

Communication in the Exam Room

The obvious difference between veterinary medicine and human medicine is the reality that our patients can't talk. However, there are parallels in human medicine. In Pediatric Medicine, the same communication barriers exist and the American Academy of Pediatric Medicine is aware of this, as their committee on Bioethics stresses the importance of communication in accurate diagnosis.

In order to make a diagnosis, your veterinarian needs to collect a thorough history. Many diseases may not seem apparent on a physical exam and the history you provide will help your pet's doctor rule in or rule out various conditions.

Obvious examples are a cough that is only occasionally observed. This may not be detectable during the physical exam. In a young animal this could be a relatively benign condition known as tracheobronchitis, while in an older pet, heart disease should be considered. Another example of a symptom that only a pet owner observes is increased thirst. This can indicate many potential problems from kidney disease to diabetes. The information you bring with you is the same as your pet "speaking"

It is not uncommon in human medicine and veterinary medicine for a "client" to forget to share important information or fail to recognize there is a health problem. In an older arthritic animal that has become less active, age may be confused with pain or a more complex disease entity.

I recommend that my patients bring a list of questions and observations to the office visit. In our view, each patient is entitled to enough time in the exam room to discuss all issues. Even under the best of circumstances, before the end of the visit, one last question should be asked and answered.

The Mayo Clinic Proceedings recommend that physicians end all interviews with "is there anything else?" Doctors often learn about additional patient concern at the end of a visit after making that inquiry. Studies have delineated that an extra 2 and 1/2 minutes at the end of a visit can provide important information. Remember, there is no such thing as too much information or communication. I recommend you make certain that all your questions are answered to your satisfaction and comprehension. Take that

opportunity in your own health care and remember, your pet can't respond without your observation, care and communication