Several frameworks for consulting have been developed for medical education. However, none have been developed specifically for veterinary use. There is considerable overlap between the two fields and also the likely differences between the veterinary and medical consultation, it was decided to adapt a widely used medical consultation model to the veterinary context. The Cambridge-Calgary consulting model (Figure 1) was adapted by the National Unit for the Advancement of Veterinary Communication Skills, and therefore the most relevant to the veterinary profession.

Preparation

Before any consultation is started it is important to prepare adequately. Any equipment required for the consultation should be prepared, the consulting room needs to be clean and the clinical history of the animal read through. The nurse needs to be fully aware of any relevant previous history of the animal. Whether or not the consult is regarding the previous clinical history of the animal, if you mention or ask who the pet has been since the incident, the client feels that you care about their pet. It is always worth checking vaccination status, last time of worming and other parasite control. If any comments have been noted in the clinical history, which are relevant these should be reminded to the client. For example if the veterinary surgeon has requested to repeat blood sampling or a repeat clinical examination in a specified period of time, it should be reminded to the client. Make a note of the animal's name, sex and age, and refer to these facts when talking about the animal.

Your appearance is also something that is highly important in the client’s perception of you. The nurse’s uniform needs to be clean (as possible), and all excess hair should be removed. All staff members should wear name badges, which should be visible. Even though you tell the client your name, many clients are stressed and do not remember many important facts, let alone your name. When writing down any future appointment times write your name next to the appointment time.

Initiating the Consultation

The consultation should also be started with you confirming the name of the client when calling them through from the waiting area. Always introduce yourself, and confirm what the appointment is for. For example, ‘Hello my name is Nicola, I am your nurse for today.’ There are many occasions when the client will make an appointment for one cat, and then bring the other as the initial cat hasn’t made it into the cat transport box. There are also occasions when the reason for the consultation can change, but this only comes apparent when the animal is presented. If there has
been a delay in the starting time of the appointment, apologies for the client’s wait should be made. Clients don’t like to be kept waiting, but not acknowledging it can make the situation worse.

The veterinary nurse should also acquaint themselves with the animal. Dogs should be patted and cats removed from transport baskets, use of the pet’s name is vital. If cats are not willing participants to be removed from their baskets then removal of the top half of the basket is beneficial. It is always recommended that cat owners purchase cat boxes that have the option of being opened from the top. Cats can be examined in the bottom half of their baskets, or lifted out on their blankets onto the consulting table.

This stage is very important for creating rapport with the client and their pet. Remember to use names, shake hands with the client, greet the pet and most importantly involve the pet. In order to create good rapport nurses need to empathise with the owners, the owner needs to see, hear and feel these emotions from the practice as a whole – not just the veterinary nurse that they see in the nurse consultations. In the majority of cases, pet is family, and this special bond needs to be respected.

Information gathering

Background information can be gained from the clinical history, but in many cases addition information is required through questioning. Many clients are more than happy to offer information whether it is relevant or not, some need specific questioning in order to retrieve the required information. The use of open and closed questioning should be utilised. Both types of questioning should be used when conducting a consultation as different types of answers can be gained. Questioning also helps provide information on the client’s expectations, concerns, wants and needs. It allows you to demonstrate your professionalism and knowledge, whilst helping to build rapport and through you showing empathy. Questions also help to give you time to think and time to focus. Ensure that you show genuine interest in what the client is saying, listen to what the client is saying and in cases repeat back to the client what they are saying in order to confirm details.

This is a very important stage of the consultation, and one that this often overlooked or not completed to the full. In many situations when the consultation has finished the client often asks, ‘...and another thing.’ This occurs when not enough questioning has occurred in this stage. In some cases the client will ask for multiple things to be completed, or will have a very long list of questions and queries. Find out what all of these things are; prioritise which are the most important, to you as a veterinary professional and to the client. What you feel is the most important and what the client feels is the most important factor may be two different things. For example the client may feel that having the nails clipped is what they have presented their pet for, and this is the most important things to be completed in the consult. You however, may feel that the dramatic weight loss and polydipsia are the most important factors to be considered. If this situation is experienced then the client should understand why you feel that these factors need to be prioritised over the nail clipping. In situations where
the client has a long list of non-emergency questions or procedures then confirmation between the consulting nurse and the client need to be made on which things are to be completed first, and then a subsequent appointment can be made on a different day in order to complete the rest. Agreement must be made with the client, and they must understand why we are deferring some things to a different day. This can be due insufficient time to correctly cover all the items that the client wishes to cover, too much information for the client to retain in one appointment, the pet becoming stressed at having all the mats combed out of it's hair in one consult, or to aid in compliance. For example demonstrating how to brush teeth to a dog, in the first consult you can introduce the concept of the toothpaste or gel, the second consult is to ensure that the client is managing stage 1 and in order to move onto stage 2.

Physical Examination.

When initiating the physical examination it is important to be aware of the clinical history of the animal. If the animal is known to have a tender abdomen, or arthritic joints, it is important not to exacerbate any discomfort. With larger dogs, or those that don't like being on the consulting table, the physical examination can be conducted on the floor.

Whilst performing the clinical examination it is important to talk through with the client what you are doing and looking for. Many clients comment that the veterinary surgeon only gave their pet a quick check over, or didn’t actually examine their pet. In nearly all of these occasions the pet was given a full clinical examination, but the owner was not aware of what the veterinary surgeon was doing. What the owner perceived as the veterinary surgeon fussing the dog, was actually them checking for lumps and bumps. When checking for lumps and bumps, check that they haven’t felt any; some lumps are small and may not be noticeable to yourself. Talk your way through the examination, starting from the top and systematically working backwards, having a set routine for the clinical examination that you perform will help to ensure that things are not missed out.

Start with looking at the symmetry of the head, and jaw. This is important when animals are presented with dental disease, as lumps or bumps on the jaw bone can be an indicator of tooth root problems. Any nasal discharge should be noted, along with colour and whether a lateral or bilateral discharge is present. When examining the eyes, the size of the pupils should be examined and symmetry between the two eyes. The conjunctiva surrounding the eye should be examined, in order to check for infection, and discharge from the eye should be noted. Tear over flow should be discussed with the client, and the staining of the fur that will occur when checking puppies. Ears should be checked, looking for discharge, general wax and dirt. Examination of the mouth will really depend on the cooperation of the animal being examined. If the animal is known to be difficult to handle, in some circumstances asking the owner lift the animal’s lip up so that you can look at the teeth can be appropriate. If any disease is present then it should be noted and graded. The level of gingivitis, plaque and calculus should be made a note of.
When feeling down the animal’s neck and shoulders, the lymph nodes should be checked, and if palpable this needs to be noted and referred to the veterinary surgeon. The condition of the coat and skin need to be accessed, and checked for parasites. Nail length should be noted.

Part of the examination should also include the heart rate, respiratory rate and temperature. The overall condition of the animal should be noted, e.g. BCS, MCS, weight, hydration status.

Explanation and Planning

Once all the information has been gathered and the animal examined, your findings need to be explained to the owner and a mutual plan needs to be found. When explaining and planning the next steps it is important that the way that the information is conveyed is in a form that the owner understands. This can be oral or written, and in some cases educational DVDs can be utilised. Some points will need to be reiterated, and some relayed in a different form that will enable the owner to fully understand the information that is being conveyed. When planning the next step the owner must be in agreement with the decisions that are being made. The owner must be able to comply with the instructions given. There are three parties when making any plans, the veterinary profession, the client and the pet. All parties need to be in agreement in order to make a plan work. The owner may agree to daily tableting, but the pet may not be in complete agreement with this plan and therefore complications can occur.

Breaking down the information is to ‘digestible’ chunks can be helpful for the owner. In lengthy consults it can be useful to ask in owner if they want to take notes, have a pen and paper ready in order to allow them to do so. Asking the client if they can foresee any challenges of implementing this plan at home is important, as they might completely agree with what should be done, but may not be able to actually do.

Closing the Consultation

When closing the consultation the aim is to summarise the decisions that have been agreed with, and to arrange future appointments. It can also prove to be useful to confirm that the owner is happy with any instructions for any medications that have been dispensed or diets recommended. Leave details with the client on how they can contact you, phone or e-mail, and also write your name down again. Many people will still forget what you initially told them as they are understandably worried about their pet.

In all consultations remember to show courtesy and respect to both the client and their pet, provide solutions, even if this means having to refer the problem on to someone else it is part of the pathway to providing a solution, don’t say ‘I don’t know.’ in relation to
specific problem, but turn the statement around to 'let me find out for you, or let’s see what we can do'.

Keep your word, if you say you will contact the owner in a couple of days, ensure that this occurs.

Ask if there is anything else that you can do for the client. If the information gathering stage of the consultation has been completed correctly then the client will usually answer no. This gives the client the feeling that all of their outsets for consultation have been met.

Efficient Listening.

Good listening skills are an essential part of communication and have many functions:

Seek Clarification

Take Notes

Avoid Distractions

Use pauses and silences.

Restate and Summarise
Preparation

- Establish context
- Create a professional, safe and effective environment

Initiating the Consultation

- Establish initial rapport with client and animal
- Identifying the reason(s) for the consultation

Gathering Information

- Exploration of the client’s presenting complaint(s) to discover
  - the clinical perspective (disease - short term history)
  - the client’s perspective (include animal’s purpose)
  - essential background information (long term history)

Physical Examination

Explanation and Planning

- Providing the appropriate amount and type of information
- Aiding accurate understanding and recall
- Achieving a shared understanding: incorporate the client’s perspective
- Planning: appropriate shared decision making

Closing the Consultation

- Summarise
- Forward planning

Providing structure to the consultation

- Making organisation overt
- Attending to flow

Building the relationship with the client

- Non verbal behaviour
- Developing rapport
- Involving the client
- Involving the animal(s)