Canine behaviour problems: discussions between veterinarians and dog owners during annual booster consultations

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Context
Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 (Section 9), owners are legally obliged to ensure their animal’s welfare. Welfare consists of three distinct, but overlapping, domains: health and physiological functioning (body); affective state (mind); and social functioning, including normal development, behaviour and temperament (nature). To help owners fulfil their obligation, Codes of Practice advise seeking support from veterinarians and other relevant professionals. Although the veterinary profession acknowledges its responsibility to provide behavioural support, it has been criticised for focusing on the physiological aspects of welfare and overlooking the psychological. This study explored the welfare support provided by veterinarians through observing discussions during dogs’ annual booster vaccination consultations and questionnaires.

Main conclusion
All clients reported their dog performed one or more problematic behaviours. These were not fully explored during the consultation, if at all. It is unclear how pet owners access behaviour support. Where sources of support are not knowledgeable, both human and animal welfare can be seriously compromised. Veterinarians need to ensure clients are enabled to discuss behaviour issues and are provided with appropriate support, be that in-house or via referral.

Approach
A ‘fly-on-the-wall’ approach was used to investigate welfare discussions during dog annual booster vaccinations. Seventeen consultations were videoed in two UK small animal practices, involving six veterinarians, 17 owners and 17 dogs. Clients completed a questionnaire after the consultation. The purpose of the study was to capture a range of insights, rather than provide a representative view of the profession and its clientele.

Results
Consultations lasted on average nine minutes. Five main topics of discussion were identified: navigation (ie, directing the consultation, medical, husbandry, behaviour and cost. Veterinarians led discussion of all topics except behaviour, which was instigated approximately equally by veterinarian and client. All clients reported that their dog performed one or more behaviours that they considered to be problematic, totalling 58 behaviour concerns across the sample. Ten of these were discussed during consultations, although none was fully explored or managed beyond the consultation. Behaviour discussion varied between veterinarians; this may reflect their experience, confidence or client scenarios in the veterinary practice should be explored, including services provided by other staff, different consultation formats, and the support provided to other species. Understanding the needs of owners and animals enables the opportunities for the veterinary profession to support behaviour welfare to be optimised. When support is not accessed or provided, animal welfare, the human-animal bond and the dog’s impact on society can be compromised.