

What Can't Be Taught

Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

A perspective from 10 years of practice

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After 10 years of practice, I have been known to ask myself, if I could go back and give myself advice during my first year of practice, what would I say? Other than the obvious (like always cover anal glands with tissue while expressing lest you shoot yourself in the eye), there are several intangible lessons that aren't really taught during veterinary school that I would like to share.

Cases will go south

Nothing really prepares you for the first time a case that you are solely in charge of goes poorly or you make a mistake. The best advice I can say is, "Brace yourself. At some point, things will go poorly." Be honest with the client, treat yourself gently, learn from your mistakes, and move on. Whatever you do don't internalize it and beat yourself up (which we as doctors tend to do).

Not my circus, not my monkeys

One thing you need to be aware of is that all your clients have monkeys. They may be financial monkeys, or relationship monkeys, or health-related monkeys, or time-management monkeys, etc. etc. What you need to be able to do is recognize your client's monkeys, especially when they are trying to give them to you. What does it look like when clients try to pass their monkeys off to you? It can sound like, "I'm on a fixed income. I can't afford that! Can you discount?" or "Do you take payments?" or "I just love pets, so I keep adopting them. But now I can't afford all their care." Because you as a veterinarian are a naturally empathic, caring person, you might be tempted to let the client put their monkey on you, but don't. You can *sympathize*, but the client's monkey is just that: his or hers. Not yours. Do your best to provide excellent service, but protect yourself emotionally and mentally and don't carry your client's monkeys as your own. Because they aren't.

Self-care is non-negotiable

We all know that the residents and attendees do their best to challenge us in veterinary school. We basically sacrifice our personal lives on the altar of veterinary medicine in order to obtain the degree, but things are different in the real world. In

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order for your career to be sustainable, you must take care of yourself. Take personal time, do the things that recharge your battery. Sleep enough. Try to take your lunches and go outside for a walk. Take your vacation days, and don't go in on your day off. Be a team player, but remember it is ok to say 'no' to extra shifts or to taking clients after hours. Utilize your local emergency clinic. Our jobs are hard, and you are not doing yourself or your patients any favors by seeing patients at the end of the day if you are already beyond fried and exhausted. If it helps to talk about rough days or cases, then find a safe person to talk to. If you are having ongoing stress or depression, do not ignore the symptoms: get help. Make these habits non-negotiables in your professional life as much as you can, and the sleepless, stressful dog days of veterinary school will fade in the distance.

People skills are a must

So, funny story. Even though bedside manner and chatting up clients are critical to professional success, it turns out that most veterinarians are rated as introverts on the Myers-Briggs personality scale. It is draining and sometimes difficult for us to interact with people. Extroverts don't get it, but we really have to ramp ourselves up to go in and talk to people all day, and then we need to recharge. As draining as it can be, people skills and learning to love and care for people are just as important as the medicine. The owner is the gatekeeper to the pet's care, and you need to establish a connection with the client in order to gain trust and get that door open. Humor helps, and telling people you understand and that the situation is tough helps. Master the art of small talk, and you will do well.

Quality of life is as important (or more important) than quantity

In veterinary school medicine rotations, pet owners will often go to extraordinary lengths to extend their beloved pet's lifespan. While that happens on occasion in general practice, technologies and life-saving treatments need to be doled out with a measure of respect to the pet and the pet parent's quality of life. What new grads sometimes don't understand is the unmeasurable depth of guilt that pet owners can experience concerning their pet's sickness and suffering. They will be blinded by grief, and may choose to extend life longer than they should, just because you can. It is your job to help the client assess quality of life (there are great tools available!) and make decisions based on that assessment. You will be your client's guide — be wise and prudent and repeat after me: Just because you can, doesn't mean you should.