

Paws for thought

Human considerations in the management of itchy dogs and cats

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'Compliance', 'caregiver burden', 'quality of life' and 'adherence': all terms that most companion animal veterinarians have no doubt heard of. However, we may not fully comprehend how critical they are in our day-to-day case management, treatment success, customer relationships, and even our own personal mental and emotional wellbeing.

These terms and their consequences to companion animal veterinary teams are currently being explored in recent veterinary focused literature (Silva *et al.* 2024; Spitznagel and Carlson 2019; Spitznagel *et al.* 2023), and consideration of these concepts is being recognised for the critical role it plays in product stewardship and treatment outcomes. After all, a therapy that is both effective and safe is also completely ineffectual if never administered appropriately to the intended patient.

The role of the human-animal bond is now firmly established and the benefits of living with companion animals are well supported by published literature. Improving the quality of life (physical, emotional and social 'health' (Broom 2007)) of pets is a focus for veterinarians and the wider companion animal health industry. Tools are now available to objectively measure quality of life of animals (e.g. Vetmetrica: [https:// www.vetmetrica.com](https://www.vetmetrica.com)) so that in the not-so-distant future, veterinary medicine manufacturers will look to explore quality of life improvement (for the patient) as a registered product claim. (Dewsbury *et al.* 2022)

Table 1. Definitions

Caregiver burden: The load or strain experienced by individuals who care for chronically ill, disabled, or elderly family members, including pets (Anonymous 2022; Vincent 2023).
Compliance: Willingness to follow a prescribed treatment (Gerard 2015).
Adherence: The extent to which client's administer medications prescribed, including filling/refilling the prescription; correct dosage, use and timing; and completing the prescribed course (Gerard 2015).
Quality of life: A reference to overall well-being. Quality of life encompasses a variety of physical, mental and behavioural factors. In the context of a pet's QoL, it helps us to get a better sense of whether a pet is happy, declining, in pain or experiencing any degree of suffering (Broom 2007).

Caregiver burden and quality of life in dermatological disease

While we recognise that models are being developed and validated to objectively quantify and measure the quality of life of companion animals, particularly those suffering from chronic diseases, it is also worth considering what information is available about the impact of some of the common diseases of companion animals and their treatments on the caregivers of pets. That is, what are the human considerations we need to take into account when managing a pet's chronic disease, both from the perspective of the impact of the disease, but also the impact of treatment of that disease.

Recent literature has reviewed the impact on pets and their carers of diseases such as diabetes (Niessen *et al.* 2010), neoplasia (Rha *et al.* 2015); chronic enteropathy (Lyngby *et al.* 2025) and epilepsy (Nettifee *et al.* 2017) in companion animals. However, there is also a mounting body of literature looking at one of the most common, and often challenging diseases that veterinarians manage in general practice – dermatological disease. (Noli

et al. 2011a, b; Noli *et al.* 2016; Spitznagel *et al.* 2019; Spitznagel *et al.* 2024; Silva *et al.* 2024). Caregiver burden occurs due to symptoms experienced by the patient; in the case of skin disease in dogs, caregivers note disruptions to sleep, family life and normal activities as well as experiencing feelings of sadness watching their dog suffer from this disease. Silva *et al.* (2024) found no statistical difference in the degree of burden between caring for a pet with neoplasia, compared to caring for a pet with dermatological disease; a surprising outcome when the prognosis of patients diagnosed with these two diseases is compared. Linek and Favrot (2010) illustrated that canine atopic dermatitis was shown to deeply and negatively influence the health-related quality of life of affected dogs, but also to impact the quality of life of their caregivers in a similar way.

Caregiver burden and compliance in treating dermatology cases - the New Zealand perspective

When treatment or management plans for atopic dermatitis are instigated, the burden of maintenance therapy results in smaller improvements in quality of life in the caregiver administering the medication, compared to the improvement for the patient receiving the medication. Factors such as treatment complexity, duration of therapy, disruptions to daily life and routines all contribute to the caregiver burden.

Interestingly, the results are mixed when looking at the financial contribution of treatment to caregiver burden. While Britton *et al.* (2018) found that caregiver burden is significantly related to financial strain in owners of seriously ill companion animals, more recent work by Silva *et al.* (2024), surveying owners of dogs specifically experiencing dermatological disease, found no statistical difference between the degree of burden and the caregiver's income.

Caregiver burden can also result from the challenges in the act of administering medication to pets. Taylor *et al.* (2020) reported that in a survey reflecting experiences of feline caregivers asked to medicate their cat, over three-quarters (77%) of respondents reported that their cat had reacted in a strongly negative way (biting or scratching) when medications were administered.

New Zealand caregivers report similar challenges in medicating canine companions. Odom *et al.* (2024) found that a significant proportion (47/151) of canine caregivers reported that they too experienced challenges with medicating their pet. Challenges result in a direct impact on compliance with medication or treatment programmes, and in the same study, medication noncompliance was reported in almost half of the respondents.

Dermatological disease is no different. In another recently published study (Wright *et al.* 2024) looking at global attitudes to medicating dogs with tablets, 250 New Zealanders were asked their views on medicating dogs with skin disease:

- 69% reported challenges in giving tablet-based therapies.
- 59% advised they needed to hide these tablets in food to ensure acceptance of the tablet (creating potential flare-ups from unrecognised and/or undisclosed sources of food allergens).
- 20% needed to build extra time into their day to give medications.
- 20% were worried that their dog was not properly experiencing the benefit of conventional tablets and
- 18% were almost constantly or frequently feeling stressed or unhappy about the difficulties they were experiencing with conventional tablets.

These surveys of New Zealand pet caregiver experiences, demonstrate the impact that medicating pets can have, not only on the human-animal bond but also on the quality of life of the pet and its carer.

Dermatological disease and compliance in feline companions.

Responses to a validated questionnaire designed to evaluate the quality of life in cats with skin disease and their caregivers (Noli *et al.* 2016) revealed that there are some differences between cats and dogs. While the level of discomfort and disruption to normal family life for caregivers of a cat with skin disease is less than for dogs; stress due to administration of therapies and repeated visits to the veterinarian were a far greater source of psychological stress.

Treating cats with skin disease is more difficult than for dogs and is a bigger source of psychological distress for their caregivers than for those treating canine companions.

Expenditure and time loss were also cited as areas where the quality of life of the feline caregiver is impacted.

These same factors, visiting the vet and administering medications, were also identified as having a negative impact on the quality of life of the cat. This is an important point for veterinarians to note because when the owner perceives a negative quality of life for their pet, they may choose to become noncompliant or even consider options such as euthanasia, despite the fact that clinical signs of the disease may improve.

There are now several modalities of treatments available to us to manage various feline health conditions: liquids, lotions, injectable formulations and tablets. When asking feline carers to medicate their cat, the veterinarian needs to consider that they may be asking feline caregivers to 'do' things to their cat that they have never done before (open their mouth) and things that they don't understand or see the benefit of (routine bloodwork). They may forget to do these procedures (regular preventative parasite treatment), or they may simply not enjoy doing them (giving tablets!).

The unintended consequence to these requests may be damaging to the relationship a carer has with their cat (Vicky Halls 1, pers. comm.). In the case of a cat with dermatological disease, consultation and a team approach with the feline caregiver is critical for compliance and to ensure the cat receives the treatment that it needs.

Impact for veterinary teams of poor compliance and caregiver burden

Recommending treatment plans that are complicated or difficult to follow not only increases caregiver burden but also negatively impacts compliance and treatment outcomes. In turn, poor compliance can have several negative impacts (Maddison *et al.* 2021), some of these may be:

- Failure to manage disease or clinical signs.
- Increased rate of disease recurrence.
- Poor chronic disease management.
- Ineffective prevention of disease.
- Higher risk of antimicrobial resistance.
- Adverse events due to rapid withdrawal from medication.
- Adverse events where attempts are made to “catch up”.
- Increased overall treatment costs.
- Loss of confidence in veterinary care or therapies.
- Risk of accidental poisoning from accumulated, unused medication.
- Ecotoxicity from improper disposal of retained medication.

From the veterinary teams' perspective, complex treatment plans have been recognised to contribute to caregiver burden. This burden can then be transferred from the pet caregiver to the veterinary team (Spitznagel and Carlson 2019) through:

- An increased demand for advice and support, often provided in the form of non-chargeable hours.
- Poorer treatment outcomes leading to reduced job satisfaction.
- Greater treatment complexity may reduce the client's perception of their rapport with their veterinarian, impacting the veterinarian-client relationship.
- Greater caregiver burden can increase the likelihood that euthanasia is considered.

Practical solutions for veterinary teams

When making recommendations:

- Develop treatment plans in collaboration with pet carers. A team-based approach empowers pet caregivers to comply successfully. It will also ensure that they are both able and willing to adhere to the plan, as well as providing a greater feeling of control.
- Provide realistic timelines: it is not always possible to find the right treatment for the patient (or the family they live with) immediately.
- Try to plan treatment regimens around normal daily routines wherever possible. The greater the interruption

to a caregiver's daily routine, the more likely they are to experience an increase in caregiver burden. It may be helpful to pair treatment with a daily event to ensure medication does not get overlooked (e.g. administer nightly medications with the caregiver's evening cup of tea).

- Choose treatment formulations that create a positive experience where at all possible. Palatable tablets can act as a treat. Long-acting formulations require less intervention and can even be administered by someone other than the caregiver (e.g. injections administered by the veterinary team).
- For more information on products that are recognised as being easier to administer to cats, look for the ISFM Easy to Give product mark or tick. (Easy to Give | International Cat Care (icatcare.org)).
- Discuss the consequences of poor or non-compliance with caregivers to provide motivation to adhere to treatment recommendations. The following sites have some excellent tools for veterinary teams and pet caregivers.
 - www.aaha.org/wp-content/uploads/globalassets/02-guidelines/2023-aaha-management-of-allergic-skin-diseases-in-dogs-and-cats-guidelines
 - www.aaha.org/resources/2023-aaha-management-of-allergic-skin-diseases-in-dogs-and-cats-guidelines/resource-center?
 - www.cavd.ca/empathy-for-itch-pet-parent
- Prepare pet caregivers for the flare! Skin disease is something that can be managed but never cured. Recurrence of itching does not necessarily mean treatment failure. Prior warning that flares occur even in well managed patients helps to avoid frustration when it occurs.
- Ensure pet caregivers are provided with appropriate instruction- verbal and written - and utilise veterinary nurses and technicians to provide instruction on administration techniques.
- Follow up for early identification of problems!

When things go wrong:

- Listen and acknowledge feelings of burden. Offer words of encouragement. Try to avoid use of technical jargon and medical terms.
- Stress that it is the plan that is causing stress, and not the pet. This stress does not make the person uncaring or uncommitted to their pet.
- Consider collaborating to approach the problem with the client. Help them to problem solve, rather than trying to find a solution for them.
- Listen and acknowledge feelings of burden. Offer words of encouragement.
- Consider the ultimate aim of treatment - this is an opportune time to review the goals of care.
- Wherever possible simplify the plan.

And finally

It is important to recognise that not every client will experience caregiver burden. Many will be motivated and able to undertake complex treatment plans, whereas for some, even the simplest treatment plan may be overwhelming.

Understand your limitations. Words of encouragement, collaborative care and a solution-based approach are all areas where the veterinary team can contribute to the reduction of caregiver burden, however, people may be experiencing high levels of stress associated with caring for their pet due to issues within their life that are challenging to their mental health. It is OK to accept your limitations in helping clients in this situation.

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