Enhancing Communication and Life Skills in Veterinary Students

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Context

The need for improving generic or non-technical skills in veterinary graduates has been highlighted by a number of reports from professional bodies and regulatory agencies throughout the world.1-3. All veterinary schools and faculties in Australia now have some component of their curricula devoted to enhancing interpersonal skills such as communication, team work and leadership.

Perhaps the profession has focused too much on animals when in reality veterinary medicine is a human-driven business in which animals are merely the recipient of our care and attention. Only if we accept the concept that our mandate involves human health, are we likely to fulfill the needs of society in the 21st century.4

In human medicine it is recognized that training in communication skills through visits to medical practices alone is an inadequate teaching tool as students can learn poor practice5. Veterinary students also need to apply these skills in a number of different contexts for career success.

There is a clear need within veterinary curricula to build competency in non-technical skills and to embed and integrate these lessons into all units of study. These aims are likely to best be achieved through teams of academics working with the profession to develop and apply these skills themselves, learn from other professional programs and create innovative educational programs.

Developing communication skills through drama and reflection

Drama has been shown to be a useful teaching tool for developing communication skills in veterinary students.6 The team at Murdoch University will use client simulations, student directed learning exercises, experiential tasks and an electronic portfolio resource to assist development of communication and life skills.

Communication, life skills and the human-animal bond

A number of methods will be used to explore the veterinary-client-patient triad. Firstly, a veterinary client questionnaire will assist in demonstrating to students the relationship between the strength of the human-animal bond and client expectations of veterinary consultations. A web-based human-animal bond teaching module will complement this process and finally an experiential consultation skills workshop, involving simulated clients, will assist students in applying this knowledge.

A key outcome for these teaching strategies is the development of an environment that challenges the students to develop confident communication and consultation skills and also encourages acceptance, mutual respect, non-personal judgment and individual expression. A variety of clinical situations will be used for students to rehearse these skills.

The electronic portfolio tool will allow students to showcase evidence of their skills and achievements to future veterinary employers.

Emotional intelligence, leadership, communication and life skills

Emotional intelligence has been defined as the awareness of emotional states in oneself and others and the ability to use this awareness to manage relationships.6,7 Relational competence is therefore derived from self awareness, social awareness and self management.5,10

Key outcomes of this project

• Collaboration amongst veterinary faculties and schools in Australia to generate shared resources for innovative approaches to the teaching of communication and life skills
• Enhanced understanding of the value of communication and life skills for veterinary students and academics
• Research led and evidence based approaches to teaching graduate attributes linked to non-technical skills
• Australasian symposium in veterinary education scheduled for July 2009

Key challenges for broader implementation

• Adapting the results of veterinary specific research to other university contexts, including other healthcare professions
• Financing the resource intensive teaching of communication and life skills in the long term
• Inter-university collaboration, compatibility and agreement on distribution of electronic resources developed as a result of this project

References