



SPREAD THE WORD

A recent survey indicated that pet owners gained more confidence and comfort with veterinary nurses once they better understood their role, training, and skills.



TRENDS IN VETERINARY NURSING

Enhancing Client Perceptions of Veterinary Nurses and Technicians

Carina Storrs, PhD

More than a third of veterinary nurses/technicians think they will probably leave the industry in the next 5 years and more than half list a lack of utilization as a top workplace stressor.¹ These results from a survey the North American Veterinary Community (NAVC) conducted 2-plus years ago, even before the onset of the pandemic, illustrate some of the challenges facing the profession. This year, the findings of a survey of pet owners by the NAVC point to some contributions to this dissatisfaction: Many clients do not realize that veterinary nurses/technicians perform medical procedures and are educated, skilled members of the veterinary healthcare team.²

The new survey is part of a larger Veterinary Nurse/ Technician Empowerment Initiative that the NAVC launched in January 2022, in response to high rates of underutilization and dissatisfaction among veterinary nurses. A total of 1013 pet owners between the ages of 18 and 84 across the United States who reported having at least 1 cat, dog, or exotic animal in their home completed the most recent survey online in December 2021.

Although the findings did not come as a surprise to veterinary nurses, leaders in the field are grateful to have data to confirm what they have been experiencing for years. “The survey is a call to action in the fact that there is a lot of education that pet owners deserve to have about who we are,” said Carolyn Spivock, RVT, director of veterinary technician development at VCA Animal Hospitals, which led the survey along with the NAVC.

Harold Davis Jr., RVT, VTS (Emergency & Critical Care, Anesthesia & Analgesia), president of the NAVC’s board of directors, likens the survey to veterinary medicine. “We need to make a diagnosis, and based upon that diagnosis, we can then form a treatment plan. Now that we have determined where the gaps are, we can better target our marketing and education to the public.” The organization has already taken steps to reach out to consumers through local media outlets.

But just as there are varying factors contributing to pet owners’ lack of understanding, there should be efforts on multiple fronts to enhance awareness, according to experts. In addition to putting out messages to the general public, veterinary clinics and veterinarians themselves can play a big part in explaining the critical role of veterinary nurses.

FINDING THE GAPS

One of the most striking findings of the pet owner survey is that 47% of pet owners did not realize that veterinary nurses/technicians perform medical tasks and procedures. Instead, 73% thought their role only involved cleaning cages, grooming, or feeding animals and did not realize they also carry out diagnostic tests, medical imaging, and other procedures.

“It is really important to get the message out broadly how rewarding of a profession this is,” Spivock said. “Just look at how all the different specialties have



Importantly, misperceptions among pet owners about the role of veterinary nurses can lessen the quality of pet health care because pet owners do not follow their advice or share health concerns with them.

expanded, and all the great things that we can do in primary care. I feel like it will continue to grow in opportunities and skills.” In addition to increasing awareness among pet owners, Spivock noted this type of messaging may help attract people to veterinary health care, which needs more educated and licensed veterinary nurses/technicians.³ Only 44% of pet owners in the survey knew about the shortage of veterinary nurses/technicians.

Importantly, misperceptions among pet owners about the role of veterinary nurses can lessen the quality of pet health care because pet owners do not follow their advice or share health concerns with them. This can result in veterinarians spending unnecessary time with clients, leading to fewer patient visits and less profit for the clinic, noted Ashli Selke, RVT, CVT, president of the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA), which supported the survey. Selke recalled performing physical exams of pets when she worked in private practice and watching clients wait until the veterinarian came in the room to ask questions or share health information.

REACHING PET OWNERS

Although the survey brings into stark relief how little pet owners know about the profession, it also suggests that efforts to educate them may be well positioned for success. The vast majority of pet owners (84%) reported knowing that veterinary nurses are a critical member of the veterinary healthcare team.

Additionally, there weren’t prevailing views among clients as to the education and qualifications of veterinary nurses; rather, they were all over the map. Although 20% of clients thought they needed fewer

In Clinic.

Thank you for trusting
NexGard® (afoxolaner)...



- **Kills fleas and ticks** all month long and prevents flea infestations.
- **FDA-approved** to prevent *Borrelia burgdorferi* infections by killing black-legged ticks.

NexGard[®]
(afoxolaner) Chewables

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION: NexGard is for use in dogs only. The most frequently reported adverse reactions include vomiting, pruritus, lethargy, diarrhea and lack of appetite. The safe use of NexGard in pregnant, breeding, or lactating dogs has not been evaluated. Use with caution in dogs with a history of seizures or neurologic disorders. For more information, see the full prescribing information or visit NexGardClinic.com.

NexGard[®] is a registered trademark and FRONTLINE VET LABS[™] is a trademark of the Boehringer Ingelheim Group.
US-PET-0208-2021-A



than 2 years of education after high school, 30% thought they needed 4 years or more. (Most veterinary nurses/technicians have an associate degree, many obtain a bachelor's degree, and some pursue advanced degrees.) And while only 17% of clients knew that veterinary nurses were comparable to licensed practical nurses (LPNs) or registered nurses (RNs) in human medicine, 15% actually likened them to physicians.

“The survey showed that there are a lot of positive thoughts and feelings [among pet owners],” said Kara M. Burns, MS, MEd, LVT, VTS (Nutrition), VTS-H (Internal Medicine, Dentistry), editor in chief of *Today's Veterinary Nurse* and director of veterinary nursing development at WellHaven Pet Health. “That’s a wonderful thing. They just weren’t truly aware what we are capable of.”

There are signs that client education will make a difference. The survey provided pet owners with 5 short paragraphs that described the procedures that veterinary nurses perform; the benefits they provide to veterinarians and practices; and their education, training, and accreditation. After reading the passage, pet owners gained more confidence (50%) and comfort (46%) in these professionals. In addition, 83% agreed that veterinary nurses are as important as LPNs or RNs, and 35% said they would have engaged veterinary nurses more in the past as a resource for important pet health issues had they known this information.

CHANGING PRACTICE

Veterinary clinics are excellent places to educate clients, especially new clients, about the role of veterinary professionals, and there are a number of ways to do it. Something as simple as “employees wearing name badges with their title and credentials, such as LVT or RVT, can help pet owners start to understand what everyone does,” Burns said. She also thinks it can be effective to provide pamphlets in the waiting room and show videos that explain the role of veterinary nurses, which she has seen in some hospitals. For her part, Selke noted that some practices display all the licenses on the wall, not just those of doctors, and that can help clients see the value in certified veterinary technicians and veterinary nurses.

What can make a big impression on pet owners is when veterinarians introduce them to veterinary nurses and use language such as, “I’m going to leave you in the hands of my very capable veterinary nurse” to carry out

certain aspects of patient care, Selke said. But unfortunately, many doctors don't actually know exactly what tasks their coworkers are capable of, she added. Only a few veterinary schools in the United States are integrated with veterinary nursing or technician programs, which Selke thinks is the best way for the whole healthcare team to learn about everyone else's role. More veterinary schools do seem to be integrating these programs, noted Selke, who is an instructor at Purdue University College of Veterinary Medicine's Veterinary Nursing Program, which is one such example.

Another important component of the Veterinary Nurse/Technician Empowerment Initiative is the NAVC Institute, which had been offering weeklong, hands-on workshops for veterinarians and is now expanding to include veterinary nurses. In the first course, held in May 2022, veterinarians and veterinary nurses/technicians engaged in the same learning about anesthesia and worked together as a team. "[Collaborative learning experiences] may change vets' thinking on the way that they utilize the technicians," Davis said. "It gives them a new approach of how they might do things." **TVN**

References

1. North American Veterinary Community. Amplifying the Voice of the Veterinary Community. Accessed June 2022. navc.com/download/2020/2020_NAVC_Voice_of_the_Vet.pdf
2. North American Veterinary Community. Who's involved in the care of your pet? Published March 29, 2022. Accessed June 2022. navc.com/whos-involved-in-the-care-of-your-pet
3. Carter H, Grant J. Turnover: identifying causes and solutions. *Today's Vet Nurse*. 2022;5(3):10-13.

Carina Storrs

Carina is a freelance science and health journalist. Over the last 10 years, she has written about a wide range of topics, including infectious disease, cancer research, mental health, and animal welfare for web and print publications. Her stories have appeared on CNN Health, Next Avenue, and The Dodo, as well as in *Health Affairs*, *Scientific American*, and *Dog Fancy*, among other publications. Carina obtained a PhD in microbiology from Columbia University in 2006. She lives in New York City with her husband, daughter, and 2 feline officemates.



At Home.

... over 270 million times.¹

- **#1 dog preferred** with a delicious beef flavor.²
- **Safe for puppies** as young as 8 weeks, weighing as little as 4 pounds.

NexGard[®]

(afoxolaner) Chewables

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION: NexGard is for use in dogs only. The most frequently reported adverse reactions include vomiting, pruritus, lethargy, diarrhea and lack of appetite. The safe use of NexGard in pregnant, breeding, or lactating dogs has not been evaluated. Use with caution in dogs with a history of seizures or neurologic disorders. For more information, see the full prescribing information or visit NexGardClinic.com.

1-2. Data on file at Boehringer Ingelheim.

NexGard[®] is a registered trademark and FRONTLINE VET LABS[™] is a trademark of the Boehringer Ingelheim Group.
US-PET-0208-2021-B

