

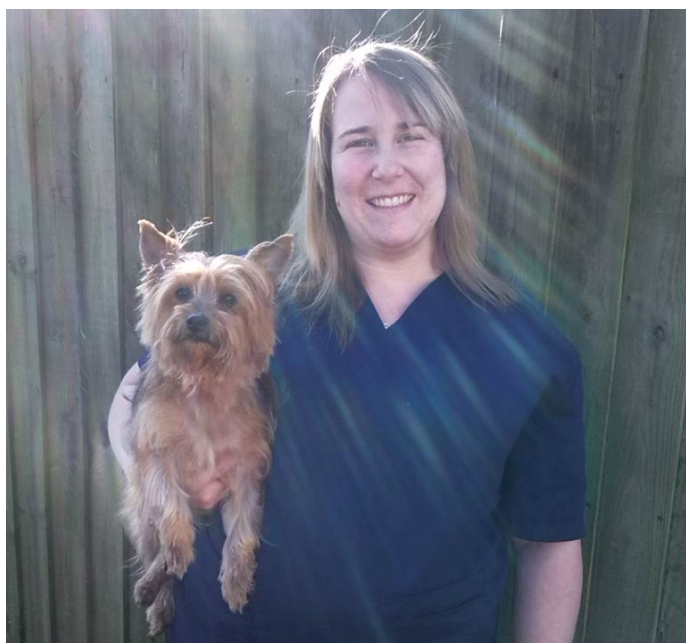
Dealing with emergencies and emotions in veterinary practice

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A little girl screaming and sobbing in the waiting room; a mum having to deal with a heartbroken, inconsolable child and a beloved pet about to be euthanised. What would you do?



Vets Now RVN Charlotte Pebody, pictured with her dog Buddy, knows only too well the traumatic cases that frequent practices.

Scenarios such as this are regularly faced by veterinary teams across the country, but how many practice staff are equipped to effectively deal with stressed, upset owners? As an emergency and out-of-hours provider, Vets Now's teams regularly face handling the unexpected.

One Sunday, a woman and her young daughter brought in their cocker spaniel, Joe. He was critically ill and, after exploring all options, euthanasia was discussed. Devastated, the owner wanted more time with Joe and decided to take him home.

However, in the afternoon the woman, child and dog returned. As the girl's screams and sobs filled

the empty waiting room, it was decided Joe would be euthanised. Although the owner knew this was the right thing to do, she wanted her brother in attendance for support and it would take him about 30 minutes to arrive. In the meantime, the girl was still crying and seemed unsure of what was going on. It was at this point RVN Charlotte Pebody took action.

“The poor mother was trying to comfort her child and dog, while making the right decision and I wanted her last 30 minutes with Joe to be as happy and stress-free as possible,” she said. “I went over to the girl, who was sobbing her heart out, and asked her if she would like to do a very important job for me. I got a nod and less crying, which was a good start.

“I pulled up a chair to a little table and encouraged her to sit down, then showed her a blank piece of paper and a pencil. I said I needed her to draw a lovely picture of Joe and write anything she liked about how much she loved him; of the nice memories she had with him.

“I told her: ‘When Joe goes to the clouds he can take this with him and he will be able to remember you all. What do you think? Can you do that for me?’”

All of a sudden, Charlotte was dealing with a responsive child who stopped crying, picked up the pencil and said: “I will draw Joe and all his family too.”

While the little girl expressed her love for Joe on paper, her mum could spend time with the dog and then her daughter, helping her to add to the picture as they said their goodbyes. The girl then called Charlotte over to explain who was in the picture and that two weeks earlier in the other consult room her other dog had been euthanised, so Joe could share the picture with that dog too.

Charlotte said: “Who would have thought a piece of paper and a pencil could have such a powerful impact on that family? As they left the surgery with their dog, which they were burying at home, the mum looked relieved and the daughter had a smile as she understood what had happened and had been able to say her goodbyes to Joe.”

This case was handled sensitively, allowing the owner and girl time to deal with the death of a much-loved pet and for the dog to be euthanised in as calm an environment as possible.

Teamwork

Has your team had to deal with situations like this? How did they handle it? What steps do you have in place to ensure you are equipped to deal with distressed or angry owners?

Because of the nature of its work, Vets Now estimates about 80% of owners seen by its staff are distressed to some degree. That distress and upset can manifest itself in different behaviours, such as crying, shouting, being short or rude or, occasionally, overt aggression. Some talk excessively and it can be difficult to get information out of them, some will argue among themselves and some

will complain about costs because they are in a distress-purchase situation and are unprepared.

It is common for highly distressed people to misunderstand events and conversations, so it is worth summarising and repeating important points and asking whether they have any questions throughout the consultation.

To successfully deal with stressed, angry or upset owners, Vets Now focuses heavily on developing its teams' people skills and encourages staff to share experiences like Charlotte's so they can learn how to work effectively when an emergency case occurs.

We have given training on dealing with difficult situations and consultation communication and e-learning, plus regular clinical governance discussions about specific instances. Although displays of physical violence by clients are extremely rare, it does happen occasionally in all vet practices and at Vets Now steps are taken to ensure staff are kept safe from harm.

Staff should always act professionally and empathetically, and communicate well so issues are minimised. Practices should have a clear protocol to keep their team safe in the event of an angry or potentially aggressive owner. There should always be personal alarms and locks on internal doors so you can confine people to one area.

Client interaction

On most occasions, a practice's first point of contact with a distressed owner is via telephone. Getting the tone of that telephone call right is vital.

Speak in a calm, measured voice and ensure the client understands. Use the client's and pet's name to show you care about them and are treating them as an individual case. Show empathy by acknowledging the situation is difficult and that you appreciate he or she may be upset or distressed by the news.

When the owner and pet arrive at the clinic, keeping them as calm as possible is also crucial. This can be done by a team member introducing him or herself and explaining what will happen to the pet. Always have space available to isolate an upset owner in a room, offering drinks and/or tissues.

If owners are unaccompanied and distressed, spend time with them, where possible, ask if they want to telephone a friend or family member for support and give them time to make decisions.

Finally, ensure they are okay before leaving. I always tell upset people to take time out, collect themselves or consider if someone else might want to pick them up.

"I commend practices that offer bereavement counselling for owners, run by nurses," Charlotte

said. "I'd urge teams to have a bereavement policy so clients can benefit from support."