask for a written complaint in which the owner also comments on which would be the best resolution for this particular case and why. Study the complaint or make notes during the meeting outlining the key reasons for the complaint, so you can answer to each of the points on your response letter.

Let the owner know that you have received the letter and he or she would have an

answer in a reasonable period of time. Explained that those days are used to interview the people involved as well as well as to review the clinical notes. Then also, once you have outlined the points that you consider key to the complaint, ask the the client/patient if there is anything missing that he or she would like responded.

Have a meeting with the people involved in an informal matter, but keeping record of it and making clear that your main aim is to improve the client satisfaction. It is important to listen to both sides, as many times clients are not always truthful about what really happened (because they feel guilty about it or want to have a “freebie”). I have encountered far too many times that the vet is guilty, before putting across their point. This adds up to the stress in the profession and it is one of the things that companies should avoid as interferes with normal client care.

Once all the details are collected, prepare a report that must include your report, the clinical records and articles from magazines or books that support your affirmations. On your report, start by expressing how sorry you are that the team has not been able to fulfill the expectations generated. Then, respond to each of the points the complaint is about individually and finish given the proactive actions that you are about to take (change protocols, give people involved further training...). Finally and only after studying each case individually, offer a “good will gesture”, but as I mentioned before, a discount of 10% on every visit for a year looks better than give the money back.

When facing a client/patient, think about what you are selling, communicate and keep record; do not think that client management it is just “good bed side manner” and “client is always right” and when (and not if) a complaint happens, use it as an opportunity to show your clients how your team is prepared and has a good client management skills.