SHORT COMMUNICATION

Consultation length in first opinion small animal practice

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Context

Research suggests that veterinary consultations often exceed 10 minutes in length, yet the 10-minute consultation is still a common feature of first opinion practice. Research in medicine has suggested that longer consultations are associated with discussion of more problems and improved management of some conditions. The aim of this study was to determine the average length of small animal consultations and describe factors which may affect consultation length.

Main conclusion

Consultation length often exceeded the 10 minutes allocated, so a 10-minute appointment may not be appropriate for all patients. The discussion of multiple problems was often a feature of longer consultations.

Approach

Consultations were timed over the course of two weeks at two small animal veterinary practices in the UK. Timing started as the client entered the consultation room and stopped once they had left. Reading and writing of clinical notes and dispensing of medications before and after the consultation were not included. Number of animals presented, number of problems discussed and type of consultation were also recorded.

Results

A total of 182 consultations involving 203 animals were timed. Consultations ranged in length from 51 seconds to 36 minutes 45 seconds with a median of nine minutes 49 seconds. There was a weak positive correlation between number of problems discussed and consultation length (Spearman’s rho 0.373, 95 per cent confidence interval 0.240 to 0.491). There was no significant difference in consultation length between preventive medicine consultations and those for a specific health problem (P=0.709).

Interpretation

Consultation length was shorter than indicated by previous studies; however, many consultations exceeded the 10 minutes allocated. As this was a convenience sample of consultations, which may not be representative of UK practice, caution should be taken when extrapolating the results.

Significance of findings

Based on the results, trialling longer consultations of 15 or 20 minutes could be justified. Further research could identify other factors affecting consultation length so that appointment times can be individually tailored to each patient.
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