The assessment of dog welfare in the waiting room of a veterinary clinic

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Abstract

Veterinary visits are known to be stressful for many dogs. The aim of this study was to assess dog welfare in the waiting room of the veterinary clinic through a multi-modal, non-invasive approach. Forty-five dogs were each videoed for 3 min in the waiting room of a veterinary clinic where they went for a scheduled visit. The welfare of each dog was assessed using a thorough video analysis and two overall evaluations (low, medium and high stress); one performed by a veterinary behaviourist and one by the dog’s owner. Two-thirds of dogs spent more than 20% of the time displaying at least one indicator of stress, and 53.3% showed four or more behavioural signs of stress. Assessments of stress by the behaviourist indicated that level of stress in the waiting room was high in 28.9% of cases. The agreement between owners’ and behaviourist’s overall evaluations was quite low. The behaviourist’s evaluations were strongly correlated with the time spent by dogs showing signs of stress and moderately correlated with the number of displayed signs, whilst owners’ evaluations were not closely correlated to those factors. Dogs rated as highly stressed by the behaviourist were more prone to display resistance (halting, refusing to budge) when moving from the waiting room to the consultation room. The results of this pilot study support the idea that the welfare of dogs in the veterinary waiting room is often impaired, and that owners are unable to accurately assess stress in their dogs in such situations.

Keywords: animal welfare, behaviourist, dog, owner, stress, waiting room

Introduction

Compared to farm and laboratory animals, fewer studies have been carried out in companion animal welfare (Yeates & Main 2011; Yeates 2012), so better data on canine welfare issues are needed (CAWC 2009). For instance, veterinary visits are stressful for many dogs (Mills et al 2006; Döring et al 2009), but little is known about time spent in the waiting room.

Behavioural parameters are of particular interest for assessing stress in pets as they are easily measurable and non-invasive (Beerrda et al 1997, 1998). There is also potential value in overall assessments of animals’ emotional states (Wemelsfelder et al 2001; Mills et al 2006). The use of multiple means to assess dog welfare is uncommon, and consistency between different methods is unknown.

This pilot study aimed to assess dog welfare in the waiting room of the veterinary clinic using a multi-modal approach including a behaviourist’s evaluation, owners’ evaluation, and a thorough observation of dog behaviour, using multiple means to assess the reliability of overall evaluations.

Materials and methods

Participants

The sample was composed of dog-owner dyads (n = 29) or triads (one dog and two owners; n = 16) recruited from a population of owners bringing their dogs for a scheduled visit to a veterinary clinic in Florence, Italy. None of the dogs had any known health problems.

Protocol

Each dog-owner dyad/triad entered the waiting room where no other animal or person was present, only an operator who stayed in a corner filming and did not interact with the dog. Prior to the visit, owners were asked to sit and to keep their dog on a leash. Each dog was videoed for 3 min while the owner completed a questionnaire, thus limiting dog-owner interactions. This helped to achieve a level of standardisation and left dogs free to behave naturally.

The questionnaire (one per dyad or triad) included 29 items, mainly multiple-choice questions, divided into three sections: owner’s data; dog data; and owner’s perception of their dog’s welfare.