

VETERINARY COMMUNICATION IN INDIA- THE PAST, THE PRESENT AND THE FUTURE

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Abstract

Veterinary communication is one of the derivatives of the rapidly changing veterinary medicine landscape. Its massive impact on all stakeholders in the field makes its study and protocol-structuring imperative. Using a mixed-method approach to data collection and analysis, this paper examines the historical roots, status, and prospects of the knowledge systems of veterinary communication in India.

Veterinary medicine has existed for centuries; however, the concept of the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) and the subsequent communication models are novel phenomena, globally. Most of the developed world has embraced and is actively looking to integrate these into their education and professional frameworks.

However, communication as a subject is still absent from Indian veterinary university curricula and continuing education programs. Although veterinary practices in urban India are entering the realm of social media, the content often revolves around product/service advertisements and brand creation, limiting the development of robust veterinarian-client relationships.

Despite challenges, there is optimism. The advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) presents a revolutionary opportunity to transform veterinary communication. Improved customization and precision present the potential to promote advantageous veterinary-client-patient relationships. Present-day India has a unique opportunity to bridge its rich ancient knowledge with contemporary innovations thereby creating distinctive and impactful knowledge systems. This paper attempts to explore this possibility.

Keywords: *veterinary education; veterinary communication; veterinarians; AI in veterinary communication; veterinary communication through the ages; veterinary communication in India*

VETERINARY COMMUNICATION IN INDIA THROUGH THE AGES

India is an agrarian country (cycles & Text, n.d.). There is ample evidence to suggest the existence of a symbiotic human-animal relationship since ancient times (May 13 & Pm, 2017; Sharma, 2015; Veterinary Medicine and Animal Keeping in Ancients India | Vethelplineindia.Co.In, n.d.). Veterinary medicine and veterinarians can be traced back to the Vedic times. It is therefore not a far fetch to say veterinary communication has existed in India through the ages. However, modern veterinary medicine is vastly different from that practiced in ancient India. With the change in the human-animal bond, the demands from veterinary medicine also changed. The emergence of domesticated animals as companions, as a fully integrated part of the family unit, and the over-abundance of knowledge (Perry, 2021) has altered the veterinarian-client relationship. There has been a shift from a paternalistic communication style to a more client-centered communication model (Shaw et al., 2006). This has made veterinary communication skills one of the most important non-core skills (Humble, 2001) in a veterinarian's toolkit.

This change in dynamics has happened in the last few decades, hence ancient texts do not contain guidelines or knowledge systems for it. Research shows that there is still a lacuna in the research efforts (Chen et al., 2022) to create sustainable, replicable knowledge protocols for effective veterinary communication (Bard et al., 2017). However, veterinary medicine is growing rapidly. The speed at which new and improved diagnostic tools, protocols, medicines, breakthrough procedural developments are happening is astounding. This coupled with AI tools ensure that veterinary professionals will have to develop their communication skills.

This paper aims to examine the origins of veterinary communication in India, understand its current state and discuss the future possibilities.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES

It is impossible to say when man stopped seeing animals as just a source of food, and fur and decided to domesticate it. But it did happen, and as man became less savage, his treatment towards domesticated animals also changed. Archaeological findings and ancient texts stand witness to this (Durant_Will_-_The_story_of_civilization_1.Pdf, n.d.).

Ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas and the Puranas have a plethora of information on animal care, diseases, and their care and management. Shalihotra (2350 BCE) is the oldest known veterinarian in the world. Nakul and Sahdev (1000 BC) the Pandav brothers were renowned for their ability to bond and treat animals. King Ashoka (300 BC) constructed the first veterinary hospital in the world (May 13 & Pm, 2017; Sharma, 2015; Veterinary Medicine and Animal Keeping in Ancients India | Vethelplineindia.Co.In, n.d.).

However, though veterinary medicine is an old science, veterinary communication is a new subject. It is a derivative of the world embracing the Western concept of 'keeping pet' as companion animals (18.5, 2022).

CONTEMPORARY SCENARIO

With globalization and digitization accessing information is becoming increasingly easy. Clients are no longer happy to comply with their veterinarian's treatment plans, they demand to be involved, have their questions answered and arrive at a consensual plan of action for their pet (McDermott et al., 2015). Unfortunately, veterinary education in India does not teach veterinary communication as part of its curriculum (BVSc-AH-Syllabus-and-Course-Curriculum-MSVE-2016.Pdf, n.d.; MSVE-Gazette-2016.Pdf, n.d.). At the post-graduate level, some basic training on writing research papers and conducting research is imparted, but that is to aid students with their thesis writing efforts. Research efforts on veterinary communication in India are almost negligible (Chen et al., 2022). Veterinary students use the internet to access journals and websites to enhance their knowledge (T6295.Pdf, n.d.), however there is no documentation of whether they acquire or in any way improve their veterinary communication skills.

Similarly, there is no formal documentation of Indian veterinarians' and veterinary clinics' / hospitals' presence or use of social media, but an internet search yields a substantial presence across social media platforms. However, a majority of their efforts seem to be targeted towards advertising their services and/or products, sharing general information about the team or the practice, and appointment generations. There is precious little to engage or educate clients towards initiating or developing a robust veterinary-client-patient relationship.

THE WAY AHEAD

With veterinary medicine changing, veterinary communication must transform too. There is a perceptible, well documented shift towards evidence-based medicine (Overall, 2019), coupled with the globalization and the growing importance of the One Health concept, the range of a veterinarian's audience is expanding as are their demands and their access to information. Veterinary communication will also therefore have to evolve to foster a more mutualistic approach. Consequently, this responsibility will fall on veterinary education (van Gelderen (Mabin) & Taylor, 2023). Changes in curriculum and continuing education are the need of the hour (McDermott et al., 2015).

The traditional paternalistic role of the veterinarian creates psychological reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Thus, ironically, the service this professional style aims to deliver is directly counteracted by the communication strategies it produces (Bard et al., 2017). However, research shows that veterinarians may already be motivated to create an environment that meets the client's needs for empathy, collaboration and motivation (Bard et al., 2017). The Vet Futures report ("Taking Charge of Our Future," n.d.) states 'by working in partnership with clients, vets are better positioned to convince them of the value of preventive services'. To stimulate a genuine paradigm shift, future communication training may need to incorporate methodologies that foster a mutualistic approach as the backbone of practice rather than a useful aid (Bard et al., 2017).

The advent of AI in veterinary medicine is yet another area where veterinarians can expect to see a paradigm shift in how they communicate with their clients. Research shows how AI can make both veterinary medicine and communication extremely targeted and personalized (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2019; Saeed et al., 2023)

PAPER DESIGN

This research used a secondary data collection approach to research the topic. Considering most of the research on the topic is based outside of India, online resources were utilized to allow for ease of access, availability, cost-effectiveness, and time efficiency.

The first step was to identify and select reputable and accessible sources of information. A list of academic databases, government publications, reputable websites and other digital repositories was compiled and only these were used for data collection. These included, but are not limited to PubMed publications, Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, The Veterinary Council of India, and the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (ICAR).

Next keywords and search terms were chosen to extract relevant data. The most used keywords and search terms were veterinary communication, veterinary communication models, veterinary communication protocols, veterinary communication in India, veterinary medicine in ancient India, veterinary websites in India, veterinary curriculum, and future of veterinary communication. MS Excel was used to create data extraction sheets to maintain meticulous records of the information collected, the publication and other contextual details. These sheets also aided with proper citation and attribution. All publications, original authors, contributors, and sources are duly credited in the Works Cited section of this paper.

To ensure the integrity of the information all collected data was cross-checked to for veracity and efforts were made to address any discrepancies or inconsistencies. Any data that could not be verified, lacked credibility, or was deemed questionable was discarded.

LIMITATIONS

The main limitation of this research is the obvious lack of research material relevant to the Indian context. Consequently, since most of the data is based outside of India, there may exist certain incongruities when extrapolated to the Indian context. However, efforts were made to mitigate these limitations through a careful selection of reputable sources and rigorous quality assessment.

ONE LAST WORD

The veterinarian's role has changed from being a subject expert imparting knowledge to a less informed audience to a knowledge partner in an evolved tri-party veterinarian-client-patient relationship. The veterinarian is expected to share his knowledge, educate the client on treatment options, and empower them to make judicious choices on behalf of their pets. Managing client expectations without compromising the patient's health objectives and his own health and financial needs is the tightrope that every practicing veterinarian walks each day. Effective veterinary communication protocols would turn this tightrope into a multi-lane highway were information flows smoothly and efficiently.

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