

CREATING CLIENT CODES OF CONDUCT

Cyndie Courtney, DVM
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Customer rudeness has continued to worsen through the pandemic.¹ Rudeness is particularly problematic because it is contagious able to spread throughout the team, impairing teamwork, and in medical settings negatively impacting patient care.² Even the perception of incivility can start this destructive cycle.³ To make things more difficult, what is perceived as rude is dependent on cultural, contextual, and individual interpretations.

Working in medical practices day in and day out, medical professionals can take the social norms of the profession or individual practice for granted. Clients however are likely to experience more uncertainty. Even when receiving human medical care, patients may not completely understand their medical rights such as the right to informed consent, to decline care, or to be informed of conflicts of interest.⁴ Real and perceived gaps in knowledge and power can fuel clients' anxiety and uncertainty. Uncertainty and miscommunication can fuel conflict.

To make things more complicated, what is consider “normal” between human and veterinary practices, between veterinary practices, and even between clinicians in a single practice, varies greatly. Some practices take emergency on call, while others refer all emergencies to the local ER. Appointment length can vary significantly by practice and by appointment type. Even within practices some doctors may be more flexible when it comes to seeing late appointments or giving discounts.

Fortunately, because norms depend on context, practices can use guidelines to help provide that context to clients. In human healthcare patient rights and responsibilities documents for this purpose. They let people know what behaviors are and are not okay as well as how they can expect to be treated.

Some practices have started by at least letting clients know which behaviors will not be tolerated – such as any verbal or physical harassment or violence toward their team members. However, mutual guidelines may help more effectively establish mutual trust.

How to Write a Code of Conduct

1. Brainstorm (Fig 1.)
 - a. What are the top three things your practice wishes clients would stop doing?
 - b. What are the top three things you think clients wish your practice wouldn't do?
(Struggling to come up with ideas? Professional standards were written to address clients' fears and concerns. You're probably meeting those standards already. Check out the following for ideas:)
 - i. Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the CVMA
 - ii. AAHA Standards of Accreditation
 - iii. Your Provincial Veterinarians Act
2. Rewrite examples as positive requests (Fig 2.) – Rewrite the ideas you came up with as “What we'll ask of you” or “What you can ask of us”
3. Write out the “Why” behind this request. (Fig 3.)
4. Make it mutual (Fig 4.) – Balance out each side. Consider the underlying need and ask how the other side can help as well.

5. Format
 - a. Keep the document short, professional, and easy to read. Use simple lists or a table. Try to keep it to a single page which more likely to be read and easier to post around the practice. Do not make it longer than 2 pages (1 page front and back.) Add your hospital letterhead and use a standard font.
 - b. Insist on something longer? Provide a summary to clients and allow them to request the longer version.
 - c. Do NOT provide a place for clients to consent or sign. This is not intended to create a contract with clients.
6. Legal Review – Because local laws can vary, get professional legal advice before using the document.
7. Using the Document
 - a. Presenting it to clients
 - i. Distribute to clients digitally at launch and then provide in person at their next appointment. It is normal for clients to express sympathy for the incidents they rightly suspect led to you writing the code of conduct.
 - ii. When introducing the document, especially to new clients, have team members review the key points out loud and even emphasize them with pen or highlighter.
 - iii. Post the document in your practice as well as on your practice website. This helps clients know what you expect and may help you attract clients who are in line with your practice values.
 - b. When clients violate the code
 - i. It is impossible to prevent all bad behavior. Some clients will not read this, may forget it, may not understand it, or feel their situation justifies breaking it. The goal is to help team members identify and respond to problems faster. Being able to connect the value behind the policy can also help stay ahead of conflicts.
 - ii. It is usually appropriate to give clients a warning and chance to make amends before ending the client relationship entirely. Repeated violations of the code of conduct indicate the client’s expectations are a better fit with another practice. Follow local law for terminating the VCPR professionally.

Examples:

Fig 1. Brainstorm

Things for clients to stop doing	
Being persistently late or not showing up for their appointments	
	Things for the practice to stop doing
	Leaving clients uncertain of how to receive timely emergency care

Fig 2. Rewrite as requests:

What we’ll ask of you	
To inform us 24 hours of any canceled appointment, to reschedule your appointment if you are more than 15 minutes late, or if missing over 3 appointments to leave a deposit to secure an appointment slot.	

	What you can ask of us
	We will provide an after-hours triage number. An easy to find link on our website will connect you to our local emergency hospital. Our answering machine will provide emergency contact information. We will provide a magnet with emergency hospital contact information.

Fig 3. Provide the why

What we'll ask of you	
To inform us 24 hours of any canceled appointment, to reschedule your appointment if you are more than 15 minutes late, or if missing over 3 appointments to leave a deposit to secure an appointment slot.	
So patients can get urgent medical care outside of normal business hours	
	What you can ask of us
	We will provide an after-hours triage number. An easy to find link on our website will connect you to our local emergency hospital. Our answering machine will provide emergency contact information. We will provide a magnet with emergency hospital contact information.

Fig 4. Make it mutual

What we'll ask of you	What you can ask of us
To provide timely care to our patients and clients	
To inform us 24 hours before of any canceled appointment, to reschedule your appointment if you are more than 15 minutes late, or if missing over 3 appointments to leave a deposit to secure an appointment slot.	To inform you by phone or text if we know our clinicians are running 15 minutes or more behind schedule so you can reschedule if needed.
So patients can get urgent medical care outside of normal business hours	
Plan ahead to pay for emergency care by creating a pet savings account or purchasing pet insurance.	We will provide an after-hours triage number. An easy to find link on our website will connect you to our local emergency hospital. Our answering machine will provide emergency contact information. We will provide a magnet with emergency hospital contact information.

References

¹ Westfall, Chris (19 November 2022). "Rudeness is Rampant, and Workers are Frustrated – Here's 5 Things Your Company Can Do About It." Forbes.

² Riskin et al. (2019) Incivility and Patient Safety: A Longitudinal Study of Rudeness, Protocol Compliance, and Adverse Events.

³ Pearson, Christine and Christine Porath. (2009) The Cost of Bad Behavior: How Incivility Is Damaging Your Business and What To Do About It. Portfolio.

⁴ American Hospital Association (21 Oct 1992) American Patient Rights Association. Accessed 24 March 2023. <https://www.americanpatient.org/aha-patients-bill-of-rights/>