Capturing the complexity of first opinion small animal consultations using direct observation

N. J. Robinson, M. L. Brennan, M. Cobb, R. S. Dean

Data were gathered on 1901 patients presented in 1720 consultations, with most consultations (91.4 per cent) involving one patient only. Revisits were the most common type of consultation (38.2 per cent), followed by preventive medicine consultations (34.7 per cent) and first consultations (25.5 per cent). Dogs were the most frequently presented species (65.0 per cent) followed by cats (27.6 per cent) and rabbits (4.7 per cent). The majority of dogs were purebred (79.1 per cent), with the labrador retriever being the most common breed. Domestic shorthair was the most common cat breed (74.9 per cent) andlop was the most common rabbit breed (35.8 per cent). Cats presented tended to be older and more likely to be neutered than dogs, which in turn were older and more likely to be neutered than rabbits.

More than one problem was discussed for the majority of patients (65.4 per cent), with up to eight problems discussed for some patients. More problems were discussed in preventive medicine consultations than in first consultations or revisits. Fewer problems were discussed for rabbits than for dogs or cats. There was only a weak positive correlation between age and total number of problems discussed. However, when data were analysed by type of problem, age was positively correlated with the number of specific health problems discussed and negatively correlated with the number of preventive medicine problems discussed.

The data collection tool worked well during direct observation of consultations, with a low opt-out rate and a wealth of data collected. The frequency with which more than one problem was discussed suggests that comorbidity may be very common in veterinary patients. Many studies of veterinary interventions exclude patients with comorbidities, so patients recruited to these intervention studies may not be representative of those typically presented in first opinion practice. The study used a convenience sample of practices and it is currently unclear how representative this network is of UK first opinion practice.

The method developed is likely to be useful in future practice-based research, particularly for topics such as veterinary decision-making where the complexities of the consultation will be of interest. It could also be used as a comparator in the validation of other methods harnessing data from first opinion practice. The findings could be used to direct veterinary education, particularly when teaching consulting skills. Veterinary practices may find the results useful when deciding on how to schedule appointments and which designated clinics to offer.
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