

Preparation

Clinical Communication in Action

Step 3 - Resource

Unit 1: Preparation

Before embarking on a consultation, whether it be with a new client or one we have already built a relationship with, it is important to be prepared. All too often we carry unresolved worries and anxieties around and these can interfere with our concentration and get in the way of ensuring that we give the client our complete and undivided attention. It's all too easy for your mind to be on the last patient or telephone call or as in Clare's case her fifth appointment that morning; she's also worried about running late as well as the argument she had with her partner, before she left home this morning. Often we compound the problem by actions that we believe will help the situation such as trying to gain time by bringing up the clinical records or by completing those of the last client, whilst greeting the next one. Alternatively, we might make erroneous assumptions about the reason for an appointment, in an attempt to take control of the situation. Looking at Clare's situation she is working on the assumption that her first appointment is a quick routine vaccination. However, for the client it is an important and significant occasion. Furthermore, additional areas may have cropped up for the client, as in this situation and time could be lost and clinical information omitted as the client is less likely to be forthcoming because he did not feel valued or important. How could Clare have been better prepared?

- Attention to her own personal needs and comfort, particularly after having an arduous journey into work. Thirst, hunger, full bladder; any of these can easily cause a lack of concentration and whilst this may take a couple of minutes to resolve, attending to these basic needs can save time in the long run and help with her resilience;
- Getting rid of personal baggage. This is easier said than done and Clare may need to set time aside, such as lunchtime or during a break, to sort out personal issues or make a telephone call. Knowing that she has allocated a time to sort things out will help to bring her mind back to the next task;

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- Putting aside the previous or future consultations and telephone calls. This may mean internalising the thought so that her mind is completely clear and open for the next consultation;
- It's important to prepare as much as possible by reading the history and/or results, but it is important not to fall into the trap of assuming that this is what the next consultation is about. All too often we make assumptions. Yes, it is good to be prepared but it is also important to keep an open mind and be prepared for all possibilities by making a gentle open enquiry. For those clients who may need you to already know what is going on you can always put the onus on yourself with phrases such as "I've got a picture of what is going on with Bobby from his clinical notes and speaking to my colleagues, but I'm really interested to hear from you about what's been going on in the last few days and what you would like to talk about today";
- In some instances it is important to prepare the physical environment. For example, use of chairs, blankets, lighting etc. This becomes particularly important in cases where you have bad news to convey.

We know that preparation is an essential skill and is the foundation for an effective interaction. It's worth bearing in mind that distractions and lack of concentration are likely to result in mistakes. In human medicine Ely et al. 1995 showed that hurrying and distraction were among the most common causes to which physicians attributed their mistakes. There is every likelihood that this holds true in the veterinary arena.

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“All things are ready, if our mind be so”

William Shakespeare

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