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Attitude toward non-human animals and their welfare: do behaviorists differ from other veterinarians?

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Veterinarians are an important source of information about animal care for owners. They provide general advice about topics important to an animal's well-being, such as appropriate training, exercise and nutrition. Veterinary behaviorists, when dealing with undesired or abnormal behaviors, also perform an assessment of pet welfare and an evaluation of owners' behavior and attitudes. It is likely that these assessments are affected by the attitude toward animals and toward animal welfare of the behaviorists. The aim of this study was to investigate whether veterinary behaviorists have a different attitude toward animals and animal welfare compared to other veterinarians. An online questionnaire, also including the 20-item Animal Attitude Scale, was completed by a convenience sample of 540 Italian veterinarians dealing with companion animals: 140 were behaviorists, 22 were starting to work in the field of behavioral medicine, and 378 were not involved in it. Veterinary behaviorists showed a more positive attitude toward non-human animals and their welfare, which seems to be more related to the interest in behavioral medicine than to its practice. Moreover, behaviorists attached more importance to the psychological aspects of pet welfare that they perceived as less protected in their feline and canine patients. These findings suggest that being involved in one discipline or another of veterinary medicine do matter in the attitude toward non-human animals and their welfare.

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