

PERSONAL WELLNESS

Mixed Emotions

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Given that most people consider their pets to be part of the family, it is not surprising that strong emotions are often encountered in the veterinary clinic. In one exam room, a happy family shows off their new kitten. In the next, a 20-year-old man and his family cry as they say goodbye to his childhood dog. While one member of the vet team is thanked by a client for the post-op care they provided to a patient, another team member is accused of being “heartless” after presenting an estimate to treat a sick pet. These intense emotions can affect the client’s decision-making and require careful handling by the veterinary team.

DISCUSSING QUALITY OF LIFE AND EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia is thought to be the hardest part of the job by many outside of the profession. In reality, it is the conversation leading up to a euthanasia that is considered the most difficult part of the process by many veterinarians.¹ These conversations are often emotionally charged, though the emotions surrounding the decision to euthanize may vary in different situations.

In some cases, the client may present their pet for a quality-of-life evaluation. Some clients are open about this, while others may feel too nervous or guilty to begin the conversation. When the veterinarian or their

staff senses this, using a question such as, “What is your goal for today’s appointment?” can give clients the opportunity to share their thoughts. While conversations surrounding quality of life can be emotional for both the veterinarian and client, when all involved agree that euthanasia is the best option the process is easier.

Unfortunately, not all end-of-life discussions are as easy. Finances often play a role in decisions surrounding treatment and euthanasia. For a client with limited finances and a pet that requires a life-saving surgery costing hundreds or thousands of dollars, euthanasia may be in the patient’s best interest. In situations of economic euthanasia, clients are more likely to express anger at the clinic’s payment policies or guilt surrounding their limited finances. The veterinary team can help guide clients in their decision and offer support if the client makes the difficult decision to euthanize. Providing reassurance to the client that they are acting in their pet’s best interest and withholding judgment on their financial situation are crucial to successfully managing these situations.

In other cases, a pet owner may be unwilling to euthanize despite the pet’s poor quality of life. As veterinary medicine becomes more advanced, there are often many things we *can* do for a pet. But should we?



Most veterinarians have experienced situations where clients request treatment that the vet feels is futile.² These situations are especially difficult for all members of the veterinary team who can see the pet's suffering and feel unable to do the "right thing."² Utilizing existing quality-of-life evaluation scales, having multiple conversations, and offering to refer a patient to a hospice veterinarian are all strategies that can be used to help move a client toward the decision to euthanize. The longer these conversations take, the more distressing they can be to the veterinarian.¹ It is important for veterinarians to stay aware of their own emotions during these conversations and avoid expressing frustration to the client.

In all euthanasia situations, veterinary teams can help the client through the process by clearly explaining the procedure and preparing clients for any potential adverse events. For clients who express high levels of grief, offering the services of a trained social worker or grief counselor may be helpful. Some grief counselors may be open to working with a client prior to euthanasia to help them make the decision to euthanize.

EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

Emotions are often magnified in emergency situations when decisions must be made quickly, money is more likely to be a factor, and the situation is unexpected. Because of this, emergency hospital staff often take the brunt of an upset client's negative emotions.

It is important to remember that emotions do not occur in a vacuum. Take, for example, the client who has just brought the family's 2-year-old chihuahua to your clinic after he was attacked by a large dog on their evening walk. The patient is in shock, has numerous puncture wounds and a large abdominal hernia, and is in respiratory distress. You discuss diagnostic and treatment options and give the client a guarded prognosis. The client begins to yell at you and your veterinary nurse. While this client's reaction may be inappropriate, it is likely driven by a number of emotions—guilt that he or she couldn't protect the dog, shock at the situation, fear of losing the dog, anger at the other dog's owner, or worry over the cost of veterinary care. By acknowledging these emotions, the veterinarian can begin to work with the client to make the best decisions for the pet. Expressing empathy is one of the most important things a veterinarian can do during these cases.

Communication is now considered a core clinical competency for veterinary students.³

MANAGING EMOTIONALLY CHARGED INTERACTIONS

Much of successful management of client emotions comes down to communication. Veterinarians with excellent bedside manner and communication skills are more likely to have a satisfied client and less likely to receive board complaints or malpractice claims.³ Communication is now considered a core clinical competency for veterinary students.³

Communication training can be provided for the entire veterinary team through mock situations or reviews of recorded client interactions. Key communication strategies that can be used in emotional situations include expressing empathy, providing information in small chunks, and reflective listening.

As discussed in my previous column in the January/February issue (todaysveterinarypractice.com/the-cost-of-caring-too-much), financial concerns are often a contributing factor to emotional situations. Discussing finances with clients is the third most common stressor for practicing veterinarians.⁴ There are resources and continuing education opportunities for veterinarians to learn how to best discuss finances with their clients, but here are a few tips to lessen the stress:

- Maintain compassion and empathy throughout your conversations. Always start your conversations by talking about the care of the pet first and the price tag second.
- Offer multiple treatment options to clients and do not jump to euthanasia immediately unless it is in the best medical interest of the pet.
- Be open about finances throughout the visit and provide treatment plans and estimates.
- If a client seems hesitant to approve diagnostics due to price, ask them what their budget is. Having this conversation early on allows you to make decisions on the most useful tests to run while conserving enough money to offer treatment for the pet.

**(fluralaner and moxidectin topical solution) for Cats****BRIEF SUMMARY (For full Prescribing Information, see package insert)****Caution:**

Federal (USA) law restricts this drug to use by or on the order of a licensed veterinarian.

Indications:

Bravecto Plus is indicated for the prevention of heartworm disease caused by *Dirofilaria immitis* and for the treatment of infections with intestinal roundworm (*Toxocara cati*; 4th stage larvae, immature adults and adults) and hookworm (*Ancylostoma tubaeforme*; 4th stage larvae, immature adults and adults). Bravecto Plus kills adult fleas and is indicated for the treatment and prevention of flea infestations (*Ctenocephalides felis*) and the treatment and control of tick infestations [*Ixodes scapularis* (black-legged tick) and *Dermacentor variabilis* (American dog tick)] for 2 months in cats and kittens 6 months of age and older and weighing 2.6 lb or greater.

Contraindications:

There are no known contraindications for the use of the product.

WARNINGS:**Human Warnings:**

Not for human use. Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children.

Do not contact or allow children to contact the application site until 2 hours post application.

Keep the product in the original packaging until use in order to prevent children from getting direct access to the product. Do not eat, drink or smoke while handling the product. Avoid contact with skin and eyes. If contact with eyes occurs, then flush eyes slowly and gently with water. **If wearing contact lenses, eyes should be rinsed first, then remove contact lenses and continue rinsing, then seek medical advice immediately. Wash hands and contacted skin thoroughly with soap and water immediately after use of the product. If the product accidentally contacts skin and a sticky residue persists after washing, rubbing alcohol (70% isopropyl alcohol) can be applied to the area to remove the residue.**

The product is highly flammable. Keep away from heat, sparks, open flame or other sources of ignition.

Precautions:

For topical use only. Avoid oral ingestion.

Fluralaner, one of the ingredients in Bravecto Plus, is a member of the isoxazoline class. This class has been associated with neurologic adverse reactions including tremors, ataxia, and seizures. Neurologic adverse reactions have been reported in cats receiving isoxazoline class drugs, even in cats without a history of neurologic disorders. Use with caution in cats with a history of neurologic disorders.

Use with caution in cats that are heartworm positive.

Bravecto Plus has not been shown to be effective in kittens less than 6 months of age.

The safety of Bravecto Plus has not been established in breeding, pregnant, and lactating cats.

Adverse Reaction	Bravecto Plus Group: Percent of Cats with the AR During the 120-Day Study (n=135 cats)	Active Control Group: Percent of Cats with the AR During the 120-Day Study (n=41 cats)
Vomiting	5.9%	12.2%
Alopecia (not at application site)	5.2%	2.4%
Pruritus	4.4%	12.2%
Application site pruritus	4.4%	4.9%
Diarrhea	3.7%	7.3%
Lethargy	3.7%	9.8%
Dry Skin	3.0%	0.0%
Elevated alanine aminotransferase (ALT)*	3.0%	0.0%
Hypersalivation	1.5%	1.5%
Application site alopecia	0.7%	0.0%

The effectiveness of Bravecto Plus to prevent heartworm disease after bathing or water immersion has not been evaluated.

Adverse Reactions:

In a well-controlled U.S. field study, which included a total of 176 treated cats (135 with Bravecto Plus and 41 with a monthly topical active control), there were no serious adverse reactions.

Percentage of Cats with Adverse Reactions (AR) in the Field Study

*ALT was greater than twice the upper reference range of 100 IU/L. These cats also had mild elevations of aspartate aminotransferase (AST) (less than twice the upper reference range of 100 IU/L). No clinical signs associated with liver disease were noted in these cats.

In well-controlled laboratory effectiveness studies, the following adverse reactions were seen after application of Bravecto Plus: pyrexia, tachypnea, mydriasis, pruritus, scabbing, and bloody stool.

Foreign Market Experience: The following adverse events were reported voluntarily during post-approval use of the product in cats in foreign markets: polydipsia, swelling of chin and lips, periorbital swelling, blepharospasm, pruritus, erythema, aggression, agitation, pyrexia, mydriasis, hypersalivation, hyperactivity, alopecia, and excessive grooming. These adverse events occurred within 48 hours of administration.

In a European field study for fluralaner topical solution for cats, there were three reports of facial dermatitis in humans after close contact with the application site which occurred within 4 days of application. In foreign market experience reports for Bravecto Plus, one veterinarian experienced tingling and numbness of the fingers, hand, and arm, and swelling of the hand and arm after getting Bravecto Plus on her fingers. Additional signs, including blurred vision and disorientation, occurred after taking an antihistamine.

To report suspected adverse events, for technical assistance or to obtain a copy of the Safety Data Sheet (SDS), contact Merck Animal Health at 1-800-224-5318. Additional information can be found at www.bravecto.com. For additional information about adverse drug experience reporting for animal drugs, contact FDA at 1-888-FDA-VETS or online at <http://www.fda.gov/reportanimal>.

How Supplied:

Bravecto Plus is available in three tube sizes to treat cats ranging in weight from 2.6 lb – 27.5 lb (1.2 kg to 12.5 kg). Each tube is packaged individually in a pouch. Product may be supplied in 1 or 2 tubes per carton.

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- Never discuss finances in a public place (e.g., the waiting room).
- Empower your staff to feel comfortable and confident discussing treatment plans, estimates, and options with clients.

MANAGING THE VETERINARY TEAM'S EMOTIONS

While it is important for veterinarians to take care of their clients' emotions, they must also care for themselves and their team. In a recent survey, over 70% of veterinarians felt that situations where they felt they could not "do the right thing" caused both themselves and their staff moderate to severe distress.²

Acknowledging these feelings and discussing them with coworkers, family, or a professional is essential to maintaining wellbeing and continuing to provide the best possible care to emotional clients. **TVP**

References

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4. Kipperman BS, Kass PH, Rishniw M. Factors that influence small animal veterinarians' opinions and actions regarding cost of care and effects of economic limitations on patient care and outcome and professional career satisfaction and burnout. *JAVMA* 2017;250(7):785-794.



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Dr. Boatright is a 2013 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania. She currently works as a small animal general practitioner and emergency clinician in western Pennsylvania at NVA Butler Veterinary Associates and Emergency Center. Her clinical interests include feline medicine, surgery, internal medicine, and emergency. As a freelance writer and speaker, Dr. Boatright enjoys educating veterinary students and colleagues about communication, team building, and the unique challenges facing recent graduates. Outside of the clinic, she is active in her state and local VMAs and serves on the VBMA Alumni Committee. In her spare time, she enjoys running and spending time with her husband, son, and three cats.