

What Can't Be Taught

Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

Boundaries, perspective, and confidence

Ingrid Okonkwo

In veterinary medicine, as with many things in life, there are certain vital lessons that you can't get from a book, classroom, or PowerPoint presentation. In my experience in clinical practice, I have come across a few of those and here are my top three.

One of the most significant lessons is the need to set and maintain clear boundaries with clients. As an eager new graduate, I always wanted to please my clients. I had no qualms giving out my personal cell phone number to clients whose patients had on-going medical concerns. At the time, it didn't feel like such a big deal; the animals were sick and as a "good vet," I wanted to make sure they were doing well over the long weekend or holiday when the clinic was closed. I'm sure you can probably figure out how those weekends turned out for me and my family! It's safe to say that it was far from a sustainable long-term approach to compassionate care, no matter how well-intended. Having quality time off as a vet has not only enhanced my personal life, but has also given me the mental preparation needed to fully engage and provide my best patient care when I am at work. For me boundaries means not giving out my cell phone OR my personal e-mail (tried and failed at that one too). It also means putting full trust in the other veterinarians at my practice to take care of any of my cases and patients when I am not there. That means I don't worry about my patients much at all when I am off duty (I still do occasionally). This is a learned skill. If you don't practice it you can keep yourself up at night thinking about patients. I plan to have a long career in this field and that means intentionally taking steps to avoid burning out.

Lesson two from my time in practice is to look at things from the perspective of the owner. Often in practice we can be put into conflict with pet owners when they do not want to follow our recommendations or do something for their pet that we as veterinarians see as essential. Sometimes it seems that we care more about the pet than their owner does. After some frustrating interactions with owners who just don't seem to "get it," I have learned to see things differently. First and foremost, if an owner brings their pet into the clinic they are saying that they DO in fact care for their pet. So before I get frustrated I try to remember that because they are here it means they care. It's also important to realize that many times the perceived conflict is coming from

Dr. Okonkwo works in Winnipeg, Manitoba as an associate at Winrose Animal Hospital. She sees dogs, cats and a variety of exotics from cockatoos to boa constrictors. She graduated from the Western College of Veterinary Medicine in 2013.

Use of this article is limited to a single copy for personal study. Anyone interested in obtaining reprints should contact the CVMA office (hbroughton@cvma-acmv.org) for additional copies or permission to use this material elsewhere.

a lack of proper communication. Sometimes it's the owner not communicating their fears, concerns, or financial constraints. Other times it could be that I didn't do a great job explaining the importance of a test or treatment. In the end it is not my place to judge but rather to listen and try to work with the owner to give them other options that might be a better fit or to try again to explain myself better and in terms the owner understands. Working with the owner sometimes means compromising and doing less than the gold-standard treatments. It can also mean offering humane euthanasia even though the patient might have a treatable condition. The more I see things from the owner's perspective and not my own medical expert perspective, the less frustration and stress I feel on the job. It enhances communication and I have more satisfying client interactions.

My final lesson is simple and has been passed on to me by wiser veterinarians and holds true in my experience. Whatever you say, say it with confidence! This is the old "fake it till you make it" principle and it is especially important for new veterinarians. Clients will not trust you or be satisfied unless you speak with confidence. I know a lot of new graduates don't necessarily feel confident in themselves all the time. That's OK, but when you talk to your clients don't let it show. I found this especially important for working with exotic pets and their owners. We see a lot of reptiles at my practice and I had limited reptile experience before I started. I learned to look up each species before the appointment and then go in confidently to address the owners as though I had seen that species many times before. I'm not saying make things up or lie, but if you think you know the answer to something but aren't sure, go with it and look it up after. If you were completely wrong you can always call the owner and say that you did some further research and found some new information that corrected what you said earlier. If I get asked a question I don't know the answer to I say "good question" and say I will go look it up, but I don't say it as though I am embarrassed. I say it as though any great veterinarian might sometimes need to look that up. People are paying for our expertise so we have to act like the experts we are, without being arrogant or condescending. The good news is before long you will actually have the confidence and won't have to fake it so often.

My final word on things that can't be taught in school. Be kind and forgiving to yourself! I think a lot of veterinarians are perfectionists and a lot of pet owners have very high expectations for us. The truth is we are all human, we all make mistakes, and not one of us knows it all. Don't be too hard on yourself when you make a mistake (it literally happens to everyone!). Accept that you are human and that is OK and then go out there each day and give it your all!