Meaningful relationships in veterinary practice

J S J Odendaal

ABSTRACT
Although the veterinarian as a person is not traditionally seen as part of veterinary science research, perceptions are changing. The aim of this investigation was to analyse veterinary practice as a social system, by quantifying interaction within the practice. The veterinarians' biographical parameters of gender, residential area, home language, age and type of practice were taken as independent variables and questions regarding the other factors in practice as dependent variables. Relationships were considered to be statistically significant when \( p < 0.05 \) using the chi-square test. Results indicated that younger, female, urban, companion animal, English-speaking veterinarians are relatively more aware of their clients' and patients' needs, as well as the interaction between owner and animal. They are more orientated towards financial success and are more aware of opposition practices. They also ascribe more emotional behaviour to their clients. Rural practitioners in mixed or production animal practices, who are predominantly Afrikaans-speaking, saw their clients as more calculating and omniscient and they are more likely to take their clients' financial position into account. The study revealed the necessity of a new human orientation in successful practice management, from a social system perspective.

Key words: social system, veterinarian interaction, veterinary practice.


INTRODUCTION
Although many fields related to veterinary science have been investigated in the past, the practising veterinarian as a person interacting with other people was not a particular subject of study. The reason for this is an ambivalence about the scope of veterinary science. On one hand, tradition dictates that veterinary science should only deal with animal matters, but on the other hand, veterinary science was initiated and maintained by human needs. These human needs are reflected in the ownership of and responsibilities towards animals.

However, perceptions are changing and one of the main influences of the change was the development of the field of human-animal interaction.3 Despite the fact that Antelyes3,4 had highlighted the importance of veterinarian-client relationships in practice since the 1960s, studies on client needs and client profiles only became popular in the 1980s.5,6,7,8 The human factor, as well as the veterinarian's conduct, are regularly dealt with in recent publications on practice management and veterinary ethics.11,16,20-23. With this new emphasis, the veterinarian as a person can no longer be seen as falling 'outside' the field of veterinary science.

The aim of this investigation is to analyse veterinary practice as a social system and to determine interaction between the practitioner and other factors identified in the system. The position of the factors in the practice system reflects a qualitative analysis, but in this study an attempt was made to quantify interaction within the qualitative model.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The veterinarian, animal patient and human client form a triad that is seen as a basic system, while the external factors influencing elements of the basic system are seen as subsystems. The system as a whole, operating in a larger community, is known as a suprasystem. The qualitative analysis of the practice system included the following factors interacting with the practitioner; during day-to-day events (Fig. 1).

Interaction between the veterinarian and other factors in the practice system was investigated quantitatively, using collective responses, by asking practitioners their opinion on and behaviour towards aspects of these factors. Only questions that could be answered by a simple symbol were asked, in order to obtain categorical data. A total of 84 questions, combined in separate sections, were included as dependent variables, to cover a broad spectrum of issues relating to the factors interacting with the veterinarian in practice. The following biographical parameters of practitioners were the independent variables: gender, residential area, home language, age and type of practice.24

The definition of the target population was practising veterinarians in South Africa. 'Practising' referred to those veterinarians who were still in practice or had been practising for at least 6 months prior to the investigation. Addresses of registered veterinarians in the South African Veterinary Council's official list of 1992 were used as a sample frame. Only addresses of veterinarians who were known definitely not to be in practice were removed from the list. Therefore the total population of registered veterinarians who were possibly practising at that time was included in the survey (\( n = 1213 \)). The questionnaire was exposed to a test with 8 practitioners, resulting in some rephrasing before finalising it. It was then presented in the 2 official languages of the country at the time of the survey. Completed forms were returned anonymously in self-addressed envelopes. Respondents were kept unaware of the qualitative model of the practice system, to prevent biasing their responses.

To determine whether an interaction between practitioner and other factors in the system was meaningful, chi-square statistics were calculated and interpreted at the 5% level of significance.5 The interaction between the biographical parameters of the veterinarians and the other factors indicates only the relative strength of the relationships and is dependent on the time and place of the investigation. Such relativity is an inherent characteristic of cybernetic systems.

RESULTS

From the number of questionnaires received (\( n = 503 \)), the 3 least fully completed questionnaires were excluded.
from the sample to work with a round figure \((n = 500)\). Statistically significant interactions \((p < 0.05)\) between biographical parameters of practising veterinarians and other factors in the practice system are given in Tables 1–5.

**DISCUSSION**

According to Lovelock\(^9\), the mathematician Norbert Wiener gave common use to the term cybernetics, which is derived from the Greek word \(kubernetes\), meaning steersman. Cybernetics describes that branch of study concerned with self-regulating systems of communication and control in living organisms and machines. The primary function of cybernetic systems is to steer an optimum course through changing conditions towards a predetermined goal.

In a social system such as a veterinary practice, it is clear that the veterinarian will be the most important factor; the steersman, communicating and controlling the system in striving for equilibrium in the system. From a management perspective, the veterinarian fulfils the role of manager, leading the practice to a predetermined goal based on the practice policy. Interaction between the parts of the practice system will take place via the veterinarian, who plays a pivotal role in achieving the practice goals. This makes the veterinarian the ideal source of information on the interaction taking place in the practice system.

The results indicate the existence of 2 major categories of veterinarians, similar to the 2 categories found in an earlier study of the biographical profiles of practising veterinarians, namely: urban, English-speaking, companion animal practitioners on the one hand and rural, Afrikaans-speaking, mixed practice veterinarians on the other hand\(^9\). Younger (\(< 40\) years old) and female veterinarians' opinions tended to follow those of the first group. Companion animal practitioners are more aware of their clients' and patients' needs, as well as the interaction between owner and animal, than veterinarians in mixed and production animal practices. These practitioners are also more orientated towards financial success and they are more inclined to experience emotional behaviour to their clients. In rural areas, veterinarians are more considerate about the financial position of their clients than their urban counterparts. Rural practitioners attribute characteristics such as being calculating and omniscient to their clients, probably

**Fig 1: Qualitative system analysis of a veterinary practice.**

**Table 1: Statistically significant relationships between veterinarians' gender and other factors in the practice system \((n = 500)\).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Opinion/behaviour of veterinarians</th>
<th>(p)-values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Record animal behaviour on practice records</td>
<td>(p = 0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Identify patients completely on records</td>
<td>(p = 0.007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Believe that animals have the same rights as people</td>
<td>(p = 0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Feel more positive about practice success</td>
<td>(p = 0.020)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Feel less positive about sport</td>
<td>(p = 0.027)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Feel clients are more trustworthy</td>
<td>(p = 0.047)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Statistically significant relationships between veterinarians' residential area and other factors in the practice system \((n = 500)\).**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Opinion/behaviour of veterinarians</th>
<th>(p)-values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feel the presence of opposition practices</td>
<td>(p = 0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Record animal behaviour on practice records</td>
<td>(p = 0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Identify patients completely on records</td>
<td>(p = 0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Use patient numbers as an identification of practice success</td>
<td>(p = 0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Use client numbers as an indication of practice success</td>
<td>(p = 0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feel clients are more humanitarian</td>
<td>(p = 0.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feel clients are more nervous</td>
<td>(p = 0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feel clients are more loyal</td>
<td>(p = 0.014)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feel clients are more persuadable</td>
<td>(p = 0.043)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>Feel clients are more enthusiastic</td>
<td>(p = 0.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Take clients' financial position into account</td>
<td>(p = 0.005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Feel clients are more calculating</td>
<td>(p = 0.032)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Feel clients are more dependable</td>
<td>(p = 0.046)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because farmers often cope on their own as far as possible.

Of all the interactions between veterinarians and other parts of the system, three did not show any significant correlations with biographical variables. These were the interaction between veterinarians and their families, their practice staff and their community involvement. It seems that veterinarians establish typical relationships with the people nearest to them, namely family members and personnel working closely with them and have typical non-veterinary involvement with people in the community. The latter is based on personal preferences.

This study not only revealed some of the human interactions operating in a veterinary practice, but also indicated the necessity for a new human orientation in understanding and achieving success in a veterinary practice as a social system.

REFERENCES
17. Odendaal J S J, Weyers A 1989 'n Kliëntprofiel van 'n geselskapsdierpraktyk. Tydskrif van die Suid-Afrikaanse Veterinaire
The proceedings comprise 30 papers and include a list of names and addresses of delegates who attended the symposium.

Wildlife rehabilitation is defined by one of the authors as, 'the treatment and temporary care of injured, diseased and displaced indigenous wildlife and the subsequent return of healthy viable animals to appropriate habitats in the wild'. It would appear that the aim of these proceedings is to discuss the various aspects of this process. Unfortunately, with no introduction, I was left in some doubt as to why each paper was included and what contribution it was expected to make on the chosen subject.

The aspects of wildlife rehabilitation discussed include: the causes of wildlife casualties, the establishment, management and financial implications of operating a rehabilitation centre, coordination of volunteers, management of media, the corporate sponsor, ethics, and the treatment, housing and nutritional requirements of injured, poisoned or orphaned wildlife. However, I was disappointed by the lack of information on the final phase of rehabilitation, the release of animals back into their natural habitat. As one author states, 'this is the only parameter by which the success of a rehabilitation programme should be judged'.

The proceedings include papers by both lay-persons and professionals from a variety of backgrounds. Authors include: veterinarians from the Faculty of Veterinary Science of the University of Pretoria and private practitioners, managers of rehabilitation centres, an environmental coordinator for a large corporation and representatives from two zoos and the Department of Nature Conservation of South Africa. The proceedings are given an international perspective by the inclusion of papers by two representatives of the International Bird Rescue Research Centre based in Berkeley, California.

Owing to the various backgrounds of the authors, the style of scientific writing is varied. Many papers are based on the authors' personal experience and are often anecdotal. Much of the knowledge in this young profession has only recently been gained through trial and error. Most papers are quite brief and many lack references or additional reading. There are, however, some notable exceptions and these include papers on zoonoses in wildlife rehabilitation, emergency treatment for wildlife patients and drug dosages for treatment of wildlife.

In conclusion, these proceedings have successfully consolidated the fragmented knowledge available on rehabilitation in South Africa. They should be read by anyone who is already involved in or is considering taking on the challenges of wildlife rehabilitation.

P E Buss
National Zoological Gardens
Pretoria