Teaching and learning communication skills at the Veterinary University of Vienna. Why? Who? How? and First outcomes!

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Veterinary medicine is historically attributed to knowledge of diagnosis and therapy in animal disease. Communication skills for veterinary practitioners are also known to be fundamentally important but have not yet been implicated to a veterinary curriculum.

Starting in 2014, teaching and learning communication skills were included into the curriculum of the Veterinary University Vienna. In the 3rd semester students are lectured about communication techniques, and how to give a relevant and concrete feedback. Checklists are provided for taking a medical history as well as for communication of examination results, and therapeutic options.

Five times a tutorial is provided for student groups of 10, to train communication skills taking a medical history from a client’s animal, supported by an instructor who provides specific case-descriptions. A student takes over the role of the client and another one performs the veterinarian. The remaining students and the instructor observe the communication situation and prepare a feedback presented to the ‘veterinarian’ student. Personal comments and experiences are documented by each student.

Before the first training session and after the last one, students were asked to fill in a questionnaire to evaluate the communication training in the 3rd semester. Answers were given on a linear-analogue scale (1-5). 15 items were asking for self-evaluation of educational objective related communicative competences in both questionnaires. The questionnaire after the 5th session was extended by 10 items for quantitative and 4 items for qualitative evaluation of the training course.

161 students completed the questionnaire and data were prepared for statistical analysis (Wilcoxon test for comparing data before and after the training, effect size by Cohens’ d for mean value differences). Significance was defined as <0.05. Statistical analysis revealed a significant improvement for item 1-14, whereas item 15 reflecting previous knowledge was not significant (p=0.166). Effect size was strong (d > 0.8) for 9 items: communication is learnable and useful, provided documents were informative, ability to schedule communication and to cope with clients emotion appropriately, ability to self-reflect own emotions and behaviour, ability to give structured and constructive feedback, knowledge of own strong and weak aspects in client communication, self-assessment of individual preparation on the training sessions. Quantitative analysis of the training evaluation revealed mean values of 4.44 - 4.93. Qualitative analysis revealed a 5 times higher number of positive statements compared to suggestions for
improvement. In the 6th semester communication training is supported by professional actors which act as the client. Verbal feedback is given to the acting student and a video is provided for self-reflection of the performed talk.

Communication training is very well accepted by veterinary students and improves soft skills substantially.