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Research

Evaluating graduating veterinary students' perception of preparedness in clinical veterinary behavior for "Day-1" of practice and the factors which influence that perception: A questionnaire-based survey

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ABSTRACT

Veterinary behavior has been recognized as an important component of modern practice and a valuable aspect of the core curriculum in veterinary education, yet a lack of behavior courses and clinical offerings for students exists in veterinary colleges and schools. The purpose of this study was to explore graduating veterinary students' perception of preparedness for "day-1" of practice and the factors of the veterinary behavior curriculum which influenced that perception. An Internet survey was completed by 366 graduating veterinary students at 30 different Association of American Veterinary Medical College member institutions. The effects of responses were analyzed using logistic regression and reported as odds ratio. Gender, presence of a boarded-certified behaviorist on faculty, year behavior courses were introduced into the curriculum, contents of behavior courses, and length of teachings were compared against students' perception of preparedness. Most students (76.9%) felt their veterinary clinical behavior curriculum should prepare them for "day-1" but only 26.8% felt prepared. Adequate instruction in recognizing abnormal behavior; preventing, diagnosing, and treating behavior problems; instruction by a diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists; introduction of behavior courses into year 1; and a course consisting of at least 2 weeks significantly increased the perception of preparedness among students. A stronger emphasis on veterinary behavior into every veterinary curriculum would benefit not only the graduating veterinarians and the alumni that employ them but also the overall quality of veterinary education.

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Introduction

Problem behaviors are considered one of the most common causes for pet euthanasia, abandonment, rehoming, or relinquishment to animal shelters (Patronek and Dodman, 1999; Salman et al., 2000; Scarlett et al., 2002). In 1 study, investigators found behavior problems were the most frequently reported reason for dog surrenders to a shelter and the second most common reason for cat

surrenders (Salman et al., 2000). Dog owners reported problem behaviors to be "somewhat" of an influence in the relinquishment of 52 of 80 (65%) dogs and a strong influence in the relinquishment of 39 of 80 (49%) dogs to shelters according to the findings of another study (Kwan and Bain, 2013). Although the exact numbers are unknown, the ASPCA estimates that 7.6 million companion animals enter shelters nationwide each year and approximately 2.7 million of those animals are euthanized (ASPCA), indicating behavior problems may be the number one cause of euthanasia in companion animals. A regional shelter study reported 70% of dogs and 50% of cats had been taken to a veterinarian by their owner within the year before relinquishment to a shelter, suggesting there is a window of opportunity for veterinarians to provide behavioral support to clients, potentially repairing the human-animal bond

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and reducing relinquishments and euthanasia rates (Scarlett et al., 2002). Pet owners seek animal behavior advice from their veterinarians because there is an expectation that veterinarians are authorities in all the animal-related subjects (Case, 1988; Shivley et al., 2016). Therefore, veterinary colleges have an obligation to provide sufficient education for graduates to meet their clients' behavioral needs successfully.

In addition to retention in homes, promotion of the human-animal bond can have many other benefits to the overall health of the animal and to veterinary practices. Data suggest the bond between owners and their pets has a significant influence on the level of care pets receive (Knesl et al., 2016) such that owners with stronger bonds to their pets are more likely to accept health care recommendations, visit their veterinarian more frequently, and seek out preventative care (Knesl et al., 2016; Lue et al., 2008). These preventative care visits give veterinarians the opportunity to focus on not only the physical wellness and preventative health care but also the mental health and the overall emotional well-being of the animal (Hetts et al., 2004; McMillan, 2002). Promotion of veterinary behavior through low-stress handling in the clinic may also have a financial benefit for veterinarians by impacting clients' perception of the veterinarian, veterinary practice, and overall compliance (Knesl et al., 2016; Sherman and Serpell, 2008). Clients may seek veterinary care elsewhere or refuse to return to the practice if their perception was that their pet was fearful, threatened, injured, or the veterinarian was angry or uncomfortable (Hammerle et al., 2015; Knesl et al., 2016). The veterinary behavior field has placed a strong emphasis on educating veterinarians and staff in reducing fear and distress in patients during veterinary visits (Hammerle et al., 2015).

For these reasons, veterinary behavior has been recognized as an important component of modern veterinary practice and a valuable aspect of the core curriculum in veterinary education, yet the lack of behavior courses and clinical offerings for veterinary students has also been documented (Patronek and Dodman, 1999; Hetts et al., 2004; Juarbe-Díaz, 2008; Scarlett et al., 2002; Sherman and Serpell, 2008; Hammerle et al., 2015; Shivley et al., 2016). This study aimed to further explore the current state of animal behavior in the veterinary curriculum by assessing the issues from the graduating veterinary student's perspective. The objectives of this study were to determine graduating veterinary students' attitudes toward veterinary behavior and identify behavioral education factors the students believed influenced their feeling of preparedness for clinical practice.

Materials and methods

Survey design

A convenience sample of senior veterinary students enrolled in member institutions of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) was recruited 3–5 months before graduation by e-mailing an introductory letter to the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs or similar school representative, who then provided graduating veterinary students with a secure link to access the online Internet survey. Only schools in the United States, Canada, and Caribbean Islands known to have a 2016 graduation class were included. Three e-mail communications with each representative were attempted. If a particular representative did not respond, representatives of the Student Chapter of the American Veterinary Medical Association and American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior were contacted to disperse the e-mail link to graduating students. The survey was also posted on the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior general online forum, and

known behavior faculty were contacted to distribute the survey link to their respective university's graduating veterinary students.

The survey instrument was adapted from a survey used to assess final-year veterinary student's attitudes toward another specialty (Perry, 2014). The survey was divided into 4 sections. The first section inquired about the student's demographics, interest, and plans after graduation. The second and third sections explored the student's current attitude toward animal behavior and their clinical experiences of veterinary behavior in practice, and a final section focused on each student's college veterinary behavior curriculum and future continuing education interests. The survey consisted of a combination of multiple choice questions, single answer questions, and statements using a 5-point Likert scale response format. The present study analyzed questions related to the respondents' feeling of preparedness on "day-1" and the factors that influence that preparedness (Appendix 1).

Statistical analysis

The effect of responses to different survey questions concerning whether the students felt the behavior teachings prepared them for "day-1" of practice was tested using logistic regression with PROC LOGISTIC in SAS for Windows 9.4 (SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, NC). The results of the analysis were reported as odds ratios. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance.

Results

Survey completion rate

The survey was open for 49 days, and 366 eligible students completed the survey. According to the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges' public web site, about 3000 veterinary students graduate from member institutions each year (AAVMC); therefore, the response rate was estimated to be 12.2% of all graduating veterinary students. Not all survey respondents answered all questions in the survey, and data from unanswered questions were excluded from analysis. The individual question response rate ranged from 98.6% to 99.5%. A total of 30 of 36 veterinary schools and colleges choose to distribute the survey. The overall response rate from the AAVMC member veterinary institutions was 83.3%. All but 2 schools responded to the e-mail inquiries and 4 college administrations declined to pass the information to the students. One student response was received from an institution that choose not to participate. This response was included in the analysis.

At the time of data collection, of the 30 veterinary colleges that participated in the survey, 12 colleges (40.0%) had 1 or more board-certified behaviorists (DACVB) on faculty, and 10 of those colleges (33.3%) had a board-certified behaviorist and clinical service within the university teaching hospital according to publically available institution web sites. Three (10.0%) colleges had an American College of Veterinary Behaviorist nonconforming resident affiliated with community practice or separate behavior clinical service. Two of those residents taught an elective behavior course but the third did not currently provide any didactic teaching. At that institution, behavior was incorporated into a Shelter Medicine elective course taught by a Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Preventative Medicine. One school employed a non-veterinary Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist to teach a required didactic animal behavior elective. One school had a veterinarian with a special interest in behavior who taught a didactic behavior elective course and received clinical behavior referrals within the university teaching hospital.

Of the 4 schools that chose not to participate, 1 school employed a part-time DACVB to teach a required behavior course but did not

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