

Owner and veterinary surgeon perspectives on the roles of veterinary nurses and receptionists in relation to small animal preventative healthcare consultations in the United Kingdom.

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Context

Few reports are available describing the roles and responsibilities of veterinary receptionists and veterinary nurses in United Kingdom (UK) small animal practice. Veterinary receptionists in the UK are not required to have any formal training and are not regulated. Despite this, they have an important and responsible role as gatekeepers of the practice and are also central to customer experience. Increasingly, their roles and responsibilities are becoming broader, an example being provision of advice on preventative medicine protocols.

The remit of veterinary nurses in UK small animal practice is also expanding. Their roles may now include performing consultations and minor surgeries, running educational interventions, and providing complex inpatient care. Confusion may exist about both what registered veterinary nurses can, and cannot, do, and the title and responsibilities that can be given to staff members who are not registered or are training, yet perform some client-facing roles.

The perspectives of owners and veterinary surgeons about veterinary receptionists and veterinary nurses have not previously been reported. Soliciting the views of the people who interact with these staff may help to identify previously unrecognised roles and responsibilities and may highlight unreported challenges to their work.

Main conclusion

The administrative, rapport and educational roles performed by veterinary receptionists in small animal practices are appreciated by many owners. The complexity and importance of these roles may not be recognised by veterinary surgeons. It is vital that veterinary surgeons are aware of the range of pet health information and advice given to small animal owners by staff in the reception area, and that they ensure the training of these staff members matches their responsibility. These interviews also suggest that the lack of protection of the veterinary nursing title in the UK is problematic. A range of barriers to, and confusion about, veterinary nurses' involvement in preventative healthcare consultations were described by both owners and veterinary surgeons. Our work supports the need for further exploration of the training, role and responsibilities of all client-facing staff within small animal veterinary practices.

Approach

This qualitative research study formed part of a larger body of work exploring canine and feline preventative medicine consultations in the UK. The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of owners and veterinary surgeons regarding their interactions with veterinary nurses and receptionists in relation to small animal (dog and cat) preventative medicine consultations. Data were collected through semi-structured telephone interviews, the transcripts of which were thematically analysed and interpreted. Owner and veterinary surgeon sampling frames were used to include a wide variety of interviewees in the study.

Results

Twenty nine telephone interviews were conducted, 15 with owners and 14 with veterinary surgeons. Thematic analysis identified a key theme relating to the role of veterinary receptionists and veterinary nurses. Reception staff were described as having a variety of roles both on the telephone and when owners attended the clinic. These ranged from rapport building to providing a wide range of healthcare information and advice. The awareness, and perceived value, of these different roles appeared to vary between owners and veterinary surgeons. The client-facing roles of veterinary nursing staff within the reception area and in the consulting room appeared to differ widely between veterinary practices. Many owners, and some veterinary surgeons, expressed uncertainty about the remit and status of veterinary nurses in relation to giving advice during a veterinary nurse-led consultation, but expressed no such concerns about advice given by any staff member in the reception area.

Interpretation

As this study did not include veterinary nurses and receptionists, it is unclear how accurately veterinary surgeon and owner perceptions of their roles match their own. Interviewees were not provided with definitions of the terms “veterinary nurse” or “receptionist” so the use of those terms reflected the descriptors used by interviewees. As with any qualitative research, extrapolation of these results beyond the study population should be performed with caution.

Significance of findings

This study identifies for the first time the degree of responsibility for preventative healthcare given to veterinary receptionists and veterinary nurses in UK small animal practices, and shines some light on the range of other pet-health topics that they may discuss with clients in the reception area. These results highlight the vital importance of providing appropriate training which matches the wide-ranging and significant responsibilities of any staff member in the reception area. It appears from the current study that there could perhaps be a significant mismatch between expected and required responsibilities according to veterinary surgeons. The study also provides further, novel, insights into the problems associated with the lack of protection of the veterinary nursing title in the UK.