In veterinary medicine, recognizing and addressing the behavioral health of the animals has gradually become more common. As veterinary behaviorists have worked to educate the veterinary organizations and general practitioners about the importance of behavior health, we are seeing the inclusion of behavioral health in practice guidelines including the AAHA Canine Life Stage Guidelines and the AAFP/AAHA Feline Life Stage Guidelines. Dr. Sophia Yin’s passion for spreading the word on low stress handling and care, not only sparked many veterinary hospital’s interest but also give them the knowledge and tools to apply it directly into their daily routine. Dr. Marty Becker is pioneering the Fear Free™ Veterinary Visits and Practices movement. The American Animal Hospital Association published the 2015 Canine and Feline Behavior Management Guidelines. It is available at: https://www.aaha.org/professional/resources/behavior_management_guidelines.aspx#gsc.tab=0

Many veterinary facilities, although interested in incorporating behavior wellness and low stress handling into practice, may find themselves ill-equipped as far as knowledge and skills on how to put this into practice. This is where you can help!

How can we benefit each other?
Ultimately everyone benefits; the trainer, the veterinary hospital, the pet owner, and the pet. Working together as a team can provide the most complete care for the pet, enhance the human animal bond, decrease relinquishment, and provide financial benefits to the trainer and veterinarian. The animal behavior healthcare team includes veterinary professionals, animal trainers, pet owners, and pets.

Some definitions
Because terms are used in various ways and understood differently by everyone, in our Canine and Feline Behavior for Veterinary Technicians and Nurses book, we (Julie Shaw and Debbie Martin) sought to provide some common definitions to help the animal behavior healthcare team communicate more effectively.

- **Behavior problem**: The animal’s behavior is a problem for the owner. The issues could be lack of training, conditioned unwanted behavior, a behavioral disorder or a combination of issues.
- **Behavior disorder**: Psychological or behavioral patterns outside behavioral “norms” that usually have an affective component.
- **Preventive care**: Preventive care refers to measures taken to prevent a behavioral disorder from occurring, rather than curing or treating the symptoms of an existing disorder. Preventive care is a primary role for trainers and veterinary technicians.
- **Intervention care**: Intervention care refers to measures taken to improve or alter an existing behavioral disorder. Intervention requires a veterinarian’s diagnosis and treatment plan.
- **Behavioral assessment**: An informal impression or evaluation of the situation. The first step in triaging a behavioral problem.

Roles of the Veterinarian and the Animal Trainer in Animal Behavior
The idea is not to take business from the trainer or the veterinarian but to increase referrals to each other. We each have our crucial roles that we play in the dynamic animal behavior healthcare team.

*Roles of the Veterinarian:*
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Real-World Trainer & Veterinary Collaboration Models
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- Rule out health issues
- Diagnose behavior disorders
- Gives prognosis
- Prescribes treatment plan
- Prescribes medication
- Determines when to refer cases to specialists

The veterinarian is responsible for the clinical assessment of all patients presented to the veterinary hospital. Only a licensed veterinarian can practice veterinary medicine. The practice of veterinary medicine means to diagnose, treat, correct, change, relieve or prevent any animal disease, deformity, defect, injury or other physical or mental conditions; including the prescribing of any drug or medicine (Modified from: Title 37 Professions and occupations Chapter 18. Veterinarians Louisiana Practice Act [La. R.S. 37:1511-1558]). The mental welfare of animals and the treatment of mental illness are included in many state veterinary practice acts. Only by evaluating the patient’s physical and neurological health and obtaining and reviewing the medical and behavioral history, can the veterinarian establish a diagnosis and prescribe appropriate treatment. When dealing with the behavior of animals, it must be determined whether the behavior is normal, abnormal, the manifestation of a medical condition, an inappropriately conditioned behavior, or simply related to lack of training.

The veterinarian and veterinary staff can be instrumental in recognizing behavior issues when a pet is presented for an underlying medical problem. All medical diseases result in behavior changes and most behavioral disorders have medical differentials. A behavior disorder may lead to the clinical presentation of a surgical or medical disease. Surgical repair of wounds inflicted by a dog bite may prompt the veterinarian to recommend behavior treatment for inter-dog aggression. A cat or dog presenting with self-inflicted wounds may indicate a panic disorder or compulsive behavior. Dental disease including fractured teeth could be an indication of anxiety related conditions such as separation anxiety or sound phobias. Frequent enterotomies (intestinal surgery to remove foreign material) may indicate pica or some other anxiety related condition. The astute veterinarian must use a multimodal approach with the integration of behavioral questionnaires and medical testing to determine specific and nonspecific links to behavioral disorders. Medical disease may cause the development of a behavior disorder. Feline lower urinary tract disease may lead to the continuation of inappropriate elimination even after the inciting cause has been treated. Many behavior disorders require and benefit from concurrent medical and pharmacological treatment.

The rationale that the problem is only either medical or behavioral is a flawed approach. Neurophysiologically, any medical condition that affects the normal function of the central nervous system can alter behavior. The nonspecific complaint of lethargy or depression may be caused by a multitude of factors including pyrexia (fever), pain, anemia, hypoglycemia, a congenital abnormality such as lissencephaly or hydrocephalus, a central nervous system disorder involving neoplasia, infection, trauma or lead toxicity, endocrine disorders such as hypothyroidism or hyperadrenocorticism, metabolic disorders such as hepatic (liver) or uremic encephalopathy and cognitive dysfunction or sensory deficits. Behavioral signs are the first presenting signs of any illness.

As a general rule, veterinarians should do a physical and neurological examination and basic blood analysis for all pets presenting for behavioral changes. The practitioner may decide to perform more specific diagnostic tests based on exam findings. Additional diagnostics indicated will vary on a case by case basis.
Roles of the Animal Trainer/Veterinary Technician

- Triage
- Assess
- Prevention and manners training
  - Group and private
- Assist with implementation of a prescribed behavioral treatment plan (advanced)

Examples of services that animal trainers could offer either in the veterinary hospital or a training facility but will benefit the entire animal behavior healthcare team include:

- Fun visits
- Victory visits
- Pet selection counseling
- Puppy classes
- Kitten classes
- Veterinary team training on Fear Free techniques to working with patients
- Private or group sessions preventively working on creating eager participants with veterinary care

Triaging

Behavior problems rarely occur overnight; behavior is influenced by learning and problems often develop over time. However, as discussed earlier acute changes in behavior are suggestive of medical disease. A physical exam and medical work-up can help to rule out contributing medical factors.

A gradual escalation of a behavior problem, such as initially avoiding and then later growling at visitors in the home, can become a crisis when an incident occurs, such as when the dog bites a house guest. When faced with a behavioral crisis, it is important to be able to triage the situation and provide immediate relief/safety until further assistance can be provided.

Signs of urgent behavior problems:

- There is significant damage to the human animal bond; the owner is at his/her "wits end" or afraid of the pet. Regardless of the severity of the behavior, the owner’s inability to tolerate the pet’s behavior indicates that the pet may be close to being relinquished if immediate assistance is not provided.
- There is a risk of injury to the pet, other animals, or people. This would include a dog suffering from severe separation anxiety who escapes the home by breaking out of a kennel and jumping through windows or a cat that is unpredictably aggressing the owner and causing physical injury.
- The owner is unable to identify and/or unable to avoid triggers for the behavior. The pet may be in a constant heightened state of arousal or vigilance affecting the pet’s welfare; the dog that paces aimlessly or the cat that hides under the bed a majority of the day. Another example would be a dog that is attacking the other resident dog in the home without an identifiable trigger.

Provide immediate assistance

It is important to let the client know that their concerns are valid and that help is available. It is necessary to schedule an appropriate amount of time to address the client’s behavioral concerns or offer a referral to an appropriate behavior professional.

Suggestions for immediate assistance include:
• Show empathy; let the pet owners know there is help and they are not alone. Empathizing can provide instant relief for the client.
• Advise the pet owner to avoid triggers of the behavior if possible. Not only for the safety of all involved but also to avoid the practicing of the undesirable behavior. For the dog that is reactive to stimuli on walks, walks should be avoided.
• Cease all forms of punishment, including verbal or physical corrections; punishment can often exacerbate behavior problems and does not address the underlying motivation for the pet’s behavior.
• In some cases, temporarily boarding the pet, if it is safe to do so, will provide the pet owner with a necessary reprieve until further assistance can be provided.

With the initial contact with a client, the following information should be obtained to determine the best course of action:

- Age and breed or size of dog
- Household dynamics
- Other pets in the house
- Owner’s concerns or reasons for calling (i.e. “problem list”)
- How long have the behaviors been going on (acute or chronic)
- Determine if there are any safety concerns for people and/or pets
- Status of the human animal bond

Most behavior complaints will fall into one of two categories:
1. Medical and/or a Behavior Disorder
2. Prevention and/or a Lack of Training

However, many times the behavior complaint might be “grey”. This is when a behavioral assessment will help to determine the best course of action.

**In Person Behavior Assessment or Field Assessment**
An in person behavior assessment, may allow you to better determine whether the pet needs a referral based on your professional evaluation of the pet’s behavior. A written summary of the field assessment should include the owner’s prioritized behavioral concerns, general signalment, family dynamics, history of the behavior situation, medical conditions reported by the owner, professional observations, management and training recommendations, the status of the human-animal relationship, and any other specific concerns.

**Risk Factors**
Predictors of future behavior problems often include fear, anxiety, and/or aggression in the young or adolescent dog. The following study revealed potential risk factors for dogs to display aggression to their owners. Guy, N. C., U. A. Luescher, S. E. Dohoo, E. Spangler, J. B. Miller, I. R. Dohoo and L. A. Bate (2001). "Risk factors for dog bites to owners in a general veterinary caseload." *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* 74(1): 29-42. The risk factors of the dog included:

- Serious illness < 4 months
- ↑ level of reactivity, impulsivity and fearfulness
- Handling issues
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- Guarding behavior
- Inappropriate play
- ↑ conflict behaviors
- Not walked regularly
- Lack of training or punishment based training

Risk factors of the owners included:
- Strong anthropomorphic involvement
- Inconsistent interactions
- First time owners

How to team up with a veterinary hospital
For most of you this will involve stepping outside your comfort zone! With some preparation and setting of realistic goals this may be the most rewarding move you can take both professionally and personally.

It is important to realize that although you know how valuable you can be to the veterinary hospital, not everyone will be convinced. Expect to approach at least 10 veterinary hospitals before you find one that will be interested in you and you in them. Think of this as a job interview. Not only are they deciding if your services will fit their hospital, you are also determining if their facility would be a good fit for you.

Possible trainer roles when teaming up with a veterinary hospital:
- Be a referral source for private and group training
- Work with the veterinarians and technicians on behavioral disorder cases
- Provide group lessons at the hospital for their clients (puppy preschool, kitten kindergarten, veterinary care training classes, manners classes)
- Provide private training lessons at the hospital for their clients (new puppy/kitten appointments, fun and/or victory visits, prevention services)
- Staff education and workshops

For your initial contact with the veterinary hospital, schedule a time to meet with the office manager. You might even offer to pay for an appointment slot. Keep the appointment short; 15 minutes or less. Come prepared with information on the detrimental effects that pet relinquishment has on their bottom line and what services you are able to offer to help enhance the human animal bond between their clients and pets. You might offer to provide a 30-60 minute presentation to the staff about the benefits of incorporating behavior and training into their practice or provide free enrollment in one of your classes to some of their staff members. For their convenience, you could also offer to provide a “private” introductory class for staff members and their pets after hours at their hospital.

Once you have established a relationship with a veterinary hospital, continue to foster that relationship through follow up. With behavior cases it is especially important to keep the veterinarian abreast of progress. However, even with basic training and preventive services, track referrals and send a short progress report to the hospital. The progress report will not only educate the veterinary staff about your training techniques, but also remind them of your services.
Summary
The trend is toward veterinary hospitals incorporating behavioral wellness into their practices. Determine your own comfort level and desire for involvement, create a plan, and make it happen! Now is the time to team up with hospitals so that you can help pioneer this change!