

## Owner compliance – educating clients to act on pet care advice

**Author :** Emma Gerrard

**Categories :** [Practical](#), [RVNs](#)

**Date :** April 21, 2015

### ABSTRACT

Do your clients understand why they need to carry out certain preventive treatment? Compliance – or rather, a lack of it – is an age-old problem in the human medical world. Despite the capacity for medicines to prevent, relieve and even cure many forms of ill health, people often do not take them as prescribed. This can lead to a level of suffering and reduced quality of life, not to mention high costs to the medical profession in treating mismanaged primary disease and secondary complications.

Sadly, a lack of compliance is not limited to human medicine; it occurs in veterinary medicine too.

**Until fairly recently, the veterinary profession did not believe compliance was an issue, but compliance is at a level that means millions of pets receive inadequate levels of care.**

The landmark American Animal Hospital Association study on compliance, published in 2003 as *The Path to High-Quality Care* (AAHA Press), clearly demonstrated that, although most practices believed that a high percentage of their active clients were compliant with veterinary recommendations for good care, a much smaller percentage of their patients actually were in compliance.

The figures varied across treatments and preventative therapies, with an 87% compliance rate for core vaccines but only 34% for senior screening and just 21% for therapeutic diets. The overall compliance rate was 64%.

Following the study's publication, efforts to increase compliance became a focus for much of the

profession. According to the World Health Organization in 2003, improving human compliance to medicine has a greater impact than any improvement in medical treatment.

## **What is compliance?**

Compliance can be defined as being in accordance with a wish, request or demand and willingness to follow a prescribed treatment. It can also be the extent to which a person's actions coincide with advice (medical, lifestyle and behavioural).

Compliance is the process where pets receive a screening, procedure or treatment believed to be best for them by a veterinary professional. This will establish a consistent quality of care by providing health care services needed, when needed, in an appropriate way to achieve the best results. To achieve compliance, a team of veterinary professionals has to work together to ensure clients are fully informed of what they need to do.

Following on from compliance is adherence, which can be defined as the extent to which clients administer medications prescribed, including filling/refilling the prescription; correct dosage, use and timing; and completing the prescribed course.

Compliance is commonly confused with concordance – the process by which the professional and patient or client make decisions together about treatment.

## **Pet-owner bond and compliance**

Lue et al (2008) found the higher the pet-owner bond, the higher the level of care expected, meaning an owner was more likely to follow recommendations, regardless of cost. The study also found dog owners were more likely to have a stronger attachment than cat owners. However, cat owners were more likely to research and be better educated in pet diseases. It was discovered cat owners clearly understand need and benefits.

The study also found in multi-pet households, dogs visited the vets more often than cats – 72% of cats were seen less than once a year, compared to 42% of dogs. Therefore, it is important to ask about other pets in the household.

A bond between pet and owner is not the only important factor – a bond between client and health care professional is also vital. The stronger the bond between a veterinary practice and a client, the higher the perception of value and quality of care. The bond is affected by communication, pet interaction, ability to educate and providing only products the pet needs.

## **Recommendations**

A clear treatment recommendation from the veterinary health care professional, supported by the health care team, is essential for improving compliance. A successful recommendation needs trust, empathy and logic. If something makes sense and is explained well and we are then able to validate what is being said by somebody who is trusted, a recommendation is likely to be followed. Human patients have been shown to be more compliant if they understand the nature of their condition and importance of following the recommended medical or lifestyle regimen (Martin et al, 2005; Bourbeau and Bartlett, 2008). Empathy with clients increases the chance of compliance.



A successful recommendation needs trust, empathy and logic. If something makes sense and is explained well, a recommendation is likely to be followed. IMAGE: ©VM/iStock.

Reasons for a lack of compliance include:

- cost;
- confusion;
- uncertainty;
- misunderstanding;
- did not feel treatment was needed;
- lack of perceived value;
- clients' personal beliefs with regards to value of medication;
- ability to administer a prescribed medicine or product;
- how the recommendation was given;
- poor support and help for the client and pet;
- failing to remember;
- time constraints; and
- poor systems in place to enable good compliance.
- Benefits of a client's compliance include:
  - improvement in the health of pet;
  - improvement in client confidence;
  - benefit to the veterinary staff member; and

- benefit to the veterinary practice as a business.

## **How to maximise compliance**

To maximise compliance, the following can be considered:

- time spent with a veterinary staff member;
- collaborative planning of treatment regime (concordance);
- effective communication;
- specific verbal and written instructions;
- timely encouragement; and
- reminder systems.

## **Skills to enhance compliance**

A good introduction sets the tone for a consultation – even in an emergency. Always acknowledge the patient and client. Use open-ended questions to invite the story from clients, in a manner that allows them to tell you in their own words what is wrong, why they have brought their animal in, what they have noticed, their concerns and expectations.

Demonstrate reflective listening. The simplest form is a short summary, provided in a rising tone of voice and that is both a statement and a question. The second form offers an interpretation, changing the words clients use so the veterinary professional is sure the client understands what is being said. The final kind of reflective listening tests the hypothesis clients are not saying outright – what they are thinking or feeling.

Expressing empathy shows a client the veterinary professional has heard him or her at a deep level and understands what the experience was like for him or her. Be aware of body language. It is important to be aware of clues clients may provide indicating they need clarification, are anxious or are experiencing other emotions. These may be apparent in facial expressions, a shift in eye contact or nervous gestures. Your own non-verbal cues may enhance or inhibit the interaction with clients. Make sure you are aware of your facial expressions, tone of voice and overall presence when communicating.

Do not make any assumptions about the level of the clients' health literacy. It has been estimated less than half of the information clients are given during each visit to the vets is retained (Kessels, 2003). Limit the amount of information given by using clear, simple language and keep a slow pace to allow clients the time to absorb information. Try not to overwhelm the client.

Providing health care information is only one aspect of client education. You should also assess clients' understanding of the cause of the problem, why it is important to act and what needs to be done. Be sure clients have asked all their questions.

Try to offer clients options – for example, tablets or liquid medication. Written instructions, supplemental materials and an action plan can help clients remember what was said during a surgery visit and will provide clarification.

Client body language can indicate whether clarification is needed. When possible, include pictures and clear, specific, written instructions. Discuss positive reasons for following recommendations, including anticipated benefits, and discuss successful techniques to help clients remember to give medication or keep a schedule.

## Effective communication

### Types of communication to aid compliance

- Nurse clinics
- Demonstrations
- Verbal direction
- Product literature
- Hand-written direction
- Length of consultation
- Continuity with the  
• veterinary professional
- Chronic medication reminders
- Text messages
- Email
- Letters
- Follow-up telephone calls
- Display boards
- Televisions
- Social media
- On-hold messages
- Pharmaceutical company reminder services
- Promotional offers
- Newsletters



Literature and information boards displayed in practices can influence effective communication and compliance.

Effective communication has been found to significantly improve outcomes, including patient health and satisfaction, adherence to medical recommendations and doctor satisfaction (Silverman et al, 2005). If you can communicate well, a client is more likely to acknowledge and follow recommendations.

If clear and thorough communication is used, client compliance rates can increase by 40% (Lue et al, 2008). Investing time in preparing checklists and protocols, then ensuring they are used

effectively by the entire team, can pay dividends in improved care, owner satisfaction and practice productivity.

## Nurse clinics

Most owners want to do the right thing for their pets, so it is up to the practice to ensure they are educated properly on preventive health care. Nurse clinics are an excellent way to provide this. For all pets, no matter what their life stage, some fundamental health care requirements need to be considered, allowing the opportunity for promotion and prospective sale of products complementing it. Nurse clinics are the easiest way for VNs to increase turnover and, ultimately, free up vets to see other patients, which is more profitable to the practice. Not only are vets able to see more clients, VNs are making money too. Clients are also more likely to speak to a VN because they do not want to bother a vet.

Educating owners about the importance of preventive health care to protect their pet, other animals and people from disease risk should form the foundation of any practice communication. Nurse clinics can provide this and will keep the client and pet returning to the practice for regular health checks and preventive health care advice – such as regular parasite treatments – which will ultimately aid compliance.

Nurse clinics will help bond clients to a practice, which will ensure client loyalty and therefore aid compliance throughout that pet's life, as well as benefiting the business. Statistics show there is a limited window of opportunity to engage and bond with new puppy and kitten owners. For every 10 puppies born, the practice will see nine for their initial course of vaccinations and by the second year of the dog's life, this reduces to just five. The figure is even lower for kittens (Intervet, 2008).

## Conclusion

Improving compliance relies on quality of interaction between the client and vet team. Client education and effective communication are also critical factors. Developing and practising the skills discussed will enhance client relationships, increase satisfaction and compliance, which will ultimately improve patient health. Effective compliance is a win-win situation. The patient gets the care needed and the client perceives quality of care, leading to a stronger bond benefiting you and the practice.

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