

Four ‘Unwelcome’ Words

Which Words Have Worn Out Their Welcome in Veterinary Medicine?

By Wendy Hauser, DVM



Since 1976, Lake Superior State University has published an annual list of ‘Banished Words’. Originally named “List of Words Banished from the Queen’s English for Mis-Use, Over-Use and General Uselessness,” this list highlights words that no longer bring value to communication. If veterinary medicine had such a list, the following four words would be my nominations to be ‘banished.’ Which words would you add?

Compliance

When used in a veterinary medical context, compliance describes the consistency and accuracy with which a client follows the treatment recommendations dictated by the veterinarian. It infers that the client follows veterinary care recommendations passively, without having input in or questioning the advice. This is antithetical to building partnership with the client and it reflects an outdated paradigm of a practitioner-centered relationship that is control oriented.

What to use instead? Adherence

A much better term is Adherence, defined by the World Health Organization as the extent to which a person's behavior corresponds with agreed recommendations made by a health care provider. In veterinary medicine, it suggests that the owner is informed about what they are being asked to do, and why. It implies an interactive and collaborative relationship between the veterinarian and pet owner. Adherence uses shared decision making to formulate the plan that is in the best interests of the client and pet.

Gold Standard

The phrase ‘gold standard’ refers to the process of assessing currency value by backing it with a specific amount of gold. This standard originated in England in 1717 and was internationally adopted in the 1870’s. The gold standard fell out of favor during World War One, when many European countries abandoned it and shifted to printing money that was not backed by a commodity. In 1971, the US abandoned the gold standard.

It is ironic that the first use of the phrase ‘gold standard’ in medicine was in 1979, given the proximity to the discontinuation of the gold standard as an economic measure. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century the phrase came to signify one standard of perfection: the single best way to diagnose, treat or manage a patient’s disease or condition.

This perspective has unintended consequences; when the term ‘gold standard’ is applied to medicine it represents an endpoint, stifling future innovation. This phrase originated to establish a currency’s value against gold, and not to evaluate medical outcomes. It is time to banish this phrase in veterinary medicine.

Standard of Care

Veterinarians often interpret the ‘standard of care’ to mean optimal care, which is incorrect. This is not a medical phrase; it is a legal term used to assess medical liability. The standard of care represents the level of care that a reasonable practitioner would provide in the same situation; it is met when the veterinarian proves they provided the minimal level of acceptable care. This is quite different from how practices and veterinary studies use this term as a measure of ideal care.

What to use instead? Best Practices

Best practices are processes or procedures that are based on evidence, research and combined expert recommendations that lead to a reliably desired outcome. When used in veterinary practices, they allow team members to integrate best practices into the daily workflow in a consistent, effective and efficient manner. Best practices are often based on guidelines from professional organizations including the AVMA, AAHA and WSAVA, species specialty organizations like the Feline Veterinary Medical Association, Specialty College contributions such as the ACVIM consensus statements and university/research websites. Best practices are dynamic; they continually evolve as new findings emerge.

Pet Parent

Nestlé Purina trademarked ‘pet parent’ in 1989 for use in marketing campaigns. This term expanded the idea of pet ownership to focus on the emotional bonds people feel toward their pets and their role as family members. Fast forward to 2025, and the term is highly polarizing, with fierce advocates on each side.

Regardless of your position on the phrase, words influence societal norms, which shape law and policy creation. Currently, pets are considered property in all states. There have been several laws introduced to endow pets with ‘rights’ and protections like human children, such as court appointed advocates and guardians.

In my non-legal opinion, the sentiment behind ‘pet parent’ normalizes the idea that pets are not property. If pets lose that designation, it will dramatically change the landscape for veterinarians in every aspect of pet care. This includes the ability to surgically desex pets, leash them, confine them in crates, etc. Because pet health care is a discretionary expense, I am concerned that human-like rights have the potential to translate into less care for pets. Consider the following example: if an owner’s rights are minimized due to pets’ rights laws, a different level of care may be mandated. This might oppose what owners feel are in their pet’s best interests or what they can afford. As a result, fewer ill pets might be presented for care. Finally, if pets are legally endowed with human-like rights, it is likely that rate for malpractice insurance will increase due to non-economic damage settlements.

I consider my pets to be cherished companions and family members. I value the choice to make the best decisions for my beloved Oliver, based on my beliefs, values and in consultation with my trusted veterinary partners. For that reason, I am a proud pet owner.

I challenge marketing departments and veterinary practices to stop using the phrase ‘pet parent’ and related terms like fur baby and grandpuppy. In their place, create relational advertising that emphasizes the value of their services or products in building and maintaining the bond between humans and their pets.



WENDY HAUSER

Wendy Hauser, DVM is the founder of Peak Veterinary Consulting and has practiced for 35 years as an associate, practice owner and relief veterinarian.