Frequency and Types of Communication Errors in Practice

**Elly Russell¹, Liz Mossop¹,
Catherine Oxtoby², Ellie Forbes¹**

¹ University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

² Veterinary Defence Society, Knutsford, United Kingdom

OBJECTIVES

Communication is a key non-technical skill, integral to the way veterinary teams and organisations deliver care. Failures in communication have been identified as an important cause of error in veterinary practice. This project identifies the frequency and types of communication errors contributing to litigation claims in small animal practice.

METHODS

A mixed methods study was conducted using written documents from closed litigation cases supplied by the Veterinary Defence Society (VDS). The cases were selected at random from all canine claims handled over a three year period.

The documents were analysed using thematic analysis (TA) applied inductively to generate a typology of communication errors and deductively to establish the frequency of communication error types.

RESULTS

Communication errors were frequently involved in litigation claims (78%). The majority of claims involved more than one communication error (range 0-5, median 2). Whilst owners were involved in the majority of errors (50%), inter-professional communication (within teams 41% and between organisations 9%) was similarly susceptible to error. Thematic analysis generated six key, interrelated, types of communication problems: content, context, channel, perspective taking, integration of other non-technical skills and systems-based issues. These problems resulted in a failure of communication to achieve one of two fundamental functions: establishment of shared understanding or inadequate information transfer.

(Preliminary results from 50/100 cases)

STATEMENT (CONCLUSIONS)

How we communicate within veterinary teams as well as with owners is central to delivering safe, effective care. Understanding the complex ways communication can fail is key to developing successful interventions to support staff communicate effectively for safe care.