



PRESS RELEASE

PARTNERS FOR HEALTHY PETS UNVEILS STUDY RESULTS REVEALING SIGNIFICANT COMMUNICATION GAPS BETWEEN WHAT VETERINARY STAFF SAY TO CLIENTS DURING AN ANNUAL CHECKUP AND WHAT CLIENTS ACTUALLY HEAR

Orlando, FL (February 5, 2018)— A recent study conducted by Partners for Healthy Pets found that most dog and cat owners fail to recognize *what actually happens during their pet's physical exam and the importance of the veterinary services performed*. More than five years of data compiled from staff and client survey responses determined that pet owners don't always hear what veterinary healthcare team members think they communicate to them.

The study results further indicate that veterinary practices have a previously unrecognized opportunity to better communicate not only what is being done in a preventive healthcare exam, but also how the exam benefits the pet, and by extension, the pet owner.

The PHP study gathered data from practices that used PHP's exclusive online survey tool, known as The Opportunity. The free tool, available at www.partnersforhealthypets.org, is designed to help veterinary practices identify communication gaps between their healthcare teams and clients during a yearly exam. How it works -- practices that use The Opportunity invite healthcare teams to take the anonymous online survey, and also send survey invitations to their clients whose pets had just received a preventive healthcare physical exam and checkup. Then, practice managers and veterinarians can access their password-protected accounts to view results at any time and evaluate trends specific for their practices. By surveying both staff and clients, it enables a veterinary practice to identify the consistency of the practice team's messages and recommendations and what the practice's clients are hearing or understanding.

The PHP study compiled Opportunity responses from 1,193 staff surveys and 1,360 pet owner surveys (the latter were completed by 833 dog owners and 527 cat owners) from April 2012-June 2017. This large and geographically diverse survey population contributed to the statistical power of the study results. The study revealed statistically significant communication disconnects between the practice staff and their clients in the following areas:

Pain Assessment –The PHP study responses found that, compared to staff survey responses, significantly fewer clients were aware that pain assessment is an important component of preventive healthcare. At their pet’s most recent exam, fewer than half of dog owners and less than a third of cat owners believed that a pain assessment was performed. That result contrasted sharply with staff responses, which indicated that the great majority of preventive healthcare visits included completion or discussion of a pain assessment by the veterinary team.

Dental exam – Healthcare staff reported much higher rates of canine and feline dental exams performed than what their clients did. For the question, “During a canine preventive healthcare visit, are the following services typically performed at every exam (yes or no),” 95% of staff responses answered “yes.” When clients were asked the question, “At your dog’s most recent checkup or preventive healthcare visit, were the following services discussed with you or performed (yes or no/do not remember),” only 77.2% of client responses were affirmative for dental exams. For feline patients, the affirmative response rates were 94.6% for staff versus 78.4% for clients. This reflects a clear-cut disparity between what staff and clients believe transpires in a healthcare exam.

Communication gaps were also found in these canine and feline veterinary services: general physical exams, weight and nutritional assessments, internal parasite testing, broad-spectrum parasite control, heartworm testing, behavioral assessments, vaccinations, follow-up plans based on assessments and recommendations and retrovirus testing (feline only).

“There is confusion on the part of clients about which services are actually performed during an exam for their pets and why they are important,” said Dr. Michael Cavanaugh, Chief Executive Officer of the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), who announced the study findings during the VMX conference AAHA session, “Explore, connect, and grow with AAHA” on Feb. 5. “The data confirms practices are missing a great opportunity to communicate and educate pet owners on the importance of those elements necessary for optimum preventive healthcare,” said Dr. Cavanaugh.

Driven by a mission to ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they deserve through regular visits to a veterinarian, PHP encourages practices to uncover their specific communication gaps by utilizing The Opportunity survey tool at www.partnersforhealthypets.org.

“Practices that use The Opportunity to reveal their unique communication gaps have taken the first step to provide better and more valued healthcare for clients,” said Dr. David Granstrom, Co-Chair of PHP and Assistant Executive Vice President of the American Veterinary Medical Association. “The second step is to develop good communication skills by the staff. It really is the fix for ensuring that a client has full appreciation and understanding of the components of a preventive healthcare exam and their importance.”

Dr. Janice Trumpeter, Co-Chair of PHP and Deputy Chief Executive Officer of AAHA added, “The Opportunity survey tool is not simply a client satisfaction survey. It’s a diagnostic tool that identifies communications gaps between the practice staff and clients.” She concluded, “Once a practice has their completed survey results, the staff can then target those specific areas for improving the dialog between staff and clients.”

Communication gap-closing tools for staff training are available for free from PHP at www.partnersforhealthypets.org/communications.aspx. The resources include videos and scripts that demonstrate ways to effectively communicate with clients and to help them recognize the value and importance of preventive care. Research has shown that pet owners are willing to make changes and embrace preventive healthcare visits if they know it will benefit their pets. The videos and scripts show how a few simple words in the exam room or during a client conversation can make a big difference in acceptance of a veterinarian’s recommendations and compliance.

The results of The Opportunity study have been recently published as an American Animal Hospital Association-American Veterinary Medical Association white paper titled, *The Opportunity: Pet owners don’t always hear what we think we tell them (and how to fix that)* and is a special feature in the February issue of AAHA’s *Trends* magazine. The paper can be viewed online at http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org/opportunity_login.aspx.

Additional Resources

- **Case study of The Opportunity survey tool benefitting a companion animal practice:**
http://www.partnersforhealthypets.org/Success_Story.aspx?ss=Eigner
Excerpt: The Cat Doctor, an all-feline AAHA practice in Philadelphia utilized The Opportunity online survey tool to strengthen and improve an already successful practice that has been serving cat owners since 1983. The survey revealed a key communication gap to practice owner Diane Eigner, VMD, past-president of the AAFP. It was the response to The Opportunity survey question, “During a feline preventive healthcare visit to your practice, is a behavioral assessment performed at every exam, regardless of the pet’s age?” In the initial survey, Dr. Eigner’s clients concurred slightly less than half the time. In contrast, the healthcare team answered in the affirmative 78% of the time. This discrepancy caught Dr. Eigner’s attention because of the importance of providing a home environment that supports the cat’s unique behavioral characteristics. “Cat owners need to understand these feline behavioral characteristics and needs,” Dr. Eigner said, “otherwise the cat’s quality of life and relationship with its owner will suffer.” She added, “We found out from client survey responses that we could do a better job of explaining and discussing this very important aspect of cat ownership.”

- **Select Survey Questions and Data Results:**

1) Practice Survey Question: During a **canine** preventive healthcare visit, are the following services typically performed at every exam (yes/no)?

Client Survey Question: At your dog’s most recent checkup or preventive care visit, were the following services discussed with you or performed (yes or no/do not remember)?

Table: Communication gaps >10 percentage points related to specific services performed. Table shows affirmative response rates to the above survey questions:

Services performed for canine patients	Practices “Yes”	Clients “Yes”
Pain assessment	73.0%	45.0%
Dental Exam	95.0%	77.2%
Weight and nutritional assessment	89.5%	77.0%

2) Practice Survey Question: During a **feline** preventive healthcare visit, are the following services typically performed at every exam (yes/no)?

Client Survey Question: At your cat’s most recent checkup or preventive care visit, were the following services discussed with you or performed (yes or no/do not remember)?

Table: Communication gaps >10 percentage points related to specific services performed. Table shows affirmative response rates to the above survey questions:

Services performed for feline patients	Practices “Yes”	Clients “Yes”
Retrovirus testing	20.7%	31.9%
Internal parasite testing	54.1%	43.5%
Broad-spectrum parasite control	55.5%	44.0%
Pain assessment	68.1%	30.2%
Dental exam	94.6%	78.4%

3) Practices and Client Survey Question: How important is it for a routine **canine** checkup or preventive care visit to include the following services?

Table: Communication gaps >10 percentage points related to perceived importance of specific services. Table shows response percentages to the above survey question:

Canine services	Practices Not Important/ Neutral	Practices Important	Clients Not Important/ Neutral	Clients Important
Heartworm test	7.2%	92.8%	20.3%	79.7%
Pain assessment	6.5%	93.5%	19.7%	80.3%
Behavioral assessment	10.2%	89.8%	28.6%	71.4%

Practices and Client Survey Question: How important is it for a routine **feline** checkup or preventive care visit to include the following services?

Table: Communication gaps >10 percentage points related to perceived importance of specific services. Table shows response percentages to the above survey question:

Feline services	Practices Not Important/ Neutral	Practices Important	Clients Not Important/ Neutral	Clients Important
Retrovirus testing	19.0%	81.0%	39.6%	60.4%
Internal parasite testing	7.3%	92.7%	30.2%	69.8%
Broad-spectrum parasite control	6.6%	93.4%	27.6%	72.4%
Pain assessment	6.7%	93.3%	22.5%	77.5%
Behavioral assessment	11.5%	88.5%	30.8%	69.2%

About Partners for Healthy Pets

Led by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA), Partners for Healthy Pets (PHP) is an unprecedented collaborative alliance of over 100 veterinary associations, colleges of veterinary medicine and animal health companies all committed to our mission to ensure pets receive the preventive healthcare they need and deserve through regular visits to a veterinarian. PHP provides tools and resources that help communicate the value and benefit of preventive care, enhance the veterinary client relationship, and most importantly, improve the overall quality of preventive healthcare provided for patients.

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