

DEFLATE STRESSORS

ON-CALL

On-call time presents a challenge. SaskVets suggest you include on-call time as part of your work schedule. Being mentally prepared and having meals prepared is ideal. Choose activities that are flexible and allow you to get in much needed fun, but still allow you to respond as needed to your practice.

INTRUSIVE COMMUNICATION

There were some funny and not so funny anecdotes from SaskVets who found they were being barraged during their off-time by 'urgent' phone calls or persistent emailers. It seemed that everyone had at least one story about a client calling, texting or emailing to personal numbers or outside of business hours.

Having a practice policy about phone numbers and emails protects everyone. Business lines take messages and allow you to advise/refer in emergencies. You may work at a 24-hour practice- but you are not the practice.

Be up front about your limits – you have a right to them. Be perfectly clear in your own mind about why those limits are in place and abide by them yourself. Respecting a limit and the logic behind it is as important for you as it is for others. When you are confident in laying down a boundary, others will take their cue from you and respect it.

Train clients to respect your practice boundaries (phone calls, texting, emails, general availability) by being consistent and communicating these limits without guilt. One clinic has their policies framed and hanging proudly in the waiting area. This is a smart, friendly way to educate clients. Clients who transgress won't be caught off guard when you refer to them. They also give you an external reference point in confrontational situations. Can poorly behaved clients be 'fired'? Sask Vets at the wellness bistros agreed: poorly behaved /repeat offenders can indeed be fired.

All of that said, round-the clock availability is a persisting expectation that many clients have of rural veterinarians (and that many rural vets have of themselves). Turning off the phone at a specific time may not seem like a viable option. It's hard to refer to after hours or emergency services when you provide those services. Collaboration with other practitioners can effectively spread out the load (and despite what some people think, clients are very unlikely to leave their vet and go to a new one). Of course there will always be vet-hopping clients no matter what you do. It comes down to deciding how much is worth it to you to worry about/feel in control of.

ANGRY CLIENTS

People usually want to be heard, first and foremost, so listen. Repeat back to them what you are hearing to help them make clear what they are upset about. If they're angry, try not to take it personally.

How people express their angry feelings is not your concern (they may actually not even be angry with you/the clinic) unless or until their behaviour 'crosses the line'. If it does, you should act accordingly to affirm your clinic's codes of behaviour.

If their emotional behaviour is non-threatening, your job is to acknowledge and problem-solve. Try to empathize with the client and keep in mind that you're not meeting them on their best day. You never know what someone may be dealing with in their life, and a veterinary emergency certainly adds stress.

There's no benefit to making a client (or anyone) guilty in your mind- they are human and so are you. Having that perspective allows you to roll with mistakes, yours and others'. Stay positive by thinking about your unique ability to help someone during their time of need - not by buying into some sense of obligation to be a doormat.

NEGATIVE ONLINE COMMENTS

Limit the interactive use of social media. Your practice social media accounts are best used for to provide information, show fun photos and tell stories. Just like your website, social media perform the function of promoting your business and building a relationship with your community.

If you get a negative post from a client, respond to them privately by offering a phone call and/or meeting and then delete the post. **DO NOT ENGAGE WITH CLIENTS IN A PUBLIC FORUM.**

YOU'VE MADE A MISTAKE

Medical mistakes are going to happen, but it's how you deal with them that determines how they impact your relationship with the client. Communication is critical, and most times an apology is what the client wants most and goes a long way in diffusing the situation. Tell them why the mistake occurred, and if possible, the steps you and the staff are going to take to ensure it won't happen again.

There is an additional factor, known as the 'second victim' condition¹, where clinicians involved in errors and other adverse events report feelings of shame, anger, failure, depression, inadequacy, and loss of confidence; some even report symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. If/when a mistake is made, the response a veterinarian or vet tech has will vary with the individual, but colleagues need to know that some type of reaction is normal and worthy of peer support. Sask Vets recommend giving yourself the gift of failure and recovery. Mistakes happen on the road to learning. Not a one of us is exempt from the process.

Interestingly, from a business perspective, your practice's efforts to make good on a mistake actually do more for its reputation than had the mistake never happened at all. It may seem counterintuitive, but it's true. People are actually more loyal to a business they know cares about its clients and patients than a business that has all perfect reviews. Why? Because it's authentic.²

1. Second Victims: Support for Clinicians Involved in Errors and Adverse Events

Patient Safety Network Primer <https://psnet.ahrq.gov/primers/primer/30/second-victims-support-for-clinicians-involved-in-errors-and-adverse-events>

2. Enhancing Public Perception of the Veterinary Profession (seminar, Feb 24, 2018; Edmonton AB) Dr Kyle Murray, Vice Dean, Alberta School of Business