



Working with Behaviorists

Because there is a behavioral component to most ailments veterinarians treat, they may think of an animal's behavior as a symptom rather than a separate condition. [Doctor Rachel Malamed](#), a board certified veterinary behaviorist, said that behavioral issues in house pets are much more common, and often more severe, than veterinarians may realize.

"I think that, as a referral service, we are under-used," Dr. Malamed said. "Some behavioral issues will go beyond the expertise of a general practitioner, and that may lead a client to consider euthanizing or relinquishing a pet."

[The Regional Shelter Relinquishment Study](#), sponsored by the National Council on Pet Population Study and Policy, surveyed owners who had relinquished their pets and categorized the reasons why. The study concluded that behavioral issues were the most common reason given for relinquished dogs and the second-most given reason for feline relinquishment.

"Behavior is not only important from an animal welfare perspective, it's important from an economic perspective for veterinarians," Dr. Malamed. "When people relinquish their pets, veterinarians lose their clients."

Doctor Stefanie Schwartz, a board certified veterinary behaviorist, said that considering this trend, veterinarians should be referring clients to behaviorists more often.

"I don't think it is possible for a primary care veterinarian to do justice to complex behavioral cases in this day and age," Dr. Schwartz said. "It can take me an hour to take a behavioral history of an animal and another hour to explain my diagnosis and lay out a treatment plan. General practice veterinarians cannot do all of that in a 15-minute visit."

Doctor Schwartz points to the prevalence of drugs being marketed for behavioral issues and an over-reliance on dog trainers as two of the reasons why behavioral issues often lead pet owners to consider relinquishment or euthanasia.

"Unfortunately, because drug companies push pills for behavioral cases, pet owners will reach for the magic pill first and when that doesn't work, they start to get frustrated," Dr. Schwartz said. "The other problem is primary care vets continue to refer people to dog trainers, which might be appropriate in the case of a rambunctious puppy, but anything more complex than that should be referred to a credentialed behaviorist."

Doctor Leslie Larsen Cooper, a board certified behaviorist and Diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists, agreed that veterinarians would benefit from making more referrals to behaviorists, but noted that many veterinarians do not refer clients to behaviorists because they are not knowledgeable about the specialty.

"There are quite a few veterinary schools where students don't get much exposure to behavioral issues," Dr. Cooper said. "They need to be able to ask the right questions in the beginning and start to parse out the problem or it's not going to occur to them to make a referral."

Dr. Malamed advocates taking an "integrative approach" to addressing behavioral issues in an animal. While oftentimes, changes in behavior are an indication of an underlying medical issue, it is also possible that stress or a pet's emotional well-being is contributing to the animal's physical symptoms. Because of this, Dr. Malamed said that collaboration and ongoing communication between veterinarian and specialist is key to solving any behavioral problem.

"Oftentimes, both physical and behavioral issues need to be addressed concurrently," Dr. Malamed said. "Feedback is necessary between practitioners for the benefit of the patient."

One way to facilitate this collaboration is for general practice veterinarians to make behavioral questions and considerations a standard piece of a veterinary examination.

"Veterinarians play an integral role in diagnosing these issues, and they can easily integrate some basic behavioral awareness into their practices," Dr. Malamed said. "Including behavior history checklists

in the history for each appointment and teaching clients some basic ways to observe their pet's behavior and body language can go a long way in identifying more of these issues."

Because there are relatively few certified behaviorists – there are currently 62 certified by the ACVB – veterinarians may not be able to find a behaviorist in their immediate area. However, there are several resources available to veterinarians who want to consult with a behaviorist. Dr. Schwartz noted that she works as a consultant with [ANTECH Diagnostics](#), and can provide guidance about behavioral cases over the phone.

"By speaking directly with veterinarians, I can pick their brains and get a pretty good fix on what the problem is," Dr. Schwartz said. "From there, I can usually work with the veterinarian to develop a treatment strategy."

Doctor Cooper also offers phone consultation, but encourages veterinarians to take advantage of the growing body of literature and continuing education courses to develop a basic understanding of behavioral diagnostics and treatments.

"We're always looking for different ways to keep practitioners up to date and we're holding seminars at most of the major conferences now that offer courses on behavior directed at general practitioners and technicians," Dr. Cooper said. "There are also some wonderful textbooks – one in particular is *Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat* by Landsberg, Hunthausen and Ackerman – that have some great information that will keep veterinarians knowledgeable about behavior."

Doctor Malamed also encouraged veterinarians to do more to blend behavioral awareness into their practice.

"Early intervention and prevention are very important to behavioral medicine," Dr. Malamed said. "Things like pre-adoption counseling – setting realistic goals and expectations about pet ownership and finding the right pet for a home or owner – promoting early socialization for puppies and kittens, practicing low-stress handling in the clinic and providing educational resources to clients about behavior will reduce the number of behavior problems and help with identifying severe problems earlier."

Veterinarians looking for more resources concerning animal behavior can also consult the [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#), the [American Veterinary Society of Veterinary Behavior](#) and the [Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians](#).



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