

A HEALTHY PRACTICE ENVIRONMENT IS NOT EASILY MAINTAINED, BUT RESEARCH SHOWS THAT OPEN, FREQUENT, HONEST COMMUNICATION IS CRUCIAL FOR CREATING A TOXIC-FREE WORKPLACE.



# Creating a Toxic-Free Practice Environment

**Jane R. Shaw, DVM, PhD**

**Lisa Hunter, LSW**

Colorado State University  
College of Veterinary Medicine & Biomedical Sciences

Veterinary teams commonly face challenges in the practice, such as communication breakdowns, ambiguous roles, unrealistic goals, and unsustainable workloads. If any of these factors are not addressed, a toxic work environment can be created, leading to dissatisfied team members, incivility, turnover, fragmented client relations, and poor patient care.<sup>1</sup>



his article reviews research published in 2015 in *Frontiers in Veterinary Medicine*, titled “Exploring the Impact of Toxic Attitudes and a Toxic Environment on the Veterinary Healthcare Team.”<sup>1</sup> The researchers identified practical recommendations to put their findings into practice and optimize team performance.

### Toxic Attitudes

Toxic team attitudes include disrespect, resistance to change, lack of motivation, conflict-avoidance, chronic negativity, and desire to be the go-to person. Such mindsets negatively impact the team and result in relationship struggles, task conflicts, poor team performance, and decreased satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

### Toxic Environments

Toxic environments form when toxic attitudes become contagious and “when ‘broken communication and tension between staff members’ occur[s] because of underlying issues, including employees lacking the requisite confidence, skills, or knowledge; employees not feeling appreciated; difficulties coping with turnover; and dealing with conflicting demands.”<sup>1</sup> When team members feel helpless, frustrated, and angry, the workplace becomes more toxic.

## Resources

- Setting boundaries with managers, team members, & clients. Shaw J, Hunter L. *Veterinary Team Brief*. <http://veterinaryteambrief.com/article/setting-boundaries>
- Tips for team communication. Shaw J, Hunter L. *Veterinary Team Brief*. <http://veterinaryteambrief.com/article/tips-team-communication>

### Finding a Remedy

Toxic attitudes and a toxic environment negatively impact day-to-day team function. Addressing toxic attitudes to detoxify the environment is daunting, but an efficient, successful, satisfied team can be created by<sup>2</sup>:

- Maintaining effective communication
- Ensuring clear roles
- Setting achievable goals
- Divvying up the workload

### Crucial Communication

Toxic environments arise from failing to communicate expectations, ignoring incivility, and sending conflicting messages about workplace roles.<sup>1</sup> Clear communication is critical. (See **Open Communication**.)

### Clear Roles

Resentment among the team builds when team members are unaware of others’ roles and unsure of their own.<sup>1</sup>

Prevent resentment from building with these actions:

- Provide explicit roles, tasks, expectations, and a system of accountability to ensure firm guidelines and clarity and reduce conflicting demands on team members.
- Provide a copy of job descriptions and workplace procedures, and explain how each role fits into the team.
- Reinforce details in day-to-day conversations and during team meetings.
- Create a poster that maps out relationships and hang it in the team meeting room so individual team members can appreciate how their work impacts others.
- Review and update job descriptions as responsibilities change.

Understanding how the team works together enables buy-in and builds a stronger commitment to goals.<sup>3</sup>

### **Achievable Goals**

Unattainable goals and unreasonable expectations set team members up for failure, disappointment, and bitterness. When overloaded, team members feel like they cannot provide “the level of client and patient service they wanted to, or were expected to.”<sup>1</sup> Having individual goals as well as team goals helps break the workload down to a manageable level.

Set goals during annual performance reviews and check in quarterly with team members to measure their progress. Take time with each team member to recognize accomplishments, redefine challenging goals, identify resources, and provide support.

### **Shared Responsibilities**

When team members see the benefits of sharing responsibilities and tasks, the focus shifts positively to the attributes each team member brings to the table. Share the positivity by highlighting examples of the team working well together, reading client comments at team meetings, voting on a team member of the month, offering prizes for nominating a team member who went above and beyond, or sending notes of appreciation.

### **From Toxic to Team-Focused**

A veterinary team’s effectiveness is maximized daily through action. The road to a healthy practice environment will be filled with detours, accidents, and flat tires, but maintaining frequent, open team communication, clarifying roles, and emphasizing sharing the workload detoxifies the practice environment and helps create a team that can meet any challenge. ■

## **Open Communication**

To be effective, provide frequent, timely, accurate communication focused on problem-solving,<sup>4</sup> including in-the-moment check-ins with individual team members.

- **FREQUENT** check-ins open communication channels, engage team members, let them be heard, and provide a quick litmus test to gauge where individuals are in relation to the team.

*Good morning, Marsha. I wanted to take a minute to check in with you to see how you feel things are going this week.*

*David, I noticed you appeared upset after that last client. Let’s take a minute to chat about that consultation.*

- **TIMELY** communication means tackling each situation as it occurs or shortly after.

*Team, I called this meeting because I overheard some grumbling about workload. I hope by addressing this head-on as a team, we can work together to come to a mutual understanding.*

*David, I am doing my best to follow protocol and procedures. I am confused when I tell the clients one thing and then you tell them something completely different. Can we work together to make this more clear for me so I can make sure our clients and patients receive the best care?*

- **ACCURATE** communication involves putting feelings and emotions that color the conversation aside and providing upfront, honest, mindful, and factual information.

*I was upset yesterday when I heard you telling Dr. Ames you could not be bothered with veterinary nurse work. I want to understand where you are coming from so we can work through this.*

*I have heard gossip about the new hiring process, and I want to share the facts with the team, answer any questions, and quell any rumors.*

- **COMMUNICATION** focused on problem-solving capitalizes on the team’s strengths and talents rather than nitpicking, finger pointing, or dwelling on the problem.

*Team, our main goal is patient care and client satisfaction. How can we achieve these goals when we are arguing over whose job it is to clean up before clocking out? I hope we can discuss this as a team and work out a solution so we can all leave in a timely manner.*

**References**

1. Moore IC, Coe JB, Adams CL, Conlon PD, Sargeant JM. Exploring the impact of toxic attitudes and a toxic environment on the veterinary healthcare team. *Front Vet Sci.* 2015;2(78):1-9.
2. Grumbach K, Bodenheimer T. Can health care teams improve primary care practice? *JAMA.* 2004;291(10):1246-1251.
3. Mickan S, Rodger S. Characteristics of effective teams: a literature review. *Aust Health Rev.* 2000;23(3):201-208.
4. Gittell JH. New directions for relational coordination theory. In: Cameron KS, Spreitzer GM, eds. *Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; 2011:74-94.



**TEAM TAKEAWAYS**

**Veterinarians:** Promote understanding of every team member's role and how the team works together to ensure buy-in and create a healthy workplace.

**Management Team:** Make sure team members have both individual and team goals; check in regularly to measure progress, address challenges, and provide support.

**Nursing Team:** Addressing challenges in a timely manner is important; for example, if a team member is upset, talk to him or her as soon as possible before frustration spreads.

**Client Care Team:** Understand how sharing positivity benefits the whole team and pass along examples of team members who go above and beyond with clients and patients.

# Heartgard® Plus

(ivermectin/pyrantel)

**CHEWABLES**

**CAUTION:** Federal (U.S.A.) law restricts this drug to use by or on the order of a licensed veterinarian.

**INDICATIONS:** For use in dogs to prevent canine heartworm disease by eliminating the tissue stage of heartworm larvae (*Dirofilaria immitis*) for a month (30 days) after infection and for the treatment and control of ascarids (*Toxocara canis*, *Toxascaris leonina*) and hookworms (*Ancylostoma caninum*, *Uncinaria stenocephala*, *Ancylostoma braziliense*).

**DOSAGE:** HEARTGARD® Plus (ivermectin/pyrantel) should be administered orally at monthly intervals at the recommended minimum dose level of 6 mcg of ivermectin per kilogram (2.72 mcg/lb) and 5 mg of pyrantel (as pamoate salt) per kg (2.27 mg/lb) of body weight. The recommended dosing schedule for prevention of canine heartworm disease and for the treatment and control of ascarids and hookworms is as follows:

Dog Weight	Cheewables Per Month	Ivermectin Content	Pyrantel Content	Color Coding On Foil Backing and Carton
Up to 25 lb	1	68 mcg	57 mg	Blue
26 to 50 lb	1	136 mcg	114 mg	Green
51 to 100 lb	1	272 mcg	227 mg	Brown

HEARTGARD Plus is recommended for dogs 6 weeks of age and older. For dogs over 100 lb use the appropriate combination of these chewables.

**ADMINISTRATION:** Remove only one chewable at a time from the foil-backed blister card. Return the card with the remaining chewables to its box to protect the product from light. Because most dogs find HEARTGARD Plus palatable, the product can be offered to the dog by hand. Alternatively, it may be added intact to a small amount of dog food. The chewable should be administered in a manner that encourages the dog to chew, rather than to swallow without chewing. Chewables may be broken into pieces and fed to dogs that normally swallow treats whole.

Care should be taken that the dog consumes the complete dose, and treated animals should be observed for a few minutes after administration to ensure that part of the dose is not lost or rejected. If it is suspected that any of the dose has been lost, redosing is recommended.

HEARTGARD Plus should be given at monthly intervals during the period of the year when mosquitoes (vectors), potentially carrying infective heartworm larvae, are active. The initial dose must be given within a month (30 days) after the dog's first exposure to mosquitoes. The final dose must be given within a month (30 days) after the dog's last exposure to mosquitoes.

When replacing another heartworm preventive product in a heartworm disease preventive program, the first dose of HEARTGARD Plus must be given within a month (30 days) of the last dose of the former medication.

If the interval between doses exceeds a month (30 days), the efficacy of ivermectin can be reduced. Therefore, for optimal performance, the chewable must be given once a month on or about the same day of the month. If treatment is delayed, whether by a few days or many, immediate treatment with HEARTGARD Plus and resumption of the recommended dosing regimen will minimize the opportunity for the development of adult heartworms.

Monthly treatment with HEARTGARD Plus also provides effective treatment and control of ascarids (*T. canis*, *T. leonina*) and hookworms (*A. caninum*, *U. stenocephala*, *A. braziliense*). Clients should be advised of measures to be taken to prevent reinfection with intestinal parasites.

**EFFICACY:** HEARTGARD Plus Chewables, given orally using the recommended dose and regimen, are effective against the tissue larval stage of *D. immitis* for a month (30 days) after infection and, as a result, prevent the development of the adult stage. HEARTGARD Plus Chewables are also effective against canine ascarids (*T. canis*, *T. leonina*) and hookworms (*A. caninum*, *U. stenocephala*, *A. braziliense*).

**ACCEPTABILITY:** In acceptability and field trials, HEARTGARD Plus was shown to be an acceptable oral dosage form that was consumed at first offering by the majority of dogs.

**PRECAUTIONS:** All dogs should be tested for existing heartworm infection before starting treatment with HEARTGARD Plus which is not effective against adult *D. immitis*. Infected dogs must be treated to remove adult heartworms and microfilariae before initiating a program with HEARTGARD Plus.

While some microfilariae may be killed by the ivermectin in HEARTGARD Plus at the recommended dose level, HEARTGARD Plus is not effective for microfilariae clearance. A mild hypersensitivity-type reaction, presumably due to dead or dying microfilariae and particularly involving a transient diarrhea, has been observed in clinical trials with ivermectin alone after treatment of some dogs that have circulating microfilariae.

**Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children.**

In case of ingestion by humans, clients should be advised to contact a physician immediately. Physicians may contact a Poison Control Center for advice concerning cases of ingestion by humans.

Store between 68°F - 77°F (20°C - 25°C). Excursions between 59°F - 86°F (15°C - 30°C) are permitted. Protect product from light.

**ADVERSE REACTIONS:** In clinical field trials with HEARTGARD Plus, vomiting or diarrhea within 24 hours of dosing was rarely observed (1.1% of administered doses). The following adverse reactions have been reported following the use of HEARTGARD: Depression/lethargy, vomiting, anorexia, diarrhea, mydriasis, ataxia, staggering, convulsions and hypersalivation.

**SAFETY:** HEARTGARD Plus has been shown to be bioequivalent to HEARTGARD, with respect to the bioavailability of ivermectin. The dose regimens of HEARTGARD Plus and HEARTGARD are the same with regard to ivermectin (6 mcg/kg). Studies with ivermectin indicate that certain dogs of the Collie breed are more sensitive to the effects of ivermectin administered at elevated dose levels (more than 16 times the target use level) than dogs of other breeds. At elevated doses, sensitive dogs showed adverse reactions which included mydriasis, depression, ataxia, tremors, drooling, paresis, recumbency, excitability, stupor, coma and death. HEARTGARD demonstrated no signs of toxicity at 10 times the recommended dose (60 mcg/kg) in sensitive Collies. Results of these trials and bioequivalency studies, support the safety of HEARTGARD products in dogs, including Collies, when used as recommended.

HEARTGARD Plus has shown a wide margin of safety at the recommended dose level in dogs, including pregnant or breeding bitches, stud dogs and puppies aged 6 or more weeks. In clinical trials, many commonly used flea collars, dips, shampoos, anthelmintics, antibiotics, vaccines and steroid preparations have been administered with HEARTGARD Plus in a heartworm disease prevention program.

In one trial, where some pups had parvovirus, there was a marginal reduction in efficacy against intestinal nematodes, possibly due to a change in intestinal transit time.

**HOW SUPPLIED:** HEARTGARD Plus is available in three dosage strengths (See DOSAGE section) for dogs of different weights. Each strength comes in convenient cartons of 6 and 12 chewables.

For customer service, please contact Merial at 1-888-637-4251.



©HEARTGARD and the Dog & Hand logo are registered trademarks of Merial.  
©2015 Merial, Inc., Duluth, GA. All rights reserved. HGD15PRETESTTRADEADS (01/16).