Behavior problems are a significant cause of death (euthanasia) in companion animals. While most veterinary practices are necessarily geared toward the medical aspect of care, there are many opportunities to bring behavior awareness into the clinic for the benefit of the pet, the owner, and ourselves. This series acknowledges the importance of behavior as part of veterinary medicine and speaks practically about using it effectively in daily practice.

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Behavior issues affect almost every aspect of veterinary medicine (BOX 1). The most obvious, such as aggression, fears, and phobias, may be serious enough to prompt consultation with a behavior specialist. Others, however, may simply be considered “normal,” such as stress during office visits or avoidance of a carrier. Although they may not be dramatic, these behaviors can cause clients to limit the number of nonemergency veterinary visits they make, ultimately affecting a practice’s bottom line. Therefore, providing basic behavioral services, such as socialization or habituation, can not only help increase revenue in general practices but also improve patient health.

**Why Provide Behavioral Services?**
Many general practices do not offer behavioral services for several reasons. The appointments are assumed to be too time-consuming to be profitable (1½ to 3 hours), and add-on services and products are not obvious to practices. In addition, many veterinarians are not comfortable with treating behavior problems. However, many behavior services can be provided within a 20- to 30-minute appointment, and although adding a new profit center and retraining employees is a large investment, the return on investing in behavioral services is sizable. Adding these services can not only increase client compliance (e.g., medication administration, scheduling recheck appointments), retention, and satisfaction but also improve your patients’ quality of life and decrease the likelihood of relinquishment. Clients are often embarrassed to share their pet’s behavior problems or their decision to relinquish their pet with their veterinarian. You may not know how many patients you lose to behavior problems each year, but behavior problems are the leading cause of relinquishment and euthanasia of dogs and cats.1,2,3 Offering behavioral services is, therefore, a great way to attract and retain clients, reduce stress and euthanasia in your practice, and even make a profit. By improving a pet’s behavior, you ultimately help the pet, the client, and the practice.

**QuickNotes**
Providing basic behavioral services can help increase revenue and improve patient health.

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**Common Circumstances in Which Behavioral Issues Affect General Practice**

- Avoidance of cat carrier
- Stress during veterinary visit
- Difficult handling during veterinary visit
- Intolerance of regular injections/medication
- Anxiety during boarding
- Aggression in the waiting room
- Lack of compliance with postoperative rest recommendations
- Resistance to nail trimming
- Relinquishment of pets for treatable problems
Where to Begin
Planning for New Services
First, decide which levels of care your practice can provide. Examples include prepurchase counseling, doggie day care, preventive medicine, behavior modification for simple or major problems, basic obedience classes, behavioral consultation for major problems, and referral to a behavior specialist.

Next, decide how you will delegate the responsibilities to your team. Your role as the veterinarian is to diagnose the problem and write a treatment plan. Just as you would not ask a technician to make the treatment plan for a dog with acute pancreatitis, you should not turn the responsibility to diagnose and treat behavior problems over to a technician. So, what will the technician's role be? Will he or she implement the treatment plan for you or be responsible for phone follow-up and follow-up appointments? What will the receptionist's role be? All members of the practice should be on board with the plan for it to be effective.

Next, think about how you will train your staff. Some resources for education are textbooks, continuing education courses, and professional organizations (Box 2). Contact your nearest board-certified veterinary behaviorist and ask which textbooks and conferences he or she recommends or whether he or she would be willing to talk to your staff to get the ball rolling.

Finally, consider how to make behavioral services simple and accessible for clients. Easy-to-understand client handouts explaining the diagnosis and treatment should be used to help keep appointments to a reasonable length of time. Handouts can be written by staff and edited by the veterinarian, or prewritten handouts can be found in a number of textbooks (Box 2). Handouts can also be inte-
integrated into a computer-generated discharge sheet so that all client instructions are in the same place. The number of handouts and the topics to be covered will depend on the services offered at the practice. Also, decide which behavior-related products the practice will carry, as this will be an important part of completely integrating behavior services.

Integrating New Services Into the Practice
For any service to be a successful practice builder, it must be integrated into the practice, from the receptionist to the veterinarian. From the moment that clients enter the waiting room, they should be aware that you provide behavioral services. Signs unique to the practice or supplied by toy manufacturers or pharmaceutical companies are one way of achieving this goal. The receptionist should mention the addition of behavioral services to the practice when clients book appointments and should give each arriving client a short behavior checklist (BOX 3) to be filled out while waiting. The client can then give the completed form to the technician at the beginning of the visit. Using a form is the most efficient way of collecting information about a pet’s behavior at each appointment. By incorporating behavioral issues into routine wellness visits, you foster the idea that behavior is just another aspect of the patient to be examined.

Similarly, the practice should support the message that behavioral problems should be treated as promptly as medical illnesses. For example, when you write a medical treatment plan, the practice pharmacy dispenses the necessary medications (e.g., an antibiotic for superficial pyoderma). Although other pharmacies may dispense the same medication at a lower price, dispensing from the practice pharmacy allows clients to begin treatment immediately and conveniently. Behavior cases are no different. Behavioral supplies (e.g., food toys, collars, clickers) should be displayed prominently in the lobby. Although clients can purchase these products elsewhere at a later time, they are more likely to initially purchase them from the veterinarian at the time of the appointment because the product is unique to the veterinarian’s office (e.g., Blue Kong) or was “prescribed” as part of the treatment plan.

QuickNotes
Behavioral medicine can be a profit center for primary care practices.

What to Offer
Prepurchase Counseling
Prepurchase counseling helps owners avoid problems of incompatibility by suggesting a pet that matches their lifestyle. These appointments typically take 20 to 30 minutes and can be conducted by a veterinary technician. Technicians can educate themselves by using Internet resources (e.g., akc.org, iams.com, purina.com), attending continuing education classes, and familiarizing themselves with breed handbooks. Before the appointment, the owner fills out a 1- to 2-page questionnaire listing his or her expectations for a pet (e.g., grooming, exercise, energy level). The technician should consider the owner’s ability to exercise the pet, the amount of time available for training, the presence of children in the household, grooming requirements, and the owner’s travel/work schedule. The client should be sent home with a summary of recommendations, which can be as simple as a list of breeds with the suitable candidates checked off.

BOX 2

Resources

Textbooks

Organizations
- American College of Veterinary Behaviorists: www dacvb org
- American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior: www avsab online org
- Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians: www svbt org
Compendium: Continuing Education for Veterinarians®  |  June 2009  |  CompendiumVet.com

Understanding Behavior

Doggie Day Care
In today’s busy society, many owners do not have the time to adequately exercise their dogs, which can contribute to several behavior problems. By instituting a doggie day care program, your practice can offer your clients several benefits. To clients who pick up their dog after a long day of work, the most obvious benefit will be the dog’s reduced need for activity. This aspect of the service will build client loyalty and encourage clients to continue to use the day care. Another benefit of a good doggie day care program is screening for common infectious diseases and aggression (via a questionnaire), which should be required for all dogs before they are permitted to participate.

Doggie day care requires a significant commitment of space and dedicated staff. A medium-to-large room or yard is necessary. Outdoor yards should have secured fencing of adequate height to contain large dogs. Agility equipment, beds, crates, and toys can also be provided. Ideally, there should be at least three separate areas for small dogs, large dogs, and older dogs. Dogs should be rotated between rest and play in appropriate groups, depending on their play style. All interactions should be supervised by at least one person for every four or five dogs. Upgrades such as baths and viewing by webcam can also be offered.

Preventive Medicine
Veterinarians practice preventive medicine every day, but behavioral advice is frequently left out. Puppies and kittens have sensitive periods for socialization in which a relatively small amount of effort can have a very large effect. Unfortunately, if their experiences during these periods are stressful, or if they are not exposed to new people and situations during this time, they often become fearful or anxious. Fears and anxieties are the most common causes of behavior problems, including aggression, in animals. Therefore, each new puppy or kitten appointment should include counseling about socialization and habituation. In addition, the practice can offer in-house socialization/habituation services, kitten and puppy classes, obedience classes, and counseling services for life/schedule changes.

In-house socialization/habituation services for puppies and kittens reduce clients’ time commitment to this type of training. Instead, clients bring their pets to the clinic, where habituation to startling noises (e.g., thunderstorms, fireworks), house-training, crate training, and socialization to people and other animals can be conducted. While this may seem like a large task, it requires little more time and commitment than boarding patients. Crate training and housetraining of dogs include walking them on a schedule and teaching them that the crate is a fun place to be. Socialization to people takes roughly 5 to 10 minutes, three times a day. Clients who are in your clinic waiting for their own pets can help by playing with puppies and kittens in a clean, safe area, adding to socialization without placing a drain on the practice. However, these services require a separate puppy/kitten area that is kept clean and free of any pets with infectious diseases, and owners of pets with infectious diseases should not participate.

Clients may want to complete the socialization of their pet themselves but not know how to do so. In these cases, the veterinarian can customize a plan, based on the pet’s strengths and weaknesses, for the client to implement at home. Appointments generally last 20 to 30 minutes. The client should leave the appointment with a summary and a handout on which the appropriate recommendations are checked off.

Puppy and kitten socialization classes are vitally important in preventing behavioral disorders. Because the classes should be limited in size and the patients are small, there is no need for a large space. During these classes, pets are socialized to people and other pets, habituated to sounds and handling, and taught to tolerate nail trims and tooth brushing. Finally, they are taught basic obedience behaviors. These positive-reinforcement classes can be taught by a veterinarian or a member of the staff. Puppies and kittens should be enrolled when they are as close to 8 weeks of age as possible to offer the greatest benefit to the pet and client.

QuickNotes
Behavioral issues affect almost every aspect of veterinary medicine.

BOX 3
Waiting-Room Behavior Checklist

- Have your pet’s elimination habits changed since his/her last appointment?
- Has your pet growled at or bitten someone since his/her last appointment?
- Has your pet had an increase in anxiety or fear since his/her last appointment?
- Has your pet’s personality changed since his/her last appointment?
- Are any of your pet’s behaviors of concern to you?
Obedience classes can be offered at the clinic. A member of the staff can teach the class, or the clinic can partner with a dog trainer. Such classes can be a good way to supplement income, increase employee job satisfaction and retention, and introduce new clients to your practice. However, these classes should be undertaken with care because the practice may be legally responsible for the advice given. Regardless of who you employ to teach obedience or puppy classes, observe them teaching first. Ask them what methods they use and how much experience they have. Lay down guidelines for positive-reinforcement training in writing so that there is no confusion about what is permitted.

Counseling services can help clients transition their pets in circumstances such as moving, marriage, loss of a family member (animal or human), or arrival of a baby. Even the best pet can become agitated by major life changes. Appointments generally last 20 to 30 minutes. As with a medical appointment, the technician takes the history and presents the case to the veterinarian. The veterinarian examines the pet and makes an assessment and a treatment plan. After presenting the plan to the client, the technician teaches the client how to implement it and sends him or her home with an appropriate handout.

Basic Behavior Modification

Basic behavior modification appointments last 20 to 30 minutes and are conducted either by the technician after the veterinarian has examined the pet or as a standard part of treating a medical disorder. Some examples are muzzle training for veterinarian-aggressive dogs, behavior modification for cats that will not enter their carriers, and counterconditioning for pets that do not tolerate medication administration. When topical, oral, or injectable medications are prescribed, the client should be asked if he or she will be able to administer the medication for the duration of the treatment plan. If the answer is “no,” a behavior modification appointment should be recommended.

Problem Behavior Referrals

Appointments for problem behaviors typically last 1½ to 3 hours. Most general practices choose not to offer these appointments because of their length and profitability compared with other services. If this is the case in your practice, you can offer an initial 30-minute consult preceding a referral to a board-certified veterinary behaviorist. These visits include a physical examination, screening laboratory tests (e.g., complete blood count, serum chemistry profile, thyroxine, urinalysis), and a short list of five to 10 safety recommendations specific to the case (e.g., avoidance of provocative situations, discontinuation of physical corrections or confrontational interactions). By offering this service, you ensure that the patient has had a recent medical workup before it goes to the behavior specialist and that this income stays in your practice. In addition, screening tests may help identify, and allow you to start treatment for, an underlying medical disorder that may be contributing to the behavior problem.

Conclusion

There are many ways to integrate behavioral medicine into the general veterinary practice. Change is never easy or comfortable, but by adding behavioral services to your practice, you can improve your patients’ quality of life; increase patient, client, and employee retention; and positively affect your practice’s bottom line.

References