



CANINE BEHAVIOUR ADVICE FOR VETERINARY STAFF DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC



The lives of most of our dogs have changed in recent weeks, particularly since the COVID-19 lockdown started. With the exception of health workers and other essential workers, owners are at home most of the time. Many have children at home, who are likely to be particularly active and noisy in the house due to restrictions on outside activities. Most dogs will be receiving one walk daily, which may be in a different location to their normal walks. Dogs belonging to members of the vulnerable groups may not be going out at all or being walked by neighbours or friends. Most dogs will not be experiencing their usual social interactions with familiar dogs.

Even though veterinary practices are only permitted to treat emergency conditions at present and their overall work-load has therefore been greatly reduced, this work is being carried out by a small number of vets and nurses to minimise social contact between staff. In some cases, this is resulting in the staff on duty being extremely busy.

Dogs thrive on routine and the routine of most will have been altered to a greater or lesser extent by the COVID-19 lockdown. In addition, dogs are sensitive to signs of stress in their owners and many people are experiencing anxiety and stress during the pandemic. The extra activity in households will also be making it difficult for some dogs to rest sufficiently during the day, particularly if they are young and excitable. All these factors may be contributing to elevated stress levels in pet dogs, so that their ability to cope with additional stresses such as a visit to a veterinary practice could be reduced. It is therefore even more important than usual that veterinary staff recognise when individual dogs are showing signs of anxiety and ensure that veterinary visits are as stress-free as possible.

Signs of anxiety

Most vets and nurses will be familiar with the canine body language signals that indicate anxiety. These include: licking their lips, yawning, turning their head away, showing the whites of their eyes ('whale eye'), lowering their head, and holding their tail down.

Taking dogs from owners' cars into the practice

Only emergency or very urgent conditions are being dealt with, so dogs being treated in the present situation will either have an injury or be medically unwell.

Dogs who have come to the practice before will be used to entering via the waiting-room. They will also be used to their owner remaining with them throughout a veterinary examination and may depend on this to maintain a feeling of security. The experience of being collected from the owner in the carpark will be unfamiliar and they may find the approach of the veterinary staff threatening. This is particularly likely when the veterinary staff are wearing personal protective equipment such as masks which dogs are unlikely to have been habituated to if their owners have not been wearing them at home.

Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



Dogs who have never been to the practice may be anxious about being taken to a new location when unwell or after having sustained an injury. Their owners are also likely to be experiencing stress which they will be sensitive to.

It is important to avoid eye contact with the dog and get the owner to pass the end of the lead towards the vet or nurse rather than reaching over them as many dogs are worried by arms reaching towards them. Some vets are using their own slip leads to avoid having to touch the owner's lead so they should ensure that they loop the lead over the dog's neck slowly and carefully, without sudden movements while the owner's lead is still attached so that the dog cannot run away if anxious. Dogs may need to be encouraged to come away from their owner by gentle pressure on the lead and an up-beat cheerful voice. Food treats could be used for dogs who are not likely to require an anaesthetic or have a medical condition for which this would be contraindicated.

For dogs who have shown aggressive behaviour towards veterinary staff in the past or whom the owners feel might do so when anxious, safety of veterinary staff can be protected by asking owners to apply a muzzle to their dog just before they are collected from the owner's vehicle.

When the veterinary staff are having to deal with a large number of cases, it is preferable to leave anxious dogs with their owners in the car until they are ready to deal with them, rather than admitting them into a kennel. For those who require a surgical procedure or investigations, administration of a sedation or premedication injection immediately after they are admitted will allow them to relax when subsequently placed in a kennel and reduce the risk of 'kennel-guarding.'



New pets

Despite the lockdown, many people are acquiring new puppies and adopting new dogs at this time. Although this is not ideal, as these animals are not able to receive puppy vaccinations and socialisation opportunities are reduced, it is a situation that vets are required to deal with, and appropriate advice needs to be given to owners to minimise the development of behaviour problems in the future.



There will be no opportunity in the current situation for these pets to experience social visits to the practice so that they develop at positive association with the premises and the staff. It will be important to arrange these when the lockdown restrictions are lifted and for vaccination courses to be completed as soon as possible.

Although socialisation opportunities will be reduced, even unvaccinated puppies can be allowed to view passing dogs and people from the garden or out of the window. In some cases, this will provide a gentler introduction to unfamiliar people than many puppies experience normally, when overwhelmed by excited visitors.

Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians



If puppies and new rescue dogs are given a food treat every time a person or dog passes, this will help to create a positive emotional response to their appearance.

Household members can also dress in different types of clothing and put on hats, false beards, high viz clothing, rucksacks etc to habituate puppies to the appearance of these.

Exposure to different objects and sounds within the house can be carried out as normal and the 'Sounds Scary' recordings can be obtained from the Dogs Trust website to habituate puppies to the sounds of fireworks, gunshots, thunder, babies etc. These should initially be played a few times daily at a low volume while puppies or new rescue dogs are engaged in a fun activity and the volume gradually increased over days to weeks, always ensuring that they show no sign of fear.

Providing puppies and new rescue dogs with enough 'down time' in order to rest is important in households in which there is a lot of activity, especially involving children.

It is also important that new dogs are exposed to short periods of being alone, initially just when the owner leaves the room for a few minutes while the puppy or new dog is calmly resting or chewing, and gradually progressing to longer periods alone. This to ensure that they do not develop separation related problems when the lockdown is lifted and people resume their normal activities.

If owners are experiencing behavioural problems with their dogs or are seeking on-line training courses for their puppies, while unable to access actual puppy classes, they can go to the Animal Behaviour and Training Council (ABTC) website to find suitably qualified trainers and behaviour counsellors.

(www.abtcouncil.org.uk/)

