

## Research Article

# United Kingdom Veterinarians' Perceptions of Clients' Internet Use and the Perceived Impacts on the Client-Vet Relationship

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## Introduction

In 2016, the majority (82%) of the UK adult population used the internet on a daily or almost daily basis, a demonstrable increase from 35% in 2006 (Office of National Statistics, 2016) [1]. As witnessed in the human health field, the internet is a commonly used resource for accessing health information (Healthcare UK, 2015) [2]. Despite the internet's popularity in the human health field, little is known about the internet's impact on veterinarians, their clients and the veterinarian-client relationship. Furthermore, the response of pet owners to information sourced online is also an area which needs to be better understood. Previous research has highlighted the fact that pet owners frequently consult the internet for pet health information in addition to seeking advice from their veterinarians [3,4]. However, the internet is an extensive resource and thus there is the risk for pet owners to access inaccurate and unreliable information, potentially impacting pet health and veterinarian-client relationships [4]. One method recently explored to combat the potential of inaccurate online information is the provision of 'Information Prescriptions' by veterinary staff. Veterinary clients in the United States have reported finding these information prescriptions informative and trustworthy [5]. To address the potential benefit of something similar in the UK, the aim of this study was to investigate UK veterinarians' perception of clients' use of the internet and the perceived impact on pet health and the veterinarian-client relationship.

## Method

A survey was adapted from [4], approved by Colorado State

University Research Integrity and Compliance Review committee and piloted. The final survey, available upon request, was distributed between January 4th and March 3rd, 2017 via an online link to a survey through social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn), two veterinary blogs and a letter in a veterinary publication. All respondents answered all questions unless stated otherwise. As only one hundred responses were received, only descriptive statistics are reported.

## Results

In total, 100 veterinarians completed the survey. The majority of respondents (65%) were female. Nearly all respondents lived and worked in England (90%). The remaining were from Scotland (6%); Wales (3%) and one respondent stated both England and Wales. A wide range of ages were reported with 57% being between 20 and 40 years, 30% between 41 and 60 years and 13% being over 60 years of age. The majority (69%) were exclusively small animal veterinarians and 17% predominantly small animal veterinarians. Only a small proportion were equine (6%), mixed practice (5%) and exotic (3%) veterinarians.

Over 70% of veterinarians thought that nearly all (> 80%) clients have access to the internet either at work or home. Fifty-seven per cent of veterinarians thought that the majority (61-100%) of their clients use the internet to find pet health information. Yet, 73% of veterinarians thought that only a minority (0-40%) of clients understand what they read online regarding pet health information (see Table 1)

Question	0-20%	21-40%	41-60%	61-80	81-100%
What percentage of your clients do you think have access to the internet either at home or at work for personal use?	0%	0%	5%	24%	71%
What percentage of your clients do you think use the internet to look for health info about their pets?	1%	13%	29%	39%	18%
What percentage of your clients discuss the pet health information they find on the internet with you?	17%	38%	30%	12%	3%
Among your clients who access the internet for pet health information, what Percentage do you feel understand what they read online?	8%	14%	30%	42%	6%
Among your clients who access the internet for pet health information, what percentage do you feel trust what they read online?					

**Table 1:** Veterinarians' responses to statements about clients' use and understanding of the internet (n=100).

The question “How often do you suggest specific websites (not including your clinics website) to clients” resulted in 28% stating less than once a month, 27% several times a month, 21% several times a week, 15% at least once a day, 3% many times a day and 6% never. Of 94 veterinarians who reported they do suggest website to clients, the majority either told clients the name and address of a particular website (31.9%), gave them a written copy of the website name and address (21.3%) or gave them both written and verbal instruction (17%) (See (Table 2) for a full breakdown).

Options	n	%
Give them a written copy of the websites name and address	20	21.3
Give them a written copy of the websites name and address, show them the website homepage on a computer at the veterinary clinic	2	2.1
Show them the website homepage on a computer at the veterinary clinic	8	8.5
Tell them the name or address of a particular website	30	31.9
Tell them the name or address of a particular website, give them a written copy of the websites name and address	16	17.0
Tell them the name or address of a particular website, give them a written copy of the websites name and address, show them the website homepage on a computer at the veterinary clinic	15	16.0
Tell them the name or address of a particular website, show them the website homepage on a computer at the veterinary clinic	3	3.2
Total	94	100

**Table 2:** Methods in which veterinarians recommend website to clients (n=94).

More veterinarians reported feeling that clients' use of the internet for pet health information has had a negative impact on the vet-client relationship (54%) compared to those who felt it has had a positive impact (37%). Furthermore, 40% of veterinarians stated that the pet health information on the internet has had a negative

impact on the health of companion animals, with 37% reporting a positive impact and the remaining 23% stating it has had no impact on companion animal health. Regarding time spent with a client, approximately half of respondents stated that the internet has had no impact on how much time they spent with clients (51%) with the remaining (49%) stating they have needed to spend more time with clients. No veterinarians felt that the internet had reduced the amount of time they need to spend with clients.

## Discussion

This study found that most UK veterinarians feel their clients access the internet to find pet health information, yet often do not understand what they read online. This is a similar finding to [4] who found that for US veterinarians, 63.5% perceived that 0-40% of clients understand online information, compared to 73% in this study. Similarly, [4] found 62.9% of veterinarians perceived that between 41-80% of clients trusted what they read online compared to 72% in this study. Importantly, 40% of veterinarians stated that the internet has a negative impact on companion animal health. This compares to 23.1% of veterinarians in the U.S. that stated the internet had a negative impact on pet health [4]. The reasons for this response require further investigation.

Research on clients' actual use of the internet and their associated perceptions is a next logical step. The authors are conducting a follow up study investigating pet owners' self-reported behaviours and perceptions. Overall, this small scale study found mixed opinions regarding veterinarians' perceptions of their clients' use of the internet and the potential impact it has on the client-veterinarian relationship. Many comments by respondents spoke to concerns they have about the potential negative impact of the internet, an area which has recently been highlighted. For example, one respondent stated, “Online misinformation is a major cause of stress and frustration to myself & colleagues” whilst another veterinarian stated that “Most clients who do bring their internet results/searches up are at this stage looking for professional confirmation at this stage. I believe this may become more of a challenging scenario with time”. In contrast, positive

aspects were also noted with a respondent stating, "I find that Dr. Google is sometimes a very useful tool in supporting my advice and helps the client understand sometimes complex problems at their leisure"

It is important to highlight the limitations of this study including small sample size and method of distribution. The use of online sources to obtain participants might have impacted the type of respondents and their views and familiarity with the internet.

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