



Promote Mutual Understanding, Improve Client Compliance

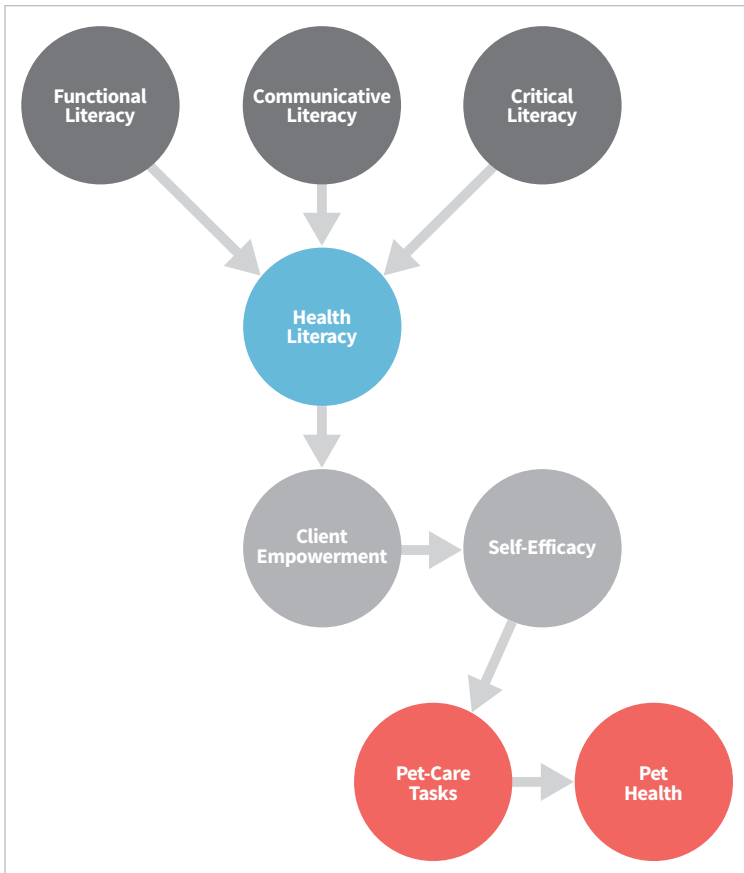
Jane R. Shaw, DVM, PhD

Lisa Hunter, LSW

Colorado State University
College of Veterinary Medicine
and Biomedical Sciences

Patients visiting their physician are often anxious and overwhelmed by the type and amount of information they receive, making it difficult for them to ask critical questions for clarification or discuss alternative treatment plans. Clients at a veterinary practice can experience similar emotions when trying to understand their pet's diagnosis and treatment options while also worrying about financial concerns and pet wellbeing.

Learning how to recognize clients' *health literacy* (ie, their ability to process medical information and make appropriate decisions¹) and adapt communication to individual clients alleviates client stress, promotes mutual understanding, and builds a strong client partnership.



▲ FIGURE 1 Adapted Health Literacy Model

Signs of Literacy Concerns³

- Not completing paperwork
- Completing forms incorrectly
- Not reading printed materials (eg, client surveys, handouts, discharge instructions)
- Making excuses for not reading (eg, *I have bad eyesight, I do not have my contacts in, I will read this later*)

Interpreting the Model

The Health Literacy Model proposed here was adapted from a human model used in patients with type 2 diabetes mellitus.² Fostering mutual understanding is a critical precursor to client compliance. The model consists of 8 components (see **Figure 1**) that can be divided into 3 steps:

- **Step 1:** Provide information at the clients' level of comprehension (ie, **functional literacy**), and equip clients to discuss (ie, **communicative literacy**) and use the information to make decisions (ie, **critical literacy**).
- **Step 2:** With strong **health literacy**, clients are empowered to take an active role in their pet's care (ie, **empowerment**) and make informed decisions, which helps them feel confident and competent about caring for their pet (ie, **self-efficacy**).
- **Step 3:** Clients are better able to approve diagnostic recommendations, choose treatment plans, and provide the nursing care their pet needs (ie, **pet-care tasks**). The end result is improved health for the pet (ie, **pet health**) and enhanced client satisfaction and compliance, team satisfaction, and practice performance.²

Fostering Understanding on Multiple Levels

Functional Literacy

Be mindful of making assumptions, and gauge clients' understanding by listening to the language they use and the questions they ask. When explaining diagnoses, treatments, or other information, observe verbal and nonverbal cues (see **Signs of Literacy Concerns**) to determine if clients are processing the information or becoming confused or overwhelmed. Stop periodically to assess clients' level of understanding. Use diverse educational

tools (eg, pictures, diagrams, models, videos) to support visual, tactile, and kinesthetic learning and decrease reliance on reading or auditory learning.¹

Communicative Literacy

Help clients understand the information so they can share it with other key decision-makers in the pet's life. Use plain language instead of medical jargon. Pause to allow clients time to process information, pose questions, or ask for clarification. Use various approaches to enforce learning (eg, articles, handouts, books, show-and-tell demonstrations, guided internet searches). Present information in chunks (ie, 1-3 sentences) and ask questions frequently to check client comprehension.² (See **Evaluating Comprehension**.)

Critical Literacy

Pose questions that promote the clients' ability to apply the information and encourage them to think out loud.³ (See **Applying Knowledge**.)

Client Empowerment

Raise clients' awareness of their pet's health concerns and empower them to take an active role in the animal's care by promoting their decision-making and advocacy for the pet. Create a partnership that encourages their involvement in the pet's care plan.⁴ Recognize clients' expertise and knowledge of their pet, and encourage them to pose questions and share their thoughts, opinions, and values. (See **Promoting Empowerment**.)

Self-Efficacy & Pet-Care Tasks

Self-efficacy is the clients' self-perception of their ability to complete pet-care tasks (eg, make diagnostic and treatment decisions). When the veterinary team recognizes the clients' assets, knowledge, and skills (eg, to administer medications, observe an incision,

Evaluating Comprehension

- *What questions do you have?*
- *What are your greatest concerns?*
- *How will you explain this to your family?*
- *How will you implement the plan at home?*

Applying Knowledge

- *What additional information do you need to consider these options?*
- *What do you see as the advantages and disadvantages?*
- *What are the most important factors for you to make this decision?*
- *What do you need to take into account?*

Promoting Empowerment

- *How have you made important pet-care decisions in the past?*
- *What do you see as the best option for Max?*
- *What is most important to you?*
- *You know Max best—how do you think he will respond?*

Recognizing Client Competence

- *You take the very best care of Max.*
- *It is going to be hard at first, but I know you can do it.*
- *Look at how much progress you have made.*
- *Max is doing so well, thanks to you.*

care for a bandage), clients feel assured they can follow through with their pet's prescribed care plan.⁵ Provide compliments, words of reassurance, and support. (See **Recognizing Client Competence**, page 39.)

Pet Health

Empowering clients enables them to provide proper at-home care for their pet, which enhances pet health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Engaging and partnering with clients in their pet's healthcare helps build client confidence. Clients who clearly understand their pet's health are better equipped to make decisions about treatment options and provide appropriate continuing care. The Health Literacy Model

TAKE ACTION

- 1 Assess clients' level of understanding and tailor communication to strengthen the veterinary team-client partnership and enhance clients' confidence in caring for their pet.
- 2 Avoid medical jargon, present information in 1- to 3-sentence chunks, use diverse educational tools, and encourage clients to ask questions and make suggestions. Compliance is improved when clients feel empowered.

is a component of an effective communication strategy that promotes the formation of a positive partnership between veterinary team members and clients. ■

References

1. Silverman J, Kurtz S, Draper J. *Skills for Communicating With Patients*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Radcliffe Publishing; 2005:165-166, 189.
2. Silverman J, Kurtz S, Draper J. *Skills for Communicating With Patients*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Radcliffe Publishing; 2005:158-159, 163.
3. Silverman J, Kurtz S, Draper J. *Skills for Communicating With Patients*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Radcliffe Publishing; 2005:70-97.
4. Silverman J, Kurtz S, Draper J. *Skills for Communicating With Patients*. 2nd ed. Oxford, UK: Radcliffe Publishing; 2005:166-198.
5. Kanji N, Coe JB, Adams CL, Shaw JR. Effect of veterinarian-client-patient interactions on client adherence to dentistry and surgery recommendations in companion-animal practice. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2012;240(4):427-433.



LISA HUNTER, LSW, an alumna of Colorado State University, is an advocate of the human-animal bond and veterinary-client communication and is an interim clinical counselor for The Argus Institute at Colorado State University.

FUN FACT: A Colorado native, Lisa lives in Fort Collins with her husband, children, dogs, chickens, and one mischievous rabbit.



JANE R. SHAW, DVM, PhD, is an associate professor of Veterinary Communication for Professional Excellence at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences. She is a recognized expert in veterinarian-client-patient interactions. Jane implements the communication curriculum at CSU and conducts skills-based communication workshops nationally and internationally.

FUN FACT: Jane's grandmother was one of the ladies in the Wendy's "Where's the Beef?" commercial.

Recognize clients' expertise and knowledge of their pet, and encourage them to pose questions and share their thoughts, opinions, and values.