



HERE'S A SECRET ...

Communicate Clearly, Don't "Dumb It Down"

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"We'll just need a fecal sample for the next appointment to check for parasites." A girl-boss veterinarian colleague closed another successful wellness appointment! "Huh?" the client responded, confused. "A stool sample to check for worms?" Her confidence was fading. "Some poop?" my colleague replied. Silence. Puzzlement. "S^*\$... can you bring some in?" Nods, smiles, chuckles ... She had finally broken through the confusion. The shock of using the curse word finally helped the client understand. The issue? My colleague hadn't followed the communication rule: to distill all our technical language down to the level of a 9-year-old child. Remember, we were told, "All medical records should be written at a second-grade level."

Did you know we speak a different language? Veterinary medicine is a dialect of "biology." After all, you understand this: "I have a DSH that presented HBC with a prior history of CRF and now has signs consistent with ATE on IVF and a CRI for pain." The acronyms we are incredibly fond of help us communicate efficiently and clearly but definitely in our own way. When we move from colleague to

client communication, we sometimes get in trouble. We forget to switch out of our veterinary dialect!

"He has internal bleeding in his tummy." I watched another colleague attempt to communicate the urgent nature of a dog's medical condition. He had assumed, "He is hemorrhaging into his abdomen!" was in our dialect. Instead of being met by the client's confusion, the combination of grief and stress ended in anger. "I know what abdomen means!" the client shouted as they left the room. Later they reported to the receptionist that the veterinarian had been condescending and treated them like a child. How can we ever win?

If "dumbing it down" makes people angry and "Your GSD has VPCs and evidence of HCM" is too technical, we have to land in the middle. And yes, the middle is a pretty wide range of language, communication styles, and phrasing. Using my acute 20/20 hindsight, what stands out to me in both of these stories is the veterinarians weren't really communicating—they made statements or gave lectures. Communication is back and forth; it involves questions, answers, listening, and adjustments. When a client says in words or expressions that they don't understand, sometimes the simple act of asking them another question regarding what they do understand and then carefully listening without responding will bring about understanding. "Why do we have to repeat x-rays in 2 weeks after all these medicat ... Oh gosh, they hopefully will look totally different, right?" I nod and smile. The client answered her own question. My job was done. **TVP**

Ben Kirchner

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This column is titled "The Secret Life of Vets" so I can talk about the secrets that really should be considered well-known truths. These are the not-so-secret secrets that can help change our thinking and our profession for the better.

