

2 powerful words to empower animal owners

by Kirk Augustine

It is easy to rush client interactions to get to the next caller, return to work in progress, or begin the next appointment. When we do this, we miss primary opportunities to let clients think about and share the rest of the details about the animal. Like our own interactions with medical doctors, most animal owners are reluctant to share ALL the details of their critters' problems, situations or needs.

While newer pet owners may be more willing to tell all, a client's reluctance to share is our opportunity to learn more and build trust. The first step is to capture a solid history that includes exercise, diet, treats, other pets and lifestyle. Mentally position this history as a situation analysis. Use open-ended questions, not leading ones as the second step.

After we acknowledge and clarify what was shared, two simple words empower the animal owner to share the rest of the story: WHAT ELSE?

“So the red in Fluffy's urine started three days ago, right? WHAT ELSE?”

Source: *Animal Health Digest*. Asking “WHAT ELSE?” following clarification or acknowledgement is a primary key to change your position in the communication. That simple action moves you alongside the animal owner as an informed partner to help solve Fluffy's problem. This communication principle is known as triangulation:

In figure 1: The owner hands off their animal to the DVM. DVM and team turn focus away from owner who is often left to just wait to be told what to do; one option only.

In figure 2: The DVM moves alongside the owner offering discoveries and options to solve the issue. In this way, the doctor and owner equally bring their own expertise to the solutions for the pet.

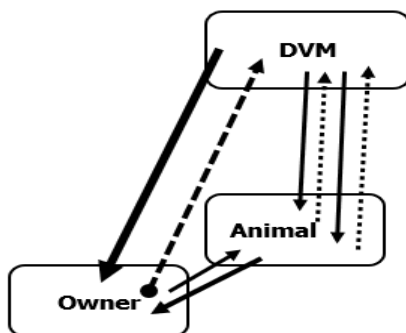


Figure 1

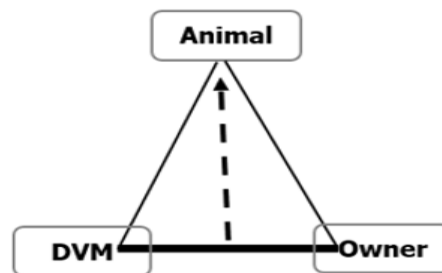


Figure 2

Also see: Practicing narrative medicine; diagnostic listening, *Animal Health Digest*, September 24, 2019. [Link](#).

animal health

DIGEST

Simple. Consistent. Timely. Relevant. Actionable. . . Affordable.

INSIGHTS: By triangulating and engaging the pet owner as the decision maker the DVM becomes a partner in the animal's health and treatment solution options.

The narrative might go like this:

DVM: Let's see, Fluffy is here because of some red discharge in her urine. Is that right?

Owner: Yes, it started about three days ago like I told the technician.

DVM: Ok. She is excellent help. Thank you for updating Fluffy's history so completely.

Owner: Well, I would never have remembered all that if you had not sent me the pre-visit check list with the appointment reminder yesterday.

DVM: That's good feedback. Besides the red in the urine, I see Fluffy still spends most of her time indoors except for walks and backyard play time.

<pause for 15-20 seconds of eye contact with owner> then continue.

There IS a different diet name on here from before . . . when did you change that?

Owner: Last year. It was when we had Fluffy here for those booster shots and she was getting too heavy. The other doctor said to try the current food. We never went back to the original diet after that. We started the pet insurance then too!

DVM: Oh, that's fine. Dr. <name> is quite knowledgeable on diets and Fluffy has lost five pounds since we saw her last! I'm curious, did Fluffy do ok with the boosters?

Owner: Yes. Oh, she was a bit grumpy for a day but truly no problems.

DVM: Good! And pet insurance is a good choice given Fluffy's age. WHAT ELSE should I know before we take a good look at Fluffy and figure out some options together.

Owner: Nothing else . . . I AM anxious to have your exam her. I AM worried about her.

DVM proceeds with physical exam explaining each action as she goes, praising the normal temperature, teeth, ear cleanliness, eye confirmation and hip/joint palpitation.

Note: affirmations build trust with the owner and helps eliminate apprehensions.

DVM: Well <owner> Fluffy looks very good except for that red urine concern. I am unable to see any injuries or reason with just a physical exam. I have a couple options in mind. Let me share them with you, then you can decide what sounds best to you.

Owner: Thanks doctor. What would you do if Fluffy was your dog?

DVM: Thanks for asking. We could always do nothing and see if it clears up. My preference though is to draw some blood and along with this urine sample we got while examining her and run some simple lab tests. We should recheck for heartworm as well since you shared you ran out of medication a couple months ago.