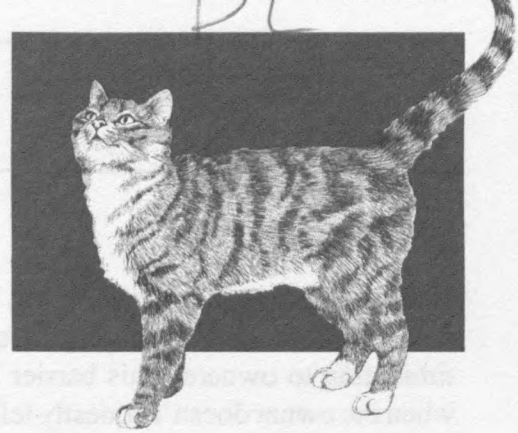
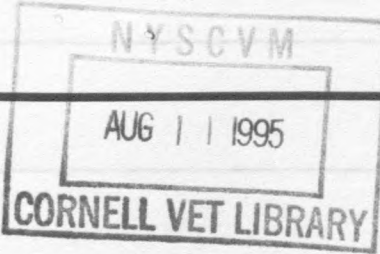


Perspectives On Cats

A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers
From The Cornell Feline Health Center



Winter 1994

NEWSLETTER

Dr. Mew Speaks Out on Feline Health Care

Providing quality care for your cat is an important responsibility. It requires accurate interpretation of your cat's behavior and "language" for your veterinarian. Pet health care is a triangular relationship—cat, owner, and veterinarian—with the most important link being between owner and veterinarian. We thought it would be interesting to have one of our staff members, Dr. Mew, share his unbiased feline insights on this important relationship.

Dr. Mew, I understand that you go to the college's Small Animal Clinic for routine health exams and dental care. From your observations and discussions with other feline patients, what makes for good relationships between owners and veterinarians?

Simply stated, good communications.

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Could you explain what you mean by "good communications?"

Pet owners need to talk openly with a veterinarian about their cat's health problem. An owner should be able to describe their cat's symptoms—including when the problem was first noticed, and if the condition has worsened over time. Also, it is very helpful if the owner takes the time to record vital signs, such as temperature, respiration rate and pulse. Remember that a veterinarian will ask similar questions of the owner about their pet's health, just as a medical doctor would ask of their patient. The only difference is that the owner is the interpreter for their cat.

Owners also need to be honest about their financial circumstances. I have seen owners decide to euthanatize their cat because they couldn't afford the expenses for medical or surgical treatment. They feel they have no choice based on finances. If the veterinarian is made aware of financial constraints, he may be able to offer his client a reasonable in-stallment payment plan.

What do you think are barriers to communication?

I think there are many factors that can cause communications to break down between a cat owner and veterinarian. Communication is a two-way street, and problems can occur on both sides.

Veterinarians are professionals and are accustomed to using what I call medicalese, or jargon.

Unfortunately, most owners are unfamiliar with medical terms. Medical jargon can be very intimidating to owners. This barrier becomes greater when the owner doesn't honestly tell the veterinarian that he needs a down-to-earth explanation of terms he doesn't understand. This can then be compounded because the owner cannot determine what are the appropriate questions to ask regarding their cat's condition. I think that *The Cornell Book of Cats* can be very helpful to owners, especially the medical glossary and the chapter on *The Sick Cat*, which provides a basic examination checklist for owners.

Emergency situations can pose their own unique communication problems. The sudden stress can cause an owner to be incoherent, forgetful, and overly emotional. In those cases, it is crucial to have an empathetic veterinarian.

What are reasonable questions for an owner to ask a veterinarian?

An owner must be willing to ask pertinent questions about their cat's condition. I don't think it

is at all unreasonable to ask about the cat's prognosis; ask about alternative treatments for the condition; ask why certain medications are being prescribed and what are the possible side effects of the medication.

Knowing how to properly administer medications is critical to a patient's recovery. For example, ask if pills can be crushed or capsules opened and added to food. Some drugs will lose their desired effects if they are combined directly with food. Also, if the owner has never administered medications, then she should ask the veterinarian to demonstrate the proper procedure, and if possible, to practice under the supervision of the veterinarian. Some people are too afraid to administer medications and because of their fear they may not give the medication to the cat.

Owners should also ask about follow-up appointments to assess the cat's condition. If surgery is to be done, then the owner should ask when he can expect to receive progress reports on his cat's condition. Some people don't think to ask certain questions until they are back home. If this is the case, they should call the veterinarian and ask those questions. It is better to understand than to be ignorant. Also, by taking an active role, you ensure the best possible health care for your cat.

Are there other things that owners can do to have better relationships with their cats' veterinarians?

Oh, yes. I can think of a few commonsense courtesies. First, don't tell the veterinarian *your* diagnosis of what you think is ailing your cat. This shows disrespect for your veterinarian's knowledge and experience. Instead, the owner should provide an accurate history of the cat's problem for the veterinarian's analysis.

Owners should pay their bill on time. Veterinarians are small business owners and have the typical overhead expenses and taxes to pay. If they don't receive payment for their work, they won't be in business for very long.

Perspectives On Cats

A Newsletter for Cat Fanciers
From The Cornell Feline Health Center

The ultimate purpose of the Cornell Feline Health Center is to improve the health of cats everywhere, by developing methods to prevent or cure feline diseases, and by providing continuing education to veterinarians and cat owners. All contributions are tax-deductible.

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Be punctual for appointments and keep your cat properly restrained, preferably in a cat carrier. When you arrive, check in with the receptionist and provide any necessary information that is requested of you at the time. If your appointment is delayed due to an emergency, don't lose your temper. Remember, some day your cat may require emergency care and you would want your veterinarian to respond quickly to your needs.

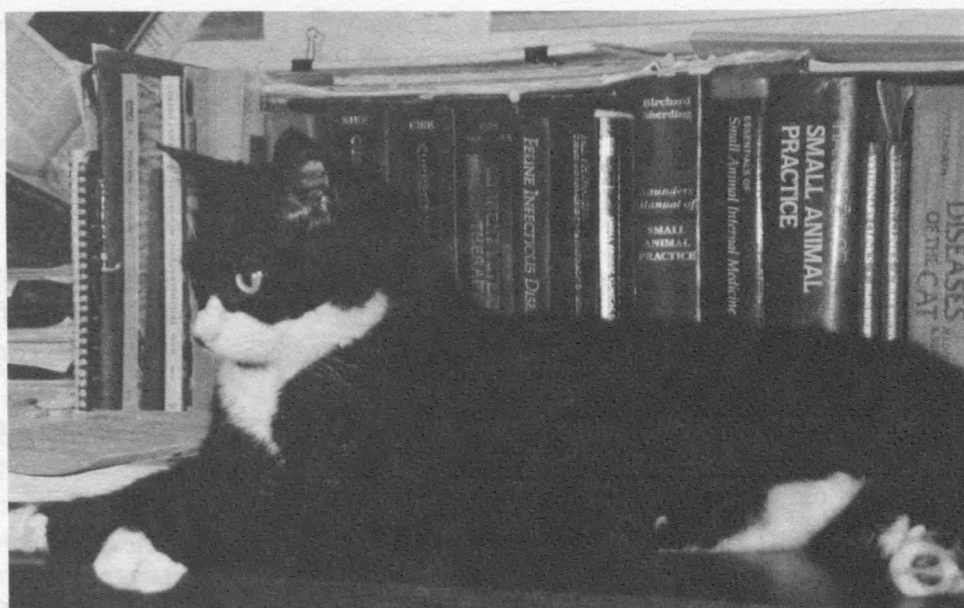
With so much national attention being given to health insurance reform for people, what are your thoughts on pet health insurance?

The concept of pet health insurance is not new. The first company offering a "major medical" plan for pets was established in 1945. Since that time, many other companies have joined and left the ranks of pet health insurance—but enough about the history of pet insurance.

Pet insurance provides for most medical expenses, including long-term ailments such as dermatitis, as well as traumatic injuries and non-elective surgeries. It does not cover the cost of preventive health care such as annual physical exams or vaccinations. Basic costs vary depending on the type of coverage. Be sure to carefully read and understand the policy before you agree to its terms. Many people are under the assumption that all health care costs are covered, including pre-existing conditions; however, this may not be the case. The standard consumer caveat—*buyer beware*—is a good one to remember.

Do you have any suggestions for owners who have moved and are looking for a new veterinarian for their cats?

Many of the same procedures that a person goes through to find a medical doctor for themselves will



Dr. Mew rests comfortably in the office he shares with Dr. James Richards.

apply to finding a veterinarian. Check with neighbors, friends or coworkers and ask them who they have as a veterinarian. Word of mouth can be a fairly accurate way to determine if a veterinarian is providing a good service to his clients. Select a few clinics and then call them and explain that you are new to the area, are seeking veterinary care, and would like a tour of their facilities. Most clinics are glad to accommodate your request. During your visit you should evaluate the cleanliness of the facility. Does it have an objectionable odor? Is the staff pleasant and willing to help? Does the clinic provide 24-hour emergency care? Do you feel that you are able to communicate with the veterinarian and vice versa? What forms of payment are acceptable? Does the clinic treat just cats, all small companion animals or both large and small animals? Although veterinarians are trained to treat cats, those in cats-only clinics would certainly have a special interest in feline medicine and surgery and may be able to devote more of their time keeping up with recent developments.

Thank you, Dr. Mew for sharing your insights on building and maintaining good client-veterinarian relationships. ■



Q. My four-year-old neutered cat was placed on a special diet to reduce the chances of further urinary tract disorder. What special treats may I occasionally give my cat? Cheese? Cream? Tidbits of deli meat turkey? Other?—T.M.F., Vermont

A. If your cat requires a diet designed to lessen the chances of lower urinary tract disease associated with struvite formation, I fear that supplementation with any other food is probably unwise. Veterinary nutritionists disagree on these issues, but it's possible that the extra protein, calcium or phosphorus might further increase the possibility that either struvite or calcium-oxalate stones could precipitate in the urine. The calcium in dairy products theoretically raises the risk of calcium-oxalate precipitates, and the extra protein could influence the formation of either type. How much risk treats would pose to a cat already prone to struvite-complicated lower urinary tract disease is impossible to assess, but it's best to avoid feeding treats of any kind to these cats. However, occasional treats are generally safe for cats not requiring a special diet, if treats do not exceed 10 to 15 percent of the cat's diet.

Q. I have three cats, ages 10, 11 and 12, and I have fed them Hill's Prescription Diets since they were young. But since I have read about preservatives and additives in pet foods, I am concerned about Hill's foods containing BHA. Is BHA harmful to cats?—C.H., Massachusetts

A. I am unaware of any reports definitely linking BHA in pet foods with any problems in cats. Another common antioxidant commonly added to pet foods, ethoxyquin, has received considerable attention recently, but reliable evidence of any harmful effects from it is also lacking.

Q. I have had two cats that have gone into anaphylactic shock after an inactivated FVRCP vaccine was administered. The cats were not related. I now have two new cats, but I'm concerned about having them vaccinated because of possible anaphylactic shock and possible shedding of virus if they receive a modified-live vaccine. Could you please address both these concerns.—D.Z., Wisconsin

A. First, I am sorry to hear that your cats had such severe reactions to their vaccinations. Thankfully, post-vaccination anaphylactic reactions are relatively rare. In the future, it might be prudent to try a different brand of vaccine and consider administering only one vaccine at a time. I have personally seen more anaphylactic reactions associated with inactivated vaccines than modified-live vaccines. Some veterinarians feel that giving an antihistamine prior to vaccination may be helpful to cats prone to reactions, but I have no firm data that confirms this practice. Careful monitoring by your veterinarian after administering the vaccine to your cats would certainly be prudent.

Shedding of vaccine virus should not occur with an inactivated vaccine; however, it theoretically is possible with a modified-live product. If exposure to virus does occur, it should not cause any problems to the other household cats.

Choosing whether or not to continue vaccinating your cats should be based on evaluating the benefit of vaccinating versus the risk of not vaccinating. If your cats are at low risk of exposure to infectious agents, then the risk of vaccinating may be greater than the risk of infection. This is certainly not the case with most cats, but you should discuss your situation with your veterinarian.

Q. My 12 year-old cat has a condition called rodent ulcers. She has received a variety of treatments, but nothing has cured the problem. Treatments have included Ovaban tablets and a steroid injection of Depo Medrol. Do you know of any other treatment for this condition?—N.W., North Carolina

A. Rodent ulcers, also called indolent ulcers, can be frustrating to treat. They are included in a group of skin disorders called the eosinophilic granuloma complex; the cause continues to be complex and a bit obscure. The ulcers are not painful or itchy, and don't seem to cause discomfort to the cat.

Most veterinary dermatologists believe that allergies are responsible in many cases. Bacteria can cause secondary infections. If food allergies or inhalant allergies (pollen, fungal spores, house dust, etc.) are the cause, then control of these allergies should be curative in those cats. Many times an underlying cause is never determined. In those cases, it may be worthwhile to try a two- to three-week course of

antibiotics since some cats respond without needing additional medication. In most cases, though, anti-inflammatory medications (e.g., cortisone-like steroids) are necessary and are the mainstays of therapy. However, not all cats respond the same way to different forms of these medications. For example, some cats will respond with Depo-Medrol, whereas another cat may do better with a different form of cortisone-like medication. Derm Caps Liquid has been shown to be helpful by allowing a lower dose of cortisone-like drugs to control the problem.

There are a few reports in the veterinary literature indicating some success with laser therapy. Unfortunately, not all cats in these reports responded favorably, and the procedure is not widely available. ■

Have a question about cat health? Send it to Mail Bag, Cornell Feline Health Center, College of Veterinary Medicine, Ithaca, NY 14853-6401 or fax it to (607) 253-3419.

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Solving Feline Behavior Problems

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Ithaca, New York

Program

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Program instructors are faculty and staff members of the College of Veterinary Medicine, Cornell University:
Dr. Katherine A. Houpt, Director of the Animal Behavior Clinic and Professor of Veterinary Physiology;
Dr. Ilana R. Reisner, Resident in Behavior Medicine in the Animal Behavior Clinic;
Dr. Soraya Juarbe-Díaz, Resident in Behavior Medicine at the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

Program Charge

The program charge is \$285 and includes tuition; course materials; a formal Cornell University certificate of completion; and meals throughout the program.

Further Information

Solving Feline Behavior Problems, Cornell University, Box 231, B20 Day Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-2801; telephone: (607) 255-7259; fax: (607) 255-8942.

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Book Bits—Myocardial Diseases

Cardiomyopathies are primary diseases that affect the heart muscle. The ultimate result is an inability of the heart to compensate for stress, and heart failure may occur. Inheritance, viral infections, autoimmune mechanisms, biochemical disorders, and diet deficiencies (e.g., insufficient taurine) are factors that may contribute to the development of cardiomyopathies.

Cardiomyopathies are subdivided into hypertrophic, dilated, and restrictive. However, an increasing number of cats is being recognized with cardiac disease that cannot be classified into just these three categories. Middle-aged cats and certain breeds seem more predisposed to cardiomyopathies. Generally, the observed signs of labored breathing, lameness or paralysis, lethargy, and ascites (accumulation of fluid in the abdomen) are the result of cardiac arrhythmias, congestive heart failure, or blood clots. In advanced stages collapse may occur. This occurs when a partial or complete temporary suspension of respiration or circulation results from obstructed arterial blood flow.

Diagnostic tests that may be performed by a veterinarian include electrocardiogram, radiography,

serum chemistries, and hemogram (includes white and red blood cell counts, packed cell volume, and percent of hemoglobin). These tests do not necessarily help in differentiating between the various types of cardiomyopathies; however, they can provide vital information on the function of other organs. This information is important in determining appropriate methods of treatment.

Sophisticated tests that can be performed at progressive small animal clinics or at veterinary college clinics are echocardiography and angiography. These tests can differentiate between the various types of cardiomyopathy.—From *The Cornell Book of Cats* by Mordecai Siegal and Cornell University. Copyright © 1989 by Mordecai Siegal and Cornell University. Reprinted by permission of Villard Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

To learn more about the care of cats and how to provide a healthy environment for them order your own personal copy of *The Cornell Book of Cats* (see page 7 to order). ■



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