

Scaffolds for Teaching Communication and Consultation Skills – Beyond the Calgary Cambridge Guide

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As educators, we should carefully consider the best ways to help students file and retrieve information. Teaching communication skills is inherently challenging for a number of reasons, including the sometimes inaccurate preconceptions of learners and the complexity of the subject. These skills are essential for conducting effective client consultations, one of the most common procedures performed by veterinarians in clinical practice.

In their text *Guided Instruction*, Fisher and Frey, both PhDs and professors of Educational Leadership at San Diego State University, discuss using scaffolds to facilitate student learning. They suggest, “Teachers need to chunk information in ways that are consistent with working memory and long-term transfer. One of the ways to do this is through work with schemas, or mental structures that represent content.”

The Calgary-Cambridge Guide (CCG) has served as one such schema in a number of communication skills training programs in both human and veterinary medical student education. This guide delineates and structures more than seventy individual communication skills substantiated by research or theoretical application in the human medical field.

Although the CCG offers a number of benefits in teaching communication skills, it also has limitations. As this guide was developed based on interactions between physicians and their patients, it does not address unique aspects of the veterinary-client-patient relationship. The CCG provides guidance on the *process* of communication, but does not include suggested *content*. For example, the CCG suggests learners should use open-ended questions when collecting a medical history, but doesn’t provide guidance on *what* information should be gathered by the veterinarian.

Veterinary students and veterinarians must learn to investigate and deliver specific content in the client interview, including identifying client concerns, exploring social and lifestyle aspects of the history, screening key body systems, ensuring informed consent, and discussing finances. The artificial separation of content and process when teaching consultation skills can be confusing for veterinary learners, who must develop *both* process and content skills so these can be deployed simultaneously in the client interview.

Finally, some veterinary students, and even experienced veterinarians, are overwhelmed when asked to consider more than seventy specific skills. As a result, most training programs actually focus on only a subset of skills included in the CCG.

In hopes of taking advantage of significant benefits of the CCG while addressing opportunities for improvement in teaching communication and consultation skills to veterinary students, Clark developed a teaching framework based on the mnemonic WISE COACH™ in 2010. This instructional strategy was designed to delineate key process and content skills while helping students improve their memory of important skills related to

communication and conducting effective client consultations.

This educational framework, which has been revised and refined over more than a decade, has been well accepted by U.C. Davis students and helpful in their development of effective communication and consultation skills. In a 2015 survey, U.C. Davis veterinary medical teaching hospital house officers and faculty were asked to assess the entry-level competency in 14 different domains of students beginning their fourth-year clinical rotations. Students' communication skills received the highest ratings among the 14 domain areas.

In 2020 Clark and colleague Dr. Cassy Linder conducted a large cross-sectional on-line survey of 1,200 U.S. dog owners to assess the impact of the WISE COACH™ consultation model on client perceptions and spending. Participants were randomly assigned to watch one of two staged client consultation videos with and without use of the WISE COACH™ model. To reduce variability, the same veterinarian, same client, same patient, and same recommendations were given in both videos.

The veterinarian in the WISE COACH™ video was rated significantly higher than in the Control video for first impression, skilled/knowledgeable, cares about me, cares about my pet, and communicates clearly, and was rated significantly lower than Control for rushed/abrupt. Participants who viewed the WISE COACH™ video were significantly more likely to follow the veterinarian's recommendations, return to see the veterinarian, and recommend the veterinarian. WISE COACH™ participants were approximately 1.5 times more likely to approve the full recommended treatment plan and total projected spending was approximately 15% higher for WISE COACH™ participants than Control.

Implications

For good reason, the CCG is deeply entrenched in veterinary communication instruction. Kurtz and Silverman discussed the benefits of this model in medical teaching many years ago (Med Educ 1996). Nonetheless, there are opportunities to improve our teaching by seeking approaches that may increase student engagement, understanding, and retention. Fisher and Frey recommend creating systematic and intentional scaffolds to facilitate student understanding rather than leaving them alone to discover information independently. The term scaffold, as applied to learning situations, comes from Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), who define it as a process "that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts."

Research has demonstrated that the way we encode information when we first study affects memory retention. The WISE COACH™ scaffold combines important process and content skills in a simple mnemonic designed to give learners a helpful way to encode information so that it will be easier to retrieve. The model also includes practical reminders for conducting more effective client consultations, as supported by research showing significant improvement in client perception of the veterinarian, client retention, quality of patient care, and financial metrics.

In summary, WISE COACH™ is an evidence-based teaching framework that may help veterinary students and veterinarians develop the complex skills required to perform successful client consultations.