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Research Project Proposal
LIS 600

VETERINARY CLIENT ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION SEEKING BEHAVIORS

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The flow of information in the veterinarian-client relationship is a crucial one, fraught with issues on all sides. Veterinarians worry that their clients will be misinformed by inaccurate or outdated resources or that they might misunderstand more technical sources of information. Veterinary clients (in veterinary jargon a “patient” is the animal being treated, a “client” is the person making decisions about that animal’s care - usually the owner) might think that their veterinarian may be making recommendations that are motivated by the profit motive, rather than what is medically best for their pet, or they might be concerned that their veterinarian is not up-to-date on the latest research and treatments.

There is a huge range of veterinary consumer health information (VCHI) available, from peer-reviewed journals and reputable websites to misinformed bloggers and the casual advice of friends and family, which can be intimidating in volume and confusing in its contradictions. Despite this, having trustworthy VCHI is essential in ensuring that clients are able to make informed medical decisions and that they have a positive experience and build customer loyalty. Access to information is not the problem - the internet has all sorts of VCHI just a few clicks away. The problem is that the equal playing field of internet publishing makes it very hard for amateurs to assess the reliability of the information. The obvious answer is that the veterinarian - as the trained expert - should provide the information, but as mentioned above, there is potential for a perceived conflict of interest. The veterinarian can provide information that is clearly sourced from unbiased and independent sources in order to reassure the client, but this places a burden on the veterinary staff, and does nothing to engage the client in their pet’s health. Research in human medicine has shown that if a patient plays an active role in the information seeking process, it can increase their engagement and activation, which in turn has been shown to lead to improved health outcomes across a range of circumstances and medical conditions. I theorize that similarly involved clients will see similar improvements in activation and health outcomes.

There is a significant body of research around the intersection of veterinary medicine and information science. Kogan et al. described the breadth of information sources that veterinary clients use naturally in their 2008 study “Sources and frequency of use of pet health information and level of confidence in information accuracy, as reported by owners visiting small animal veterinary practices”. Even ten years ago, veterinary clients were already using the web for information seeking at a high rate - only their veterinarian and family and friends were more commonly used - but they were also not as confident in the accuracy of the information they found there. In 2018, Sohljoo et al. conducted a wide-ranging qualitative analysis of the literature regarding VCHI and clients’ information-seeking behaviors. This resulted in a conceptual model for future study, based on the interaction model of client health behaviour (IMCHB). It identifies three phases of the veterinary-client relationship: Patient Singularity, which represents the unique configuration of each client, taking into account demographics, intrapersonal elements, and the client’s specific context for veterinary care; Client-Professional Interaction, which includes the veterinarian-client relationship (while thoughtfully leaving room for the client’s interaction with other veterinary professionals, which could be a promising field of study in itself), and informational interventions; and Health Outcome, which covers a range of post-interaction outcomes, from client satisfaction to the pet’s changed health status. This model forms an ideal framework to fit this proposed study into, as I will discuss below.

Increased patient activation does in fact lead to improved health outcomes, based on extensive research into this topic in human medicine. Studies in this area tend to focus on specific diseases or conditions and their response to different levels of patient engagement. A somewhat general example is Mosen, et al. “Is Patient Activation Associated With Outcomes of Care for Adults With Chronic Conditions?” (2007). The authors found that when divided into four “stages” of Patient Activation Measurement, patients with a range of chronic conditions in each stage sees greater “self-management behavior” (including exercise, healthy eating, support group attendance, etc.), better adherence to their medication regimen, patient satisfaction, self-reported quality-of-life, and functional status. Based on my research, this connection has not been demonstrated in veterinary medicine yet. This may partly be due to the fact that the owner-pet relationship creates an additional division between the information and the patient - pets cannot seek their own health information, of course. Before that link can be shown, it is important to determine if there is a relationship between client activation and their information seeking behavior.

For this study we propose to measure the effects on client activation by comparing two different models of meeting clients’ VCHI needs. The study will be conducted at the veterinary teaching hospital of a university that also has a dedicated, on-site, veterinary medicine library. With the assistance of clinicians and staff, clients

with scheduled appointments in several departments will receive a demographic survey designed to identify a set of focus group participants. Two separate focus groups, composed of clients with a similar range of Patient Singularity, will be convened. The focus groups will meet first before their initial consultation, to assess pre-existing health information literacy and information seeking practices.

Following their initial consultation, the first group will receive a prepared information handout, prepared by clinicians and information professionals, with information targeted to their pet's specific diagnosis and treatment plan. The other group will not receive specific information, but will receive guidance on how to perform their own search, with assistance from library professionals, including an information prescription and consumer health information literacy guidelines.

Post-treatment (potentially during or following a follow-up care appointment) members of each group will receive a post-intervention survey, designed to investigate their information seeking behavior quantitatively and qualitatively, as well as their level of client engagement and activation. Hibbard et al. (2005) have developed a compelling objective Patient Activation Measure (PAM) consisting of thirteen carefully calibrated statements, including "When all is said and done, I am the person who is responsible for managing my health condition", "I know the different medical treatment options available for my health condition", and "I am confident I can tell my health-care provider concerns I have even when he or she does not ask". The PAM is designed for use in human medicine, but can be modified to provide a measure of client activation in veterinary medicine.

Comparing PAM scores across the two focus groups will indicate if the performed intervention has had a measurable effect on Client Activation. Cyrus (2018) suggests that there is a demonstrable link within the scope of human medicine, but the effect of the difference between Client Activation and Patient Activation must be investigated from a veterinary perspective. These results will tie in to the framework developed by Sohljoo within the Client-Professional Interaction phase of the IMCHB, and provides a potential hook for veterinary researchers to examine a potential link between Client Activation and Health Outcomes.

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