Communication matters

Communication is more than just saying the right thing. No matter how long you have been in practice, refining your communication skills will have positive effects, as Liz Mossop and Zoe Belshaw explain.

‘To be able to communicate effectively with others is at the heart of all patient care’ (Faulkner 1998). While communication is central to being a vet, many vets have not received any formal communication skills training.

Communicating effectively minimises stress levels in the practice and reduces complaints; at least 80 per cent of complaints to the Veterinary Defence Society include an element of poor communication (Anon 2001). With good communication, clients are more likely to comply with your treatment recommendations and mention a key part of the history, which they might otherwise have omitted to tell you.

The profession is starting to realise that training in communication isn’t an optional extra; all recent graduates will have received formal communications skills teaching as part of their training, and the impact of communication is part of the A module of the RCVS’s Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice.

There are several easy strategies that will help you to improve what you do. Don’t forget that these contribute to your CPD hours required by the RCVS.

Peer observation
One of the simplest methods is to ask a colleague to observe you consulting. Discuss beforehand what you feel your strengths and weaknesses are, and what you would like them to look out for. Ask for constructive feedback: ‘You were great’ doesn’t help anyone; ‘You were great because . . . ’ is a lot more useful.

Even better, observe them in return – you can learn a lot from watching others. It may be useful to organise your observations around a particular consultation structure, or you could ask for thoughts around simple aspects, such as the use of open and closed questions or your body language. Make sure you return to the feedback after you have tried to improve – are you doing what you said you would? Has anything changed?

Use of video
The use of video recordings is common for GPs in training, but is rare in the veterinary profession. It is a really useful way of reflecting on what you do, and is accessible to anyone with a video camera or with a video function on a digital camera or smartphone. Of course, you must get permission from your clients to do this, and it can be a little disconcerting at first.

Recording several consultations in a series is usually a good idea. Once you have the recordings it is up to you how to use them. You could choose to review them privately and reflect on what you do, set yourself targets around aspects you wish to change, or review them with a colleague and ask for feedback. However you use them, record your thoughts, and go back and review your targets after a period of time to see whether you have met them.

CPD courses
There are a number of commercial CPD courses that aim to help improve communication skills. Many are aimed at the practice team, rather than just veterinary surgeons. Practical courses are usually the most rewarding, and they often involve the use of actors to simulate clients – as scary as this sounds, it is good to be able to try different techniques without risking upsetting clients! To get the most from a CPD course, share your thoughts about it afterwards with a colleague, and record your aims for the next few months.

Written resources
There are also a number of written resources, which can be useful alongside any feedback you may receive. There are numerous textbooks aimed at doctors on how to improve communication skills, and these can be a good starting point. Veterinary-specific versions are available. The National Unit for the Advancement of Veterinary Communication Skills (NUVACs) website (www.nuvacs.co.uk) includes a suggested consultation structure, which can be useful to guide feedback and reflection. This structure is based around the Calgary-Cambridge guidance, which is a common medical structure (Kurtz and Silverman 1996).

In-house training
Everyone in the practice team can improve
their communication skills. In-house training can be a fun team-building experience. Packages are offered by several commercial companies, and may be an economical way of delivering CPD to everyone. It could also be a good topic for discussion at a staff meeting, which need not cost anything. Pick a particular aspect to discuss—for example, discussion of fees, or a difficult euthanasia episode. This is a great way for you to see what the client does, and it might not be what you think.


Worthwhile exercise
Improving your communication skills has an instant feel-good result and can be tremendously satisfying, and it doesn’t need to cost anything.

Being observed and videoed by a colleague is a great way for you to see what the client does, and it might not be what you think.

Ten-minute chat
Kate Richards is the Principal Private Secretary to the Secretary of State for Scotland and she leads the private office team supporting ministers in the UK Government. She graduated as a vet from Edinburgh in 1985 and worked as a farm animal practitioner and partner in Scotland before moving to the pharmaceutical industry. Three years later, she joined Defra as a veterinary adviser.

What was your path to working for a UK Government Cabinet minister?
I have always enjoyed challenges, stretching myself and being at the centre of activity. I enjoyed farm animal work, being paid to do a job I loved, and driving around the beautiful Scottish Highlands was a real privilege. However, after 15 years I experienced a strong desire to experience life that was not bound by the limitations of veterinary practice.

My time with a pharmaceutical company provided the opportunity to work with practitioners throughout the country and gain experience of our profession operating on a national basis. Based in London, I worked with colleagues across the globe. My location gave me easy access to meetings, and I began to know the people pictured in Veterinary Record. I was proud to work in the disease emergency control centre during the foot-and-mouth outbreak in 2001. I then completed a diploma in marketing, which had been on my to-do list for a couple of years, and moved into the company’s marketing department.

I joined Defra in 2003, and have worked in several Whitehall departments. The Civil Service is an enormous organisation, with each department having a different culture and identity. My roles have included veterinary adviser (Defra), scientific secretary to a scientific committee (Defra), head of corporate communications (HMRC) and now principal private secretary (Scotland Office). I use many of the skills I learned as a practitioner, for example, communicating, influencing, people management, crisis management, analysis of evidence, prioritisation, multitasking and decision-making. All of these have proved invaluable.

How did you come to carve out this unique career?
While driving round the Scottish Highlands I remember thinking ‘I’m a vet . . . I can’t do anything else’ and feeling frustrated about what I perceived to be a lack of career options. I toyed with the idea of a complete career change, for example, doing a degree in geology. It was when I was driving back from Edinburgh at 07.00 having completed a two-hour stint in an abattoir that I suddenly realised ‘I’m a vet . . . so what can’t I do?’ Having recognised that it was my imagination that was limiting my horizons, I started my journey, not knowing exactly where I would end up. Having overcome my own imaginary barriers, I have had to convince some people that, while I am a vet, I am capable of doing non-vet roles, as I have transferable skills and a wealth of sound experience and expertise.

What do you like about your job?
My current role is fascinating. I work at the heart of government and to see first-hand the formation of the coalition government and coalition agreement was an amazing experience. I have had the privilege of working for three secretaries of state in two years.

Leading and managing a Cabinet minister’s private office is demanding and extremely fast-paced. I have a team of staff who manage parliamentary business, correspondence, an overflowing diary, ministerial visits and engagements. No two days are the same and there is always something new to learn. I thrive on this diversity and work with colleagues across all Whitehall departments; it is a job where teamwork, communication, negotiation and influencing skills are keys to success.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
You can only make decisions based on the information you have at the time.

What advice would you give someone considering a similar career?
Believe in yourself, work hard and don’t be constrained by yourself or others in moving towards your goal. Keep an open mind and look for opportunities.

What has been your proudest moment?
First, graduating from the Dick Vet. Secondly, my first public performance singing solo.

. . . and your most embarrassing?
I had gone to a call to see an animal with pneumonia. The reception on the two-way radio had been poor, but I was near the farm in question. The farmer was not there when I arrived, which was often the case. I identified the animal in the shed of 40 cattle, caught it with a lasso and was just putting on the halter when the farmer appeared asking what was I doing. The farm had the right name; the problem was that there were four farms with that name in the practice and I was at the wrong one!

Do you miss being a vet?
I am still a vet! There are elements of practice I miss: the people, the animals, the veterinary banter; and there are elements I do not miss: the kicks, bites and the on-call rota. I will always be proud to be a vet and use many of the skills I learned as a vet every day.
Ten-minute chat

Kate Richards

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