



Dealing with unhappy clients

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The evolution of Social Media has changed the world in many ways. Information and misinformation can be spread at lightning speed. In his March 31 address to the veterinary and social work faculty and students of WCVM and University of Regina, Police Chief Clive Weighill discussed the inherent risks of communicating via social media and encouraged members of the veterinary and social work communities to be prepared to react quickly and decisively should the need arise.

Don't underestimate the public's reaction to animals. Animal injury or neglect stories seem to get more attention than human tragedy, explained Chief Weighill in his presentation entitled "Dealing with the Dissatisfied Client in the Age of Social Media".

It is an unfortunate truth that people will choose to say things anonymously on Social Media that they would not say face to face. Negative, damaging, or untrue messages can be posted with little or no legal recourse. Once a piece of information, regardless of validity, is "out there", it is hard to control and impossible to bring back. Fortunately, the Police Chief had some excellent tips to minimize damage and de-escalate the hype.

He suggests getting ahead of the game and addressing any complaints posted on social media websites immediately. To ignore a complaint fuels peoples' imaginations and they may suspect that you have something to

hide. Acknowledge there is an issue. Let the public know that you are investigating the complaint and that you will get back to them. We all know that sometimes bad things can happen. If something has gone wrong, admit it and assure people that you are taking it seriously and taking the necessary steps to prevent it from happening again. There is much more strength in facing the issue, addressing it and moving on.

The Chief of Police advised veterinarians and social workers who use Social Media to understand the purpose of their electronic messages and to pay attention to the tones they express, for the very important reason that the recipient cannot read the sender's facial expression or body language. Always be respectful and follow your profession's code of ethics.

In dealing with irate or mentally unstable people (for example, substance abusers), Chief Weighill explained, communication can be challenging and logical reasoning may be problematic. If that is the case, be cautious and careful. Patience and a level head are always the right strategy. More often than not, an emotionally charged situation can be resolved simply by listening. Most people are calmer when they feel their concerns are heard and respected.

However, if a threat is felt, you have the option to call the police. Police officers can often diffuse a charged situation by their mere presence, and they have quick access to

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mental health care professionals if necessary. (It is worth saying that it is rare for police to be called to cases involving veterinarians.)

For more information about dealing with dissatisfied clients and social media implications, see the WCVM Veterinary Social Work Initiative Committee's podcast of Chief Weighill's presentation at <http://words.usask.ca/wcvm/2014/04/police-chief-addresses-cyberbullying>.