Development of an animal welfare assessment scheme for use in companion animal veterinary clinics

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Veterinary care is important for ensuring animal health, but can also negatively impact patient welfare. To encourage optimal canine and feline welfare related to veterinary care, we aimed to develop a welfare assessment scheme for the clinic environment, similar to those that exist for agricultural species. To identify factors to be included, a variety of stakeholders, including animal welfare researchers and veterinarians, were consulted in a multi-stage survey. Through thematic analysis, pain management, behavioural health, and veterinarian-client communication emerged as overarching themes, each encompassing several assessable factors (e.g. pre-emptive analgesia for surgery, use of low-stress handling techniques, provision of training advice). These factors formed the basis of a draft assessment tool, incorporating questionnaires, interviews, and video observation of veterinary appointments. Through assessments in 30 veterinary clinics, reliability, validity, and feasibility were evaluated. This process revealed unique challenges, such as conducting a point assessment with little control over the patient's home life or previous experiences, making animal-based measures more complicated than in on-farm assessments. Intra-observer reliability was high throughout ($K_w \geq 0.80$), inter-observer reliability was highest for interviews ($K_w = 0.83, 0.73$ for pain; 0.82, 0.81 for behavioural health; 0.40, 0.44 for communication), and feasibility was high for interviews and questionnaires; however, responses given through interviews and questionnaires were often inconsistent with data from appointment observation, suggesting low validity. Overall, a mix of measurement types is required to achieve an optimal balance between reliability, feasibility, and validity. Further evaluation of alternative assessment techniques (e.g. veterinarian evaluation of staged encounters, real-time evaluation of analgesic protocols) is warranted to attempt improvements in validity.