District veterinary nursing

Recognizing stressors at home: impact on the patient's emotional and physical health and recovery

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In a domestic context many natural behaviours of companion animals are compromised and they find themselves living in social and physical environments which can be challenging. When these environments fail to provide for species-specific behavioural needs there can be an increase in negative emotional motivations and associated physiological stress, which can be a major factor in the onset and progression of medical conditions. Investigating the effect of stressors in the home on physical and emotional health is therefore an important aspect of veterinary care.

Information can be gathered through questioning, but relying on client interpretation can lead to important factors being overlooked, and carrying out home visits, either actual or virtual, can be extremely beneficial. Potential stressors can be divided into those associated with social interactions, the physical environment and the health condition of the patient. Understanding of species-specific social behaviour is needed in order to accurately assess the potential for inter- and intraspecific social interactions within the household to impact on the patient's emotional and physical health. For example, cats are solitary survivors for whom enforced social interaction with cats from other social groups can significantly increase the risk of chronic stress and physical health manifestations, such as feline idiopathic cystitis. On the other hand dogs are socially obligate mammals and inability to maintain social contact can be challenging and lead to emotional distress.

An understanding of species-specific ethology is also needed in order to assess the impact of the physical environment. For example, lack of access to three-dimensional space can be problematic for cats who use elevation and hiding as important coping strategies when faced with challenging situations. Visual access which exposes dogs to the challenge of people and other dogs repeatedly passing in front of their homes can lead to increased negative emotions such as fear-anxiety and frustration.

Other aspects of the home environment may also be significant stressors when they exacerbate existing physical health issues, for example when the slippery surface of wooden floors increases the potential for musculoskeletal pain. The physical and emotional health of patients is significantly affected by the social and physical

environment in which they live. Identifying potential stressors in the home can help to improve response to medical treatment and recovery from physical illness.

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify species specific indicators of emotional challenge
- Recognize the influence of the physical and social environment on emotional and physical health and recovery
- Be able to explain the importance of an optimal home environment

MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. The following statements are made by a client when they bring their cat in for a consultation after finding blood in the cat's urine. Which of these would you identify as a risk factor for chronic stress that could potentially affect the progression of any underlying medical condition?
 - (A) Fluffy lives with another cat and they are always washing each other
 - (B) Fluffy lives with another cat and they are often curled up sleeping together in a ball
 - (C) Fluffy lives with another cat and they completely ignore each other
 - (D) Fluffy lives with another cat and she gets really vocal when the two of them are in the kitchen waiting while I prepare their food
2. You have treated a 15-month-old Labrador Retriever for a ruptured cruciate and you are carrying out a follow-up appointment. The surgery has gone well and you are suggesting that the dog no longer needs to be restricted in an indoor dog pen and can now be given more freedom in the home. Which of the following would be the most important of these questions to ask in terms of the potential to influence the recovery of your patient?
 - (A) Does your dog sleep on a flat bed such as a vet bed or in a deeper dog bed?
 - (B) Is your dog fed from a bowl on the floor or on a raised stand?
 - (C) Do you have wooden floors or carpets in your home?
 - (D) Does your dog have regular access to Kong toys filled with food?
3. A client brings in a dog with a history of loose stools at least three or four times a week for the past 6 months. After extensive medical investigations you cannot identify an obvious

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medical cause. Which of the following household changes would you wish to investigate in more detail as a potential contributing stressor relevant to the onset of the diarrhoea?

(A) The family had a new kitchen fitted around 8 months ago

(B) The family got new neighbours, who have a young family and a dog, around 7 months ago

(C) The family went on a holiday with the dog for 2 weeks around 6 months ago

(D) The son of the family moved out into his own house 8 months ago