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Vets not adequately trained for dog-owners' "customer care" expectations

[Owner-dog relations have changed: a challenge for the veterinary profession Veterinary Record 2009; 165: 106-10]

Vets are not being adequately trained to deal with the increasing "customer care" expectations of dog-owners, reveals a small study published in this week's Veterinary Record.

The Scandinavian researchers base their findings on surveys and semi-structured interviews with a representative sample of 105 dog-owners and breeders about their attitudes to their pets and vets in Norway and Iceland.

In all, 99 of the sample owned dogs themselves, and most seemed to feel the relationship they had with their dog was on a par with a relationship they might have with another family member.

Almost three out of four (73%) said their pet was a "best friend" or "essential" part of their lives.

Around one in four said that the principal pleasure of having a dog was about "communication" and "interaction." Other words used included "trust," "unconditional love," "fulfilment," and "quality of life."

The responses also indicated that pet owners were becoming more critical of their vets' practice and expected them to take on issues other than clinical concerns.

While around one in four (23%) felt that vets acted in their pets' best interests, 26% felt that vets did what was the most interesting for themselves.

Around one in three (31%) felt that vets did not have enough time to address issues properly, and one in four felt forced to go through an array of often burdensome exams and procedures at the end of their pets' lives.

More than 7 out of 10 considered vets to be the natural choice when seeking help with their dogs' behavioural problems and as a source of advice on all aspects of general dog keeping.

The authors conclude that, given the strength of the emotional attachment pet owners have for their dogs, vets who deal with small animals may well benefit from improved communication skills and a better understanding of the relationship between owners and their dogs as part of their veterinary training.