

# What Can't Be Taught

## Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

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I graduated 7 years ago, and I suspect that my first year of clinical experience in veterinary practice was much like what other new graduates describe: intimidating and stressful, yet also memorable and fulfilling.

Being a new graduate in the veterinary world requires support and mentorship in many areas, but I will focus here on just one aspect of being a new veterinarian for which I felt unprepared upon graduation: talking to clients about money.

As a fourth year student going through clinical rotations in the Doctor of Veterinary Medicine (DVM) program, most of your time is spent in tertiary care facilities. The demographic of clientele that you work with in fourth year are the most dedicated and engaged animal lovers and pet owners in Canada, and are those for whom the cost of patient care is not a major concern. However, clients encountered in tertiary care are not representative of the pet owner population that you will work with in general practice once you have graduated. The breadth of clientele you will encounter daily as a general practitioner will encompass everyone from the owner who believes their dog or cat is "just a pet" to those who consider their dogs or cats to be cherished family members. You will meet clients for whom it is a challenge to pay an examination fee, and you will meet clients who can afford the best of what veterinary medical care has to offer. Ultimately, you will spend much more time talking about money with clients once you are working as a veterinarian, than you likely anticipated as a veterinary student.

As a new graduate, I felt unprepared and ill-equipped for my role as a veterinary salesperson. Indeed, veterinarians are salespeople; the quality of medicine you practice once you leave school will be on a sliding scale dependent upon what your clients are able and willing to afford, and how well you are able to advocate for your patients' needs. Every day you will be required to convince pet owners that what you recommend for their pets are wise and necessary courses of action. Rarely will you encounter clients for whom finances are simply not a concern; most of the time you will need to explain the how and why behind every test, procedure, and treatment that you propose. In essence, you must provide justification for each line item on every estimate you present to a pet owner.

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If I may offer you, the new graduate, some advice on this topic, it is first of all to recognize that if you are uncomfortable in your newfound sales role and dread talking about money with clients, you are not alone. There are countless Veterinary Information Network (VIN) threads on the message boards dedicated to how to speak to clients about the costs of veterinary medicine, there are online communication webinars offered through pet insurance programs to this effect, and there are continuing education (CE) seminars at most CE conferences aimed at improving veterinarians' abilities to productively discuss finances and value of services with clients. You are not alone in your discomfort, and your malaise will diminish with time, training, and experience.

Secondly, believe in yourself and what you are recommending to pet owners. Nothing is less convincing to a client than a suggested course of action that is conveyed with words, body language, and tone that are insincere and demonstrate a lack of conviction. If you don't truly believe that Fluffy needs senior wellness screening, then why should Fluffy's owner believe it's worth spending \$400 to run senior blood and urine tests? Do you perform wellness screening on your own senior pets? Of course you do! If your boss presented you with his or her senior cat for an examination, would you perform wellness screening? Of course you would! You would not want to miss a potential health problem in your senior animal or your employer's elderly cat. Recommend what is best for Fluffy; if Fluffy's owner declines your recommendation, that is their prerogative, but you need to advocate for your patient and present your recommendations with sincerity and passion. If you are having a hard time recommending costly tests, procedures, or treatments for Fluffy, and you are aware that you are feeling uncertain about how essential they are, simply pretend that Fluffy is your own, or your boss's pet; this will step up your level of sincerity when discussing recommended diagnostic and treatment plans!

Thirdly, develop a communication strategy for yourself that enhances your comfort level discussing finances with clients and improves the effectiveness of your communication with them. Your strategy should include honesty and openness. These are important aspects of how all money talks with clients should be approached. Always be up front about costs involved with tests and treatments that you recommend prior to performing them, and keep clients apprised of updates to their invoices when treatment plans change; it is best to avoid surprises when it comes time for clients to be invoiced. When discussing your recommendations, use language that imparts value behind what you are reviewing with them. For example, do not tell your client that you will review an "estimate" with them; advise them

that you will review the “treatment plan” with them. Do not instruct your client on what time they need to “drop off” Fluffy at the clinic; let them know what time Fluffy should be “admitted to the hospital.” Additional aspects of your communication strategy should include educating clients about the benefits of pet insurance, providing veterinary financing options when necessary, taking communication CE courses as needed, and leveraging the help of experienced veterinary technicians who are comfortable in assisting you with reviewing treatment plans with pet owners.

Lastly, do not prejudge your clients’ ability to afford veterinary care for their pet, and only offer Plan B or C because you think they will not be able to afford Plan A. Unless Fluffy’s owners have specified in advance what their budget is, you truly have

no idea what they can and will spend to keep Fluffy healthy. Pet owners will surprise you on both ends of the spectrum. Every pet owner deserves to know what the ideal course of action is; it is our job to advocate first for what is in the best interest of our patients, and then second, to find a solution that meets our clients’ needs as well as those of our patients. Judging our clients’ financial status is not part of our job description, and does a disservice to both Fluffy and Fluffy’s owners.

With time and experience you will learn how to comfortably educate your clients about the value of the services you provide to them. Remember to breathe deeply and enjoy yourself as you embark upon your first year as a veterinarian out in the world. Frustrations will abound, but the rewards will be many, and your first year will be behind you before you know it!