



Pet Owners' Growing Reluctance to Vaccinate:

Reasons Why & What Can Be Done

By Lori Kogan, PhD

The World Health Organization (WHO) has identified vaccine hesitancy as one of the top ten threats to global health. As the COVID-19 pandemic made all of us painfully aware, the reasons for vaccine hesitancy and resistance are complicated; driven by individual (e.g., emotions, values, risk perceptions, knowledge, beliefs) as well as social, cultural, political, and historical factors. Case in point - despite the widespread availability of a COVID-19 vaccine throughout the United States, several states never exceeded 60% fully vaccinated rates.

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Although there were some logistical barriers (e.g., time, transportation, cost, location), the greatest barriers were attitudinal: beliefs and fears about communicable diseases and vaccines, and distrust of healthcare and governmental agencies. The media, and social media in particular, played a significant role by spreading misinformation about vaccines and conspiracy theories.

Yet, even before COVID-19, there has been growing concern within the veterinary community that increasing numbers of pet owners are reluctant or resistant to getting their pets vaccinated. Canine and feline vaccinations are clearly a vital component in companion animal health, and similar to human health, are considered safe, cost-effective ways to prevent infectious diseases. Even so, canine and feline vaccine compliance rates around the world appear to be decreasing.

Numerous conversations with veterinarians who expressed worry that the growing antivaxx sentiments regarding human diseases were bleeding over into veterinary medicine made me curious. I wanted to test out this theory, so together with colleagues, I conducted two studies exploring the potential association between antivaxx sentiments for human diseases and companion animal vaccine compliance. In our first study, we surveyed veterinarians in the US and Canada and found a positive correlation between a community antivaxx movement against mandatory vaccinations for childhood diseases and the number of vaccine resistant or reluctant pet owners. When examining the reasons for owners' resistance, we found little overlap between veterinarians' top concerns regarding vaccinations (for dogs: anaphylaxis, soreness at injection site, and lethargy; for cats: vaccine-associated sarcoma, lethargy, and soreness at injection site) and pet owners' concerns. In contrast, as reported by veterinarians, two of most common concerns mentioned by reluctant or resistant owners were beliefs that vaccinations are unnecessary or that they may lead to chronic or severe illness.

This first study was conducted in 2019. Little did I know that two years later COVID-19 would offer an opportunity to see if the same

relationship between antivaxx sentiments seen for childhood diseases and pet vaccinations was present in a very different context. Indeed, we found the same pattern; the number of pet vaccine resistant owners was positively associated with the presence of local COVID-19 antivaxx sentiments (Tables 1 and 2).

So, are we destined to continue this trajectory?

Are veterinarians powerless in changing the minds of these resistant pet owners?

In short, I would argue, no. I would like to suggest that the positive feelings many pet owners have towards their veterinarians offers an opportunity to help owners, similar to human health care providers talking to parents about vaccinating their children, make better choices. Yet, just as we learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, simply providing more scientific data may not be the best technique.

The standard medical approach when trying to convince people to obtain vaccines for themselves or their children has been to provide them with solid information and scientific evidence. When these efforts are not successful, many times health professionals react by providing even more information rather than changing communication methods. Similarly, when talking to vaccine-reluctant owners, veterinarians often begin, appropriately, by discussing the facts and scientific support for vaccines. Yet, similar

to other areas involving risk judgment and decision-making, several factors beyond knowledge influence people's views on vaccines. Although ideally, we would all make risk decisions based on rational thought, research pertaining to other forms of risk mitigation suggests otherwise. Additional factors that impact our decisions are cognitive distortions - biases in thinking that lead to errors in thinking and can negatively impact important decisions.

Some of the cognitive biases that can impact pet owners' vaccine decisions include:

MINIMIZATION

MAGNIFICATION

MYOPIA

**EMOTIONAL (GUT)
REASONING**

HERD BEHAVIOR

The minimization bias is the tendency to discount or minimize the importance or likelihood of some things (e.g., their dog acquiring an infectious disease), while magnification pertains to people's propensity to exaggerate the importance or consequence

of other things (e.g., vaccine risks). If people feel that the chances of their pet acquiring an infectious disease are low and the chances of a severe negative reaction to a vaccine are high, it is easy to see how this may lead them to resist vaccinations. Another cognitive error is myopia, the tendency to focus on the short term or present moment when assessing the costs and benefits of a decision such as whether to vaccinate. For people who think myopically, it can be hard for them to envision the benefits of protective measures, such as vaccines, until it is too late. Another error worth mentioning is people's tendency to base their decisions on a 'gut' feeling. People who 'trust their gut' often assume (erroneously) that their emotions accurately reflect reality. This distortion in thinking can impact their ability to make educated, informed vaccine decisions.

One final reason I want to point out to help explain why people may make irrational decisions is herd behavior, or the tendency to make decisions based on the actions and choices of others. When unsure, people tend to look to the behaviors of others to help them decide on the right course of action. Social media, with its ability to reach large audiences quickly, has taken herd behavior to a new level. Studies have found that exposure to antivaxx sentiments online negatively impacts readers' intention to vaccinate, and in fact, the spread of negative or inaccurate information online about vaccines has been identified as the leading cause of vaccine hesitancy. Yet, we can use herd mentality to our benefit. For example, vaccine endorsements by celebrities have been effective strategies for numerous human health care decisions. Veterinary hospitals can use this approach by showcasing celebrities (local or national) as well as 'model' owners who vaccinate regularly.

Understanding these underlying reasons that lead people to make irrational decisions regarding vaccines can help veterinary teams deliver more effective messages. For example, it might be helpful to encourage owners to think about what they would do if their pet acquired a disease that could have been prevented by a vaccine. How would they feel? Would they be able to afford the treatment? The key to mitigating several of these cognitive biases is to help people realize that they can make the future potentially less turbulent if they make small sacrifices and risks in the current moment.

These conversations, coupled with listening to clients' fears and providing a positive supportive partnering relationship, can be pivotal in helping change owners' behaviors. Vaccine-reluctant pet owners are not stupid, they are simply making poor choices based on fears and cognitive biases. By better understanding this, veterinarians can adapt their vaccine messages to positively impact vaccine compliance.

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Table 1. Veterinarians' views of the impact anti-COVID-19 vaccination sentiments have on the number of owners who decline or express concern about rabies and core vaccinations

		Fewer owners declining or expressing concern about rabies and core vaccinations	Same number of owners declining or expressing concern about rabies and core vaccinations	More owners declining or expressing concern about rabies and core vaccinations	Don't know
Declining rabies or core vaccinations	Rabies (n=183)	8 (4.4%)	99 (54.1%)	66 (36.1%)	10 (5.5%)
	Core vaccines (n=184)	6 (3.3%)	60 (32.6%)	112 (60.9%) ⁶	(3.3%)
Expressing concerns about rabies and core vaccinations	Rabies (n=183)	6 (3.3%)	82 (44.8%)	90 (49.2%) ⁵	(2.7%)
	Core vaccines (n=185)	5 (2.7%)	47 (25.4%)	129 (69.7%) ⁴	(2.2%)
Want to discuss vaccinations (n=187)		6 (3.2%)	25 (13.4%)	155 (82.9%) ¹	(0.5%)

Table 2. Local anti-COVID-19 vaccination sentiment and whether participants have had clients who have expressed concerns or refused to vaccinate their dog or cat for rabies or core vaccines against recommendations since the COVID vaccine became available

	Have had clients who have expressed concerns or refused to vaccinate their dog or cat for rabies or core vaccines against recommendations							
	Canine				Feline			
	Rabies		Core		Rabies		Core	
	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
No anti-COVID-19 vaccination sentiment	194 (94.6%)	11 (5.4%)	195 (93.8%)	13 (6.3%)	192 (91.4%)	18 (8.6%)	194 (91.1%)	19 (8.9%)
Anti-COVID-19 vaccination sentiment	775 (87.0%)	116 (13.0%)	690 (76.6%)	211 (23.4%)	711 (79.4%)	185 (20.6%)	685 (75.4%)	223 (24.6%)
Don't know if anti-COVID-19 vaccination sentiment	129 (94.2%)	8 (5.8%)	122 (89.1%)	15 (10.9%)	130 (91.5%)	12 (8.5%)	131 (92.3%)	11 (7.7%)