

Papers

Perceptions of clients and veterinarians on what attributes constitute 'a good vet'

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The perceptions of veterinarians and small animal (SA) clients on what attributes constitute 'a good veterinarian' were examined by a questionnaire survey. The respondents were asked to record how important they considered 20 attributes for a veterinary surgeon to have on a five-point scale from 'not at all important' to 'very important'. In addition, they were asked to list which attributes they considered to be the three most important attributes in a veterinary surgeon; finally, they were asked whether there were any additional attributes that they considered to be highly desirable in a veterinary surgeon. In total, 407 SA clients, 243 SA veterinarians and 61 non-SA veterinarians completed the questionnaire. There were significant differences in the proportion of clients who considered an attribute to be 'very important' compared with SA veterinarians for 12 of the 20 attributes ($P < 0.005$). A larger proportion of clients considered 'confidence', 'knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery', 'cleanliness', 'good at explaining technical terms', 'patience', 'clear about cost of treatment', 'ability to work in a team', 'honesty', 'politeness', 'decisiveness', 'good with animals' and 'good practical skills' to be 'very important' attributes than the SA veterinarians; a larger proportion of SA veterinarians considered 'good communication skills' to be a 'very important' attribute than the clients.

FOLLOWING the establishment of 'Day one skills – Essential competences required of the new veterinary graduate' by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), veterinary schools in the UK are becoming more focused on ensuring that their students, on graduation, possess these defined professional skills and attributes (RCVS 2010). These attributes are then expected to be developed over the fol-

lowing 12 months, so that one year after graduation, the veterinarian should be able to demonstrate a range of 'Year one' professional skills and attributes as defined by the RCVS (RCVS 2010). The professional skills and attributes expected of 'Day one' veterinarians, as described by the RCVS, include effective communication with clients, working effectively as a member of a multidisciplinary team and awareness of personal limitations. Similarly, in both the USA and Australia, veterinary colleges are defining more precisely the attributes expected of their graduates (Collins and Taylor 2002, Walsh and others 2002). While some work has been done on examining the attributes that the wider veterinary community expects in veterinarians, most notably in recent graduates (Heath and Mills 2000, Walsh and others 2001, 2002, Butler 2003, Doucet and Vrins 2009), very little work has been undertaken on what other key stakeholders in the veterinary profession consider to be important attributes in veterinarians.

In contrast to the veterinary profession, the medical profession has extensively explored both doctors' and patients' perceptions of what attributes constitute 'a good doctor'. Indeed, an entire issue of the *British Medical Journal* was devoted to discussion of this topic (Hurwitz and Vass 2002), and a wide range of papers from numerous countries have explored both the medical profession's and the wider public's attitudes on what attributes constitute 'a good doctor' (Jung and others 1997, 1998, Carroll and others 1998, Leahy and others 2003).

The aim of this study was to examine the perceptions of veterinarians and clients regarding what attributes constitute 'a good veterinarian'. In order to have a reasonably coherent comparison, this aim was addressed by a questionnaire survey of geographically matched small animal (SA) clients and SA veterinarians. This allowed the investigators to compare the perceptions of SA veterinarians with a matched population of the key stakeholders in this population of veterinarians, namely SA clients. In addition, the secondary aim of this study was to compare the perceptions of geographically matched SA and non-SA (NSA) veterinarians. The Cambridge region (eastern England) was chosen for the study, due to the active research framework that was already

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A) In your opinion, how important are the following attributes in a veterinary surgeon?

	Not at all important	Not important	Indifferent	Important	Very important
1) Confidence					
2) Friendliness					
3) Knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery					
4) Cleanliness					
5) Good at explaining technical terms					
6) Professional appearance					
7) Compassion for patients					
8) Compassion for owners					
9) Good communication skills					
10) A likeable personality					
11) Patience					
12) Good listening skills					
13) Recognises own limitations and knows when to seek advice					
14) Clear about cost of treatment					
15) Ability to work in a team					
16) Honesty					
17) Politeness					
18) Decisiveness					
19) Good with animals					
20) Good practical skills					

B) In your opinion, which of the above are the THREE most important attributes in a veterinary surgeon (please note the numbers below)?

C) Are there any additional attributes which you consider to be highly desirable in a veterinary surgeon?

FIG 1: Questionnaire that was distributed to clients at the time of visiting a veterinary practice for a routine small animal (SA) consultation, and to SA and non-SA veterinarians

in place between the investigators, which had been used successfully in an earlier study (Mellanby and others 2007). The central hypothesis of this study was that SA clients and SA veterinarians would have different perceptions of what attributes constitute 'a good veterinarian'.

Materials and methods

Questionnaire

A list of graduate attributes that clients and veterinarians may perceive as favourable was developed through discussions between the authors, and was guided by previous published studies in this area together with the 'Essential Competences Required of the Veterinary Surgeon' document produced by the RCVS (RCVS 2010). A questionnaire was then designed to incorporate these attributes, and was piloted among veterinary colleagues and pet owners to optimise understanding and coverage of possible favourable attributes.

The client and veterinarian questionnaires consisted of three questions (Fig 1). The first question asked 'In your opinion, how important are the following attributes in a veterinary surgeon?', followed by a list of 20 attributes. Clients were asked to assess how important they felt each attribute was on a five-point scale: 'not at all important', 'not important', 'indifferent', 'important', 'very important'. The second question asked 'In your opinion, which of the above are the three most important attributes in a veterinary surgeon?'. The final question asked 'Are there any additional attributes which you consider to be highly desirable in a veterinary surgeon?'.

In the questionnaire for veterinarians, the respondents were also asked 'What type of clinical work do you do? (please give one answer

only): (a) SA only (may include some exotics), (b) farm animal only, (c) equine only, (d) exotic animals only (includes rabbits, small furries, reptiles, birds, zoo, etc), or (e) mixed practice (please indicate the percentage of time you spend on each discipline): percentage of SA, percentage of large animal, percentage of equine, percentage of exotic, percentage of lab animal, percentage of meat hygiene, percentage of other'. For the purposes of this study, SA veterinarians were defined as veterinarians who responded that they spent 90 per cent or more of their clinical work with SA patients; the remaining veterinarians were subsequently classified as NSA veterinarians.

Participants

Between August 2007 and February 2008, consecutive clients at five SA veterinary practices in the Cambridge region who presented their healthy cat or dog for a routine vaccination were asked to complete a questionnaire while still in the practice following their pet's vaccination. These five practices were invited to be involved in the study because veterinarians working at the practices had previously expressed an interest in taking part in research studies to the corresponding author. Questionnaires were also posted to all veterinarians in the 2007 RCVS Directory who were listed as working in a non-referral veterinary practice in regions 9 (Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Northamptonshire and Oxfordshire) and 10 (Cambridgeshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk) during June 2009. Only non-referral veterinarians were sent a questionnaire to ensure parity with clients, who were all recruited from non-referral practices. A covering letter outlining the aims of the study and assuring anonymity was given to all respondents with the questionnaire.

Statistical analysis

As attributes that clients and veterinarians may perceive as favourable were selected, it was hypothesised that the responses were likely to be very positive. Therefore, a two-step approach to the analysis was adopted. First, the association between the response 'very important' compared with the other categories ('not important at all', 'not important', 'indifferent' and 'important') in clients compared with SA veterinarians for the 20 attributes in the questionnaire was assessed by standard Fisher's exact tests. Secondly, the same statistical tests were then used to consider whether any associations remained if 'very important' and 'important' combined was compared with the remaining three responses ('not important at all', 'not important' and 'indifferent'). Due to the large number of attributes being tested, a cut-off of $P < 0.01$ was chosen to reduce the possible occurrence of type I errors. The same two-step procedure and statistical significance was used to compare SA and NSA veterinarians. Fisher's exact tests were also carried out to compare the proportion of SA vets who considered an attribute to be among the three most important attributes, first with the proportion of SA clients and then the proportion of NSA vets who considered the attribute to be among the three most important attributes. All statistical analyses were carried out in R version 2.10.1 (R Foundation for Statistical Computing).

Results

A total of 407 clients completed the questionnaire; the response rate was over 95 per cent of all clients approached. The number of responses per practice ranged from 59 to 115. In total, 868 questionnaires

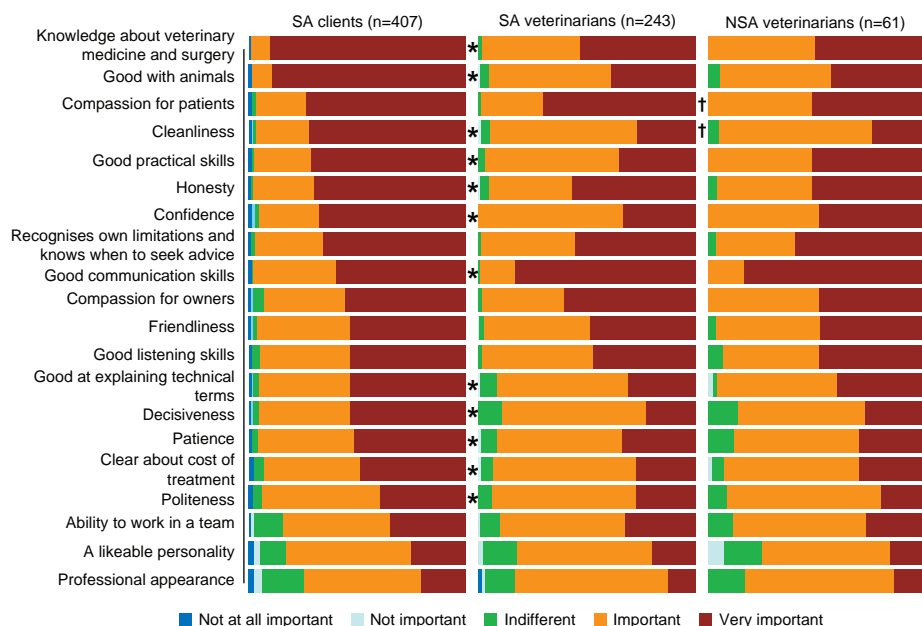


FIG 2: Horizontal 100 per cent bar plots of how important small animal (SA) clients, SA veterinarians and non-SA (NSA) veterinarians considered each of 20 specified attributes to be in a 'good vet'. All bar charts are sorted by the percentage of clients who considered an attribute 'very important'. * Significant (P<0.01) difference between the proportions of clients and SA veterinarians who considered an attribute to be 'very important'. † Significant difference (P<0.01) between the proportions of SA veterinarians and NSA veterinarians who considered an attribute to be 'very important'

were distributed by post to veterinarians; 32 of these were returned as the veterinarian was no longer working at the address. Out of the remaining 836 veterinarians, 306 returned completed questionnaires, resulting in an overall response rate of 37 per cent. Of the veterinarians

who returned questionnaires, 304 described their clinical caseload: 243 respondents were classified as SA veterinarians and 61 as NSA veterinarians.

SA clients and SA veterinarians

There were statistically significant differences between the proportion of clients and SA veterinarians who considered an attribute 'very important' for 12 of the 20 attributes (P<0.005) Table 1, Fig 2). A larger proportion of clients considered 'confidence', 'knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery', 'cleanliness', 'good at explaining technical terms', 'patience', 'clear about cost of treatment', 'ability to work in a team', 'honesty', 'politeness', 'decisiveness', 'good with animals' and 'good practical skills' to be 'very important' attributes than the SA veterinarians, and a larger percentage of SA veterinarians considered 'good communication skills' to be a 'very important' attribute than the clients (Fig 2). When 'important' and 'very important' were grouped together and compared with the other three responses, then the differences between clients and SA veterinarians were no longer statistically significant for 11 of the 12 attributes, with a larger percentage of clients considering 'decisiveness' to be 'important'/'very important'

compared with the SA veterinarians (Table 1, Fig 2). However, there were also statistically significant differences (although numerically small) between the proportion of clients and SA veterinarians who considered the attribute either 'important' or 'very important' for two other attributes – 'compassion for owners' (clients 93 per cent, SA veterinarians 98 per cent) and 'good listening skills' (clients 95 per cent, SA veterinarians 99 per cent).

When asked to list the three attributes they considered most important, the clients most frequently mentioned 'knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery' (69 per cent) followed by 'good with animals' (35 per cent) and 'compassion for patients' (32 per cent) (Fig 3). None of the clients listed 'professional appearance' among their top three attributes, and less than 2 per cent of the clients said 'likeable personality', 'ability to work in a team' or 'politeness' among their top three attributes. In contrast, the SA veterinarians most frequently listed 'good communication skills' (68 per cent) among their top three attributes, a proportion that was significantly different from the clients (P<0.001). Thirty-five per cent of SA veterinarians listed 'compassion for patients' among their top three attributes; this proportion was not significantly different from the proportion of clients who listed this attribute (P=0.146) as important. In addition, 49 per cent of the SA veterinarians listed 'knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery' among their top three attributes (P<0.001) (Fig 3). SA veterinarians did not list 'professional appearance', 'likeable personality' and 'politeness' among their top three attributes. In contrast to the clients, only 12 per cent of the SA veterinarians listed 'good with animals' as a top three attribute (P<0.001). None of the SA veterinarians considered 'cleanliness' a top three attribute, compared with 9 per cent of the clients (P<0.001). There were some other statistically significant differences between the types of respondent in whether an attribute was considered a 'top three' even for attributes that were listed at the lower frequencies (P<0.009) (Fig 3). Clients rated 'good at explaining terms' as a top three attribute more often than the SA veterinarians, but rated 'compassion for owners', 'good listening skills', and 'ability to work in a team' less frequently than the SA veterinarians. However, although statistically significant, the differences were numerically small (<10 per cent). There were no significant differences between the clients and SA veterinarians for the other 11 attributes (P>0.028).

When the top three attributes were considered in terms of which attributes were listed together on each individual questionnaire,

TABLE 1: Significance of differences between questionnaire responses ('very important' compared with 'not important at all', 'not important', 'indifferent' and 'important') from 403 clients at small animal (SA) practices and from 243 SA veterinarians, differences between the responses of the SA veterinarians and 61 non-SA (NSA) veterinarians, and differences between responses ('very important' and 'important' compared with 'not important at all', 'not important' and 'indifferent') from the clients and the SA veterinarians, using Fisher's exact tests

Attribute	Clients v SA veterinarians		SA v NSA veterinarians
	'Very important' P	'Important' and 'very important' P	'Very important' P
Confidence	0.001*	0.844	0.026
Friendliness	0.256	0.495	0.999
Knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery	0.001*	0.999	0.775
Cleanliness	0.001*	0.203	0.871
Good at explaining technical terms	0.001*	0.087	0.172
Professional appearance	0.019	0.018	0.834
Compassion for patients	0.470	0.094	0.010*
Compassion for owners	0.190	0.004*	0.110
Good communication skills	0.001*	0.270	0.999
A likeable personality	0.181	0.915	0.590
Patience	0.001*	0.086	0.762
Good listening skills	0.143	0.009*	0.886
Recognises own limitations and knows when to seek advice	0.012	0.094	0.564
Clear about cost of treatment	0.001*	0.748	0.634
Ability to work in a team	0.607	0.033	0.540
Honesty	0.001*	0.048	0.564
Politeness	0.004*	0.999	0.334
Decisiveness	0.001*	0.003*	0.403
Good with animals	0.001*	0.016	0.559
Good practical skills	0.001*	0.452	0.019

* Associations with P≤0.01 were considered to be significant

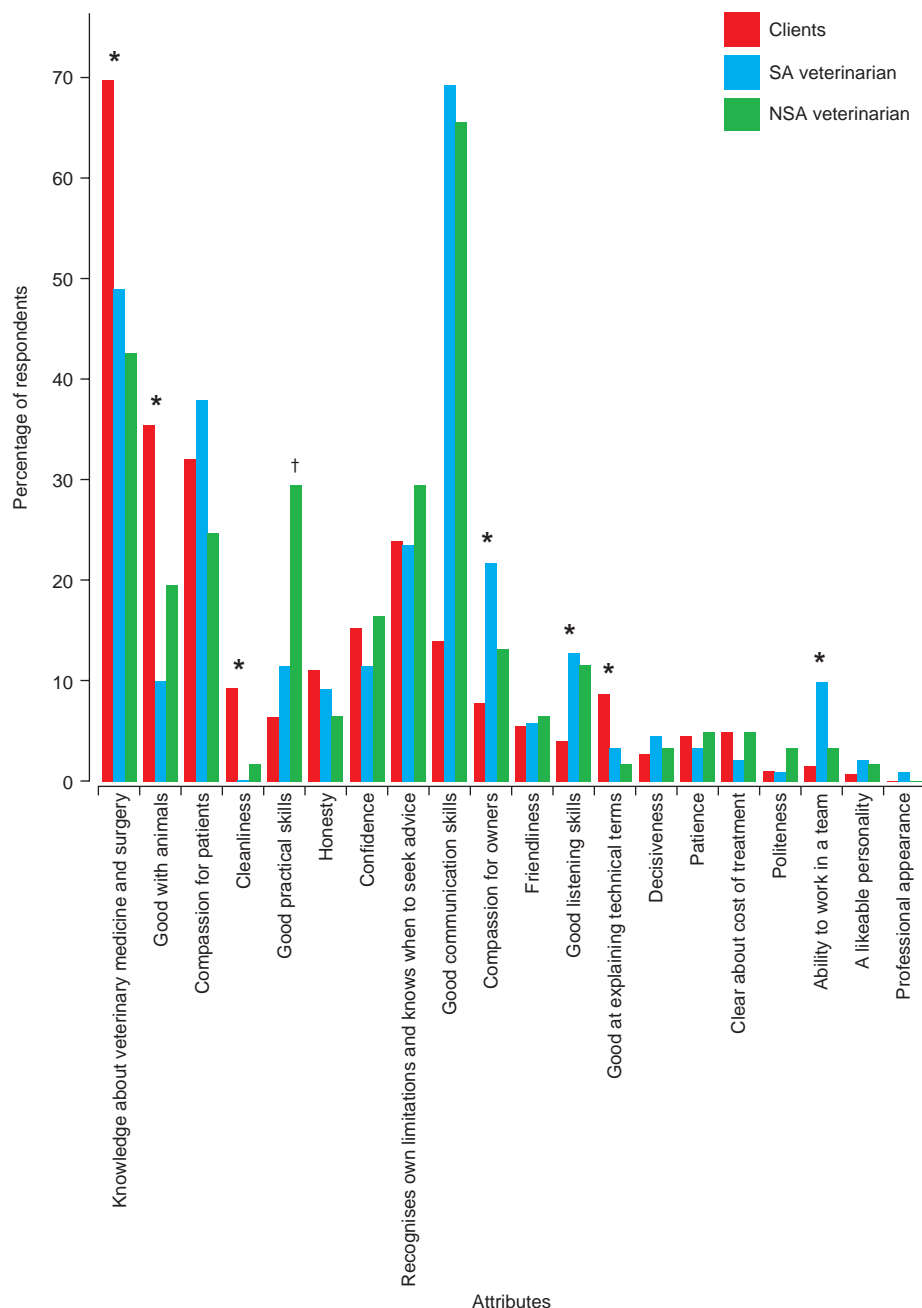


FIG 3: Percentage of small animal (SA) clients, SA veterinarians and non-SA (NSA) veterinarians who considered each of 20 attributes to be among their 'top three' attributes that a good veterinarian should have. Attributes are sorted by the percentage of clients who thought an attribute 'very important' (see Fig 2). * Significant ($P < 0.01$) difference between the proportions of clients and SA veterinarians who considered an attribute to be a 'top three' attribute. † Significant ($P < 0.01$) difference in the proportions of SA veterinarians and NSA veterinarians who considered an attribute to be a 'top three' attribute

there were over 130 different combinations from the clients and over 100 combinations from the SA veterinarians. However, when the combinations were considered as pairs, then combinations of four attributes – 'knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery', 'compassion for patients', 'recognises own limitations' and 'good with animals', accounted for 38 per cent of the paired combinations selected by clients (Fig 4). In contrast, the same paired combinations in SA veterinarians only accounted for 16 per cent of pairs. The main reason for the difference was the selection by SA veterinarians of 'good communication skills' as a top three attribute but not 'good with animals', as described above, with 48 per cent of the pairs of attributes described by SA veterinarians including 'good communication skills' but only 11 per cent of the pairs of attributes described by clients.

Fifty-two of the 407 clients (13 per cent) provided attributes additional to the 20 listed in the first question, which they considered

to be highly desirable in a veterinarian. These included 'gentleness/kindness/empathy/caring' (nine respondents), 'enjoy/passionate about job' (four respondents) and 'keeping up to date' (three respondents). A total of 113 of the 306 (37 per cent) SA veterinarians listed additional highly desirable attributes. These included 'ability to cope under pressure/ability to deal with difficult situations' (18 respondents), 'good sense of humour' (11 respondents), 'common sense' (11 respondents) and 'good time management skills' (11 respondents).

SA veterinarians and NSA veterinarians

There were few differences between SA and NSA veterinarians' perceptions of what attributes they considered as being very important in a good veterinarian (Table 1, Fig 2). The only difference observed was that 52 per cent of the NSA veterinarians considered 'compassion for patients' as very important, compared with 70 per cent of the SA veterinarians ($P = 0.01$) (Table 1). Furthermore, the only difference in what attributes were considered to be the 'top three' between the two groups of veterinarians was that 30 per cent of NSA veterinarians considered 'good practical skills' a top three attribute compared with 12 per cent of SA veterinarians ($P = 0.001$) (Fig 3). There was a less than 10 per cent difference between the veterinarian groups for the other 19 attributes in their perceived worth as a top three attribute ($P > 0.045$) (Fig 3).

Twenty-seven (44 per cent) NSA veterinarians described additional attributes that they considered to be highly desirable in a veterinarian. These responses were similar to those of the SA veterinarians described above: they included 'good sense of humour' (four respondents) and 'ability to cope under pressure/ability to deal with difficult situations' (three respondents).

Discussion

The main finding of this study was that there were significant differences in the proportion of SA clients who considered an attribute to be 'very important' compared with SA veterinarians for over half of the 20 attributes listed in the questionnaire.

Specifically, a larger proportion of clients considered 'confidence', 'knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery', 'cleanliness', 'good at explaining technical terms', 'patience', 'clear about cost of treatment', 'ability to work in a team', 'honesty', 'politeness', 'decisiveness', 'good with animals' and 'good practical skills' to be 'very important' attributes than the SA veterinarians. This finding indicates that SA veterinarians and SA clients, who are a key stakeholder group in the veterinary profession, place different levels of importance on the attributes they consider desirable in veterinarians. Consequently, it cannot be presumed that veterinarians and clients will consider the same attributes and skills to be important in veterinarians; engagement of other stakeholders in areas such as curriculum development is likely to increase the probability that veterinary graduates are well placed to have the necessary attributes required by the wider community.

In addition to scoring 20 attributes on a five-point scale of importance (the first question on the questionnaire), respondents were

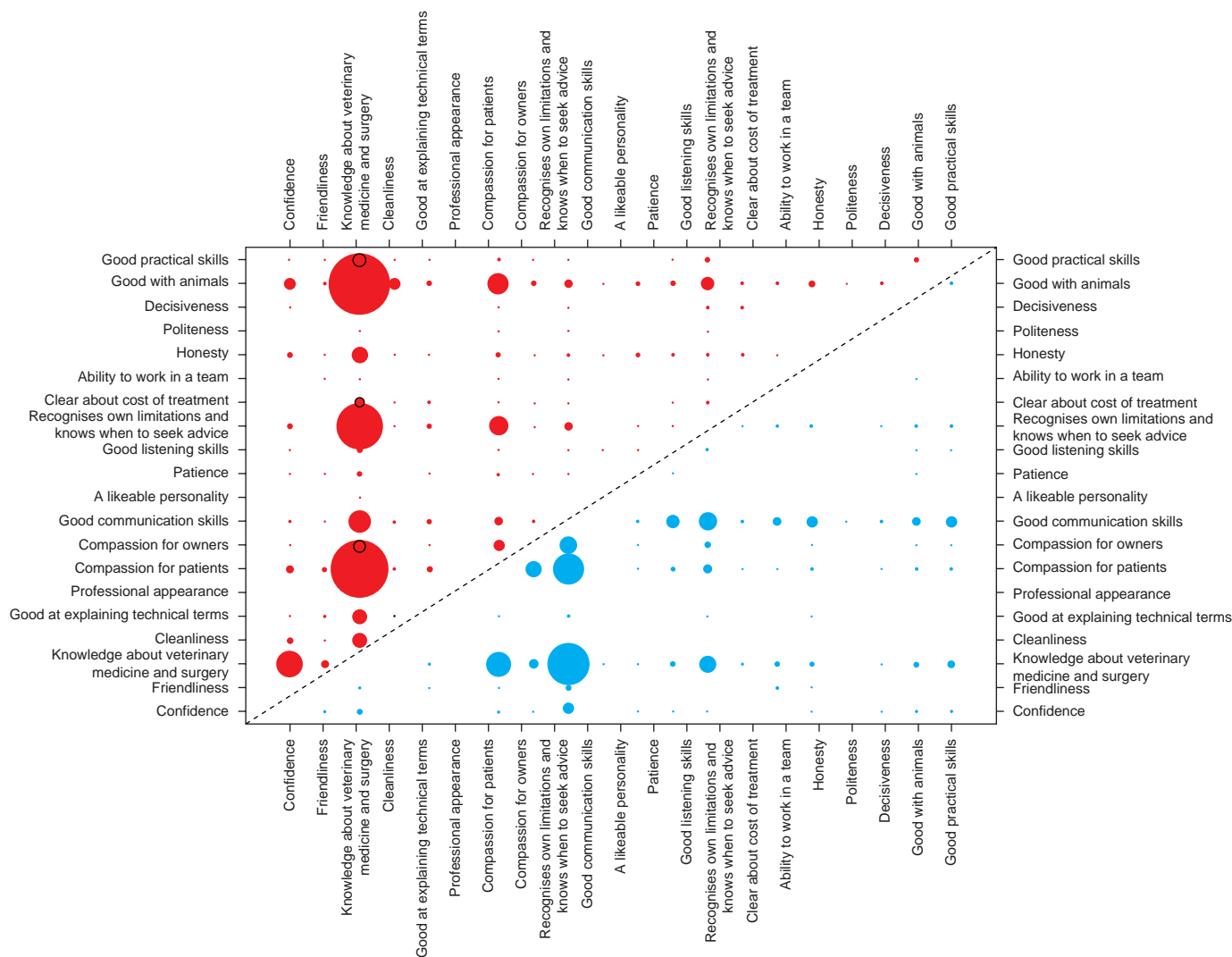


FIG 4: Dot plots showing the association between pairs of attributes that were considered by small animal (SA) clients (red) and SA veterinarians (blue) to be in the ‘top three’ attributes for a good veterinarian. The size of each dot is proportional to the number of individuals who selected a particular pair of attributes (range one to 111 clients, one to 77 SA veterinarians)

also asked to list their top three attributes from among the 20. This second question was added due to concerns that respondents may simply indicate that they considered all the 20 listed attributes to be very important. Therefore, by asking respondents to highlight which three attributes they considered to be the most important, favoured attributes could be identified if the respondent simply indicated that all the 20 attributes listed in the first question were very important. There was good consistency between the key findings of the first and second questions. For example, when asked which of the 20 attributes were the three most important in a veterinary surgeon, a significantly larger proportion of clients listed ‘knowledge about veterinary medicine and surgery’ and ‘good with animals’ compared with the SA veterinarians. Together with the results from the first question, these findings indicate that veterinarians’ cognitive skills are highly valued by clients, although several interpersonal and personality traits such as ‘patience’, ‘honesty’, ‘politeness’ and ‘ability to work in a team’ were also highly regarded by the clients. A significantly larger proportion of the clients scored ‘cleanliness’ as very important compared with the veterinarians, possibly indicating that SA veterinarians have a tendency to underestimate the value that clients place on this attribute.

It is noteworthy that the only attribute that a greater percentage of SA veterinarians considered to be ‘very important’ compared with the clients was ‘good communication skills’. The difference in attitudes between clients and SA veterinarians on the importance of good communication skills was further emphasised by the finding that 72 per cent of SA veterinarians ranked ‘good communication skills’ among their top three attributes in a good veterinarian whereas only 16 per cent of clients ranked ‘good communication skills’ among their top

three attributes. In recent years, communication skills workshops have become commonplace in veterinary curricula (Latham and Morris 2007, Hafen and others 2009, Shaw and others 2010). Indeed, the value of good communication skills is highlighted by the RCVS ‘Day one skills’ document, which states that ‘the new veterinary graduate should be able to communicate effectively with clients, the lay public, professional colleagues and responsible authorities’ (RCVS 2010). However, the present study suggests that SA veterinarians, relative to their clients, may have overestimated the importance of good communication skills.

Another central finding of this study was that almost all the differences between SA veterinarians and clients disappeared when, instead of comparing the proportion of respondents who replied ‘very important’ against the four other responses, the proportion of respondents who replied ‘very important’ and ‘important’ was compared the proportion who replied with ‘indifferent’, ‘not important’ and ‘not at all important’. This indicates that the difference in the perceptions of importance of attitudes between clients and SA veterinarians was relatively subtle and was mainly due to differences in the grading of an attribute as ‘important’ or ‘very important’.

The study did not identify any clear differences in perceptions of what attributes constitute a ‘good vet’ between SA veterinarians and the relatively small number of NSA veterinarians who completed questionnaires. The only significant difference observed was that 52 per cent of NSA veterinarians considered ‘compassion for patients’ as ‘very important’ compared with 70 per cent of SA veterinarians. Furthermore, the only difference in what attributes were considered to be top three attributes between the two groups of veterinarians was that 30 per cent

of NSA veterinarians considered 'good practical skills' to be a top three attribute compared with 12 per cent of SA veterinarians.

Additional attributes highlighted by 37 per cent of SA veterinarians included 'ability to cope under pressure/ability to deal with difficult situations', 'good sense of humour', 'common sense' and 'good time management skills'. The 13 per cent of clients who provided additional attributes listed very different attributes, including 'gentleness/kindness/empathy/caring', 'enjoy/passionate about job' and 'keeping up to date'. It is noteworthy that, without prompting, a small number of clients highlighted the value of veterinarians 'keeping up to date', indicating that some clients regard maintaining and developing professional knowledge to be an important attribute.

A limitation of this study is that only one methodology was used to ascertain what attributes clients and veterinarians thought were important in a good veterinarian. Ideally, different methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups should be used to further probe some of the themes raised in this study and to test the robustness of the findings. The influence of study methodology on responses was highlighted in a survey of public opinion on what makes 'a good doctor', which found that responses to open, unprompted questions tended to rank interpersonal characteristics as most important but, when respondents were presented with a set of predetermined characteristics, cognitive characteristics were identified as most important (Leahy and others 2003). Another limitation of the present study was that just over one-third of all veterinarians who were sent a questionnaire responded, and non-responders may have had different perceptions from the veterinarians who replied. In addition, there was a smaller number of responses from NSA veterinarians than SA veterinarians, which may have reduced the ability of the study to detect differences in perception between the two groups of veterinarians. The authors deliberately chose to gauge clients' perceptions when they were attending a veterinary practice for a standardised vaccination consultation in an effort to reduce the possible influence of clients' anxieties on their perceptions of positive attributes in veterinarians. However, this does mean that the findings of this study cannot be extrapolated to all clinical situations: clients' perceptions of what attributes constitute a good vet may be different if their pet is ill. Finally, this study focused on the perceptions of SA clients and SA veterinarians and then the perceptions of SA veterinarians and NSA veterinarians from a small region of England. Although this approach was undertaken to ensure that the three populations involved in the research were geographically matched, it cannot be assumed that the findings of this study are representative of veterinarians and clients throughout the UK.

In summary, this study demonstrated that the perceptions of SA veterinarians and clients of the importance of a range of attributes in a 'good vet' differ significantly. Consequently, it cannot be presumed that veterinarians and clients will consider the same attributes and

skills to be important in veterinarians; engagement of other stakeholders in areas such as curriculum development is likely to increase the likelihood that veterinary graduates will develop the necessary skills and attributes required by the wider community.

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