How many times in a day or week do you find yourself asking the question, “Why don’t these clients do what we want them to do?” The answer lies somewhere between your ability to listen and your ability to persuade. By enhancing several key communication skills, you really can influence the behaviors of your clients. For 30 years, medical researchers have been studying physician–patient interactions and the results, although not easy to analyze, have been surprisingly straightforward. Effective communication has been found to significantly improve medical outcomes, including patient health and satisfaction, adherence to medical recommendations, and doctor satisfaction.

Approximately half of all medical patients in the U.S. are not following their doctor’s advice. A review of 63 studies assessing patient compliance showed that close to 40% of patients take prescribed medication incorrectly or not at all. Almost twice that number fail to adhere to dietary restrictions and prescribed exercise or continue to engage in compromising habits such as smoking and abusing alcohol. This nonadherence and partial adherence by patients results in increased frustration for both the doctor and the patient and can lead to incorrect diagnoses and unnecessary or prolonged treatment.

In veterinary medicine, a recent study conducted by the American Animal Hospital Association revealed that client compliance is much lower than veterinarians had predicted. The study looked at estimated levels of compliance in small animal practice and was limited to six key areas: heartworm testing and prevention, dental prophylaxis, therapeutic foods, senior screenings, canine and feline core vaccines (DHLPP and FVRCP), and preanesthetic testing. In general, the study concluded that the majority of practitioners surveyed believed their client adherence levels were as high as 75% when in reality the average rate was found to be 50%. This means that only half of the clients seen in those practices followed through on the treatments their veterinarians recommended. The study also found that veterinarians estimated that client compliance in regard to therapeutic foods was 59%, but the actual rate was 21%. Estimates for dental pro-
phylaxis were 54%, but the compliance rate was 35%, and the gap for heartworm preventive was even greater. Therefore, low adherence to recommendations presents complex challenges for all members of the health-care team. Improving compliance relies heavily on the quality of the interaction between the client and veterinarian and other members of the health-care team.

A 1999 review identified four distinct dimensions of physician-patient communication that were associated with increased compliance: health-care education, negotiation, an active role for the patient, and expressions of empathy and encouragement by the physician. A separate study found that patients were more likely to be compliant when their doctors offered additional information, used more positive (less negative) language, and asked fewer questions. The less time spent asking questions meant more time for providing information.

Studies examining owner compliance in the veterinary literature have documented short-term use of antimicrobials; an important determinant for compliance was that owners felt the veterinarian spent enough time during the examination room visit. Other determinants of compliance were collaborative planning of the treatment regimen, provision of specific verbal and written instructions, and timely encouragement. Unmistakably, patient care is influenced by client adherence and satisfaction with the quality of communication between veterinarian and client. One 2006 study highlighted specific types of communication that are essential for patient health including ensuring that clients understand correct administration of medications, instructions for providing pet home and after care, and the importance of appropriate follow-up visits.

**BENEFITS**

Client adherence has many benefits for the animal, client, veterinarian, and the veterinary practice. When clients adhere to recommendations for their animal, it can result in improved pet health, which minimizes the need for urgent visits. It also means that if their animal is healthier, clients and others who interact with the animal will benefit. Adherence also improves client confidence, because the client feels good about taking action and carrying out recommendations. The veterinarian benefits because it is rewarding to see treatment plans followed all the way to completion and confidence gained improves his/her ability to communicate with clients, staff, and colleagues. Finally, the veterinary practice benefits when clients adhere to recommendations because they make scheduled wellness and preventive care visits more regularly.

**ESSENTIAL SKILLS TO ENHANCING CLIENT ADHERENCE**

- **Introduction**—Even in urgent care, introductions set a tone for the encounter.
- **Greetings**—With returning clients, it is important to acknowledge the patient and the person in the room.
- **Open-ended Inquiry**—Invite the story from clients in a manner that allows them to tell you in their words what is wrong, why they have brought their animal in, what they have noticed, their concerns and expectations, etc. Sometimes the story will be fairly straightforward: “Ingrid is here for her vaccinations and I want to be sure she is healthy.” At other times the story may take more prodding to understand the medical issues as well as the meaning and anticipated concerns that lie beneath the surface: “I noticed that Max seems to be vomiting more often and seems to be losing weight.” Clients may or may not voice additional concerns unless asked to share their story, which may or may not include their own ideas about what they think might be wrong. One example of how to invite the story is: “Tell me more about what you’ve noticed and what your thoughts are about these changes in Max.”
• **Reflective Listening**—Simplest form of reflective listening is a short summary. With a rising tone of voice it is both a statement and a question: “So Max threw up twice last night.”

The second form offers an interpretation, changing the words that clients use so the clinician is sure that he/she understands what is being said: “Glad that you brought him in today. It sounds like you’re really concerned.”

The third kind of reflective listening tests the hypothesis that clients are not saying outright what they are thinking or feeling: “Given your recent loss of Snowball, I’m wondering if that’s what you’re worried about with Max.”

• **Express Empathy**—The communication of empathy lets clients know that the clinician has heard them at a deep level. The clinician not only understands what the experience was like for the client, but he/she also appreciates the meaning of the experience: “I think anyone who cares about their cat the way you do would have reacted that way.”

• **Body Language**—It is important to be aware of clues that clients provide indicating they need clarification, are anxious, or experiencing other emotions. These may be apparent in facial expressions, a shift in eye contact, or nervous gestures. Your own nonverbal cues may enhance or inhibit the interaction with clients. Are you aware of your facial expressions, tone of voice, and overall presence when you communicate with clients?

• **Literacy Sensitive**—Do not make any assumptions about the level of the clients’ health literacy. It has been estimated that less than half of the information clients are given during each visit is retained.11

Limit the amount of information given, use clear, simple language, and keep a slow pace to allow clients the time to absorb information. If discussing risk, avoid using too many numbers that may overwhelm the client.

• **Assess Client Understanding**—Providing information (ie, teaching) is only one aspect of client education. You should also assess clients’ understanding of the cause of the problem, why it is important to act, and what needs to be done. Be sure that clients have asked all their questions: “We talked about a few things now. I’m wondering what questions you have for me?” “What will you tell your family about this when you get home?”

• **Assess Conviction and Confidence**—Assess conviction by asking, “How important do you feel this endoscopy procedure is to identify Jake’s intestinal problems?” To quantify, you might ask, “On a scale from 0 to 10, with 0 not important at all to 10 being of utmost importance, how important do you feel this surgery is to help Keke’s paw?”

Assess confidence by asking, “How confident are you that you can carry out this plan?” or “On a scale from 0 to 10, how likely is it that you will be able to remember to give Rocket this medication twice a day?”

• **Provide Options**—Whenever possible, offer clients options: “Would you like the medication in pill form or liquid?”

• **Clarify Details**—Whenever possible, include pictures and clear, specific, written instructions (ie, how often treatment must be given, meal requirements, etc.). Discuss positive reasons for following recommendations, including anticipated benefits, and discuss successful techniques that will help clients remember to give medication or help them to keep a schedule. Prepare in advance with the client for weekends, holidays, vacations, and other disruptions to daily routines. Discuss potential side effects clients should report.

• **Provide Written Action Plan**—Written instructions (and supplemental materials) that are knowledge sensitive can help clients remember what was said during an office visit.
Learning ways to influence client adherence requires an understanding of the importance of client and veterinary practice characteristics, cognitions, values, and communication behaviors. In addition, improving client adherence requires the willingness to evaluate one’s own behavioral contributions to relationship-building with clients. Learning and practicing many of the above skills are the first steps to enhancing client relationships, increasing client satisfaction, increasing client adherence, and improving patient health.

REFERENCES


Written instructions and supplemental materials that are knowledge sensitive can help clients remember what was said during an office visit.

References for this article as well as further information on the topic are available on the Web at www.HillsVet.com/ConferenceProceedings.