**COVID-19 discussions in small animal practice**

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The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all aspects of society. In April, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and British Veterinary Association produced guidelines for practitioners to help define emergencies, and suggesting a transition to telemedicine where possible. These changes led to profound reductions in veterinary consultations (Singleton et al, 2020). Here we summarise discussions about COVID-19 recorded in consultation narratives, as a novel way to further assess impacts on veterinary care.

De-identified health narratives containing the term “COVID” were obtained from the Small Animal Veterinary Surveillance Network (SAVSNET), a sentinel network of UK veterinary practices. The resulting 648 consultations were read and categorised.

Most (63%) related to practical issues associated with social distancing, including telemedicine consultations involving remote prescription of previously prescribed medications (n=332), and practical issues of clients attending the practice while maintaining effective social distancing (n=74).

Twenty-nine percent of consultations related to changes that might impact animal health or welfare (see table).

Table: Description of consultations (n=188) where changes associated with COVID-19 might impact animal health and welfare.

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| Context of discussion (number) | Most common specific issues discussed |
| Delayed investigation or referral (n=39). | Pruritic skin/ear disease (n=9), orthopaedic (n=7), masses (n=7), ophthalmology (n=3). |
| Vaccinations (n=37). | Mostly delayed. |
| Delayed monitoring/blood tests for long-term conditions (n=22). | Endocrinopathies (n=8), orthopaedic/mobility issues (n=5) and cardiology (n=4).  |
| Prescribing a different or longer course of treatment (n=21). | Longer courses of analgesia (n=4) or antibiotics (n=1), use of different remotely prescribed treatments to avoid patients visiting the practice (n=6) and avoiding changing drug doses (n=3). |
| Delayed dental (n=17). |  |
| Delayed neutering (n=13). |  |
| Change in household routine possibly impacting animal health (n=14). | Cystitis (n=4), overgrooming (n=3), increased seizure frequency (n=1), stress-induced anorexia (n=2), inappropriate urination (n=1) and lameness from increased activity (n=1). |
| Impact on animal health due to other services being cancelled (n=11). | Grooming (n=4), behaviourists (n=3), physiotherapists/chiropractors (n=3) and hydrotherapy (n=1). |

Only a single consultation related to owner concerns that their animal may contract COVID-19, despite significant media coverage suggesting this might be possible.

Whilst these observations are likely to underestimate the true impact of COVID-19 on veterinary care, they highlight some of the unique challenges faced by practitioners and owners during ‘lockdown’. As in human health care, there will be a gradual need to return to routine health consultations to minimise the risks of, for example, vaccine-preventable disease (Santoli et al., 2020) and poor socialisation. We hope these observations can help prioritise efforts to mitigate any longer term-implications of COVID-19 lockdown on animal welfare (Gortazar and de la Fuente, 2020). We are extremely grateful to practices participating in SAVSNET without whom such studies would be impossible.

References

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