A day in the life of a Blue Cross community veterinary nurse

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Emma Dahm VN Times editor, went on the road with Liz Walsh, to see the positive impact this initiative has on both owners and pets.

AN encyclopaedic knowledge of London’s roads, and a steely determination to conquer the rush hour traffic, are important pre-requisites for Liz Walsh’s job of community veterinary nurse at The Blue Cross. Weaving our way through the rush hour by the Thames, and nipping off down a shortcut towards Putney, Liz explained a bit about her role.

“The community nurse was an idea thought up by our head vet that has been going a while now. We think it’s an invaluable service to offer our clients, and provides a wider support network to clients all over London.”

There are two community nurses whose job it is to visit clients in their own homes, all over London, and they assist these owners with a huge variety of pet healthcare tasks that owners may not be able to perform, due to being elderly, housebound or not having any way of getting their pet to see a vet, for example.

Liz visits around four or five Blue Cross clients a day, driving to their homes to give pets medication, check on mending limbs, assess how an owner is coping with giving insulin - everything, in fact, that you would do in practice, but with an added extra: improving the welfare of pets that may otherwise have missed out on essential veterinary care.

Something that does differ about Liz’s job, though, is that on most days it’s regular, nine-to-five hours. She is based at The Blue Cross’ Victoria centre, which is where she starts her day by
planning her appointments, ringing the clients to see if they need her to bring anything, and printing off the clients’ records.

All the animals under Liz’s care have been treated at a Blue Cross centre by a vet, they are then carefully assessed by a welfare officer and Liz visits the clients under the instruction of the vet. Her mobile phone is a permanently on hand throughout the day too, as clients are encouraged to call her with any concerns they may have about their pets.

“Trust is a big part of this job; you have to build a rapport with the clients, be chatty and let them get to know you. After all, you’re going into their homes and treating their pets, so they have to know you’re trustworthy,” Liz explained.

Being a people-orientated person is clearly a pre-requisite to work in this field, and this is something that Liz demonstrates admirably. “You have to be able to relate to owners, make them understand why their pet needs this treatment, explain what is expected of them in looking after their pet’s needs, and assess how they will cope with treating the animal once they get it home.”

Our first visit was to a lady in Putney, whose dog, Bailey, had fractured his leg in several places, but was now on the mend. His leg had been pinned and dressed, but the wounds were not healing as fast as the vet had hoped. So, Liz was a regular visitor to Bailey to monitor his progress.

After discussing the case with the vet and the welfare officer, Liz visited Bailey about once per week. She rang his owner before each visit, to see if she needed any extra dressings, bandages, etc. Bailey needed short, calm walks to help strengthen his broken leg, so it was Liz’s job to make sure this was going okay.

This was something that Bailey’s owner was very good at, but, after seeing how lively and friendly Bailey was, it was easy to understand his owner’s concern that he might do himself some damage, just by bouncing around in his own home.

If there is ever any doubt about the health of an animal, it can be taken back to a Blue Cross hospital on any visit, in the van that Liz uses for her visits. This was not necessary for any of the clients we saw; despite Bailey licking his wounds and making them a little sore, his owner was complying with all the veterinary advice given, no doubt helped by the confidence given by Liz’s visits and support.

**Human-pet bond**

And this, I think, is the key to success. It is definitely not just the animals that benefit from the community nurses’ visits. According to Liz, The Blue Cross promotes the importance of the human-pet bond and, therefore, the community nursing project enables people to keep their pets who may otherwise have had to give them up due to welfare issues.
These pets are often a lifeline to people who may be socially excluded, and home visits not only enable them to continue to own a pet, but provide the opportunity of somebody to talk to and confide in. Certainly everybody we visited was more than happy to see Liz and offers of cups of tea and biscuits were abundant, as were welcoming smiles.

“Nobody should be denied the opportunity to own a pet, I don’t think,” explained Liz. “If it wasn’t for us, many of these people would be lonely. Many of the clients we visit are on their own but, seeing them in their own homes, happy, and with the welfare of their pets looked after, is fantastic for job satisfaction.”

And if that’s not enough, and you feel you might miss the more hands-on side of nursing, one day a week Liz works at one of the other Blue Cross hospitals, and can keep her clinical nursing skills up to date that way. The vets rely on Liz to feed back information about each client and, therefore, close working relationships with all the vets is important.

Through this teamwork, the client’s ability to cope is constantly assessed, and the way he or she is giving medication, dressing wounds, etc, can be monitored. The owner’s limitations have to be taken into consideration too; for example, an elderly person may not be able to unscrew tablet bottles, so this has to be accounted for, and is an issue for the community nurses to resolve.

The vets and nurses will also liaise over preventive health programmes for the “outreach” clients, which may involve Liz administering flea treatments one day and giving dietary advice the next.

On our second visit we met Gizzie, a 14-year-old terrier with an ear infection and skin allergies.

Liz explained about his case: “It’s our job to increase compliance in any way possible, so we take the time to get to know the owners and their pets. Animals can play up a bit with their owners so often it’s easier for us to visit them to apply the medication. That’s the case with Gizzie; he’s got warts on his feet that are a bit sore, and his owner is worried she’s hurting him when applying the cream, so it’s my job to help her out with this.

“We get to know the animals pretty well, and sometimes we liaise with the owner’s carers too, so there’s certainly variety in the job. The animals and the clients get to trust us, which is so important for compliance.”

Liz aims to get back to the hospital in Victoria for around 4.30pm each day, then she has to finish off by writing up the day’s paperwork, booking in any animals she’s collected during the day, and arranging new appointments.

Liz clearly loves her role and when asked to describe what the best bits are, she replied: “All of it. I absolutely love seeing clients happy, and knowing they can rely on us. I would thoroughly recommend that VNs try to set up community nursing schemes through their private practices,
because so many people would benefit from this.
Fourteen-year-old Gizzie needed medication for an ear condition and skin allergies, which Liz helped to administer in his owner’s home.
Fourteen-year-old Gizzie needed medication for an ear condition and skin allergies, which Liz helped to administer in his owner's home.
Liz visited Bailey, who had fractured his leg in several places, around once a week for postoperative care and to provide support for his owner for dressing the wound and giving medication.
Great people skills are essential to being able to build up trust, both with owners and their pets, who are visited in their own homes. Having a good sense of direction and being well organised also contribute hugely to the success of the community veterinary nurse.