

# CLIENT COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH A DEI LENS

## TOPIC OVERVIEW

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## AWARENESS

### What do client communications look like through a DEI lens?

Our goal is to create a client visit experience that acknowledges and respects the needs of our diverse clientele. We should examine our communication processes from a DEI perspective at the four critical junctions of a visit — appointment scheduling, intake, clinical exam, and discharge — and make accommodations that improve patient care and the overall client experience.

## UNDERSTANDING

### Key take-home messages.

- 1 Present treatment options that you think are best for the patient without prejudging the client’s ability to pay for the services.**
- 2 From patient intake to discharge, ensure appropriate communication options are in place to meet the needs of your diverse clientele.** Consider communication accommodations for visually or hearing impaired clients and translation abilities for common languages within your community.
- 3 Educate yourself on the etiquette and cultural norms of your client population, which can allow you to communicate in the most welcoming and accurate way.** We have a responsibility as healthcare providers to ensure a communication barrier has not prevented us from providing highest quality care and building trust with our clients.

## TRANSFORMATION

### Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients and community.

- 1** Audit all client forms and develop translatable versions and add audio capabilities.
- 2** Connect with a community group or organization that can assist your team with cultural norms and etiquette training.
- 3** Work on being less judgmental. When you encounter a situation with someone where you recognize you may be passing judgment, also focus on practicing curiosity, compassion and empathy.
- 4** If you have observed clients with visual impairments or physical disabilities struggling with navigating any area of your workplace, suggest improvements.

## TOPIC ESSAY

# Improving Client Communications and Experience from Intake through Discharge

According to the most recent US Census, America will become a minority-majority by 2045. The age group of 18–29-year-olds will see this as soon as 2027 (Frey, 2018). Diversity in our communities is increasing. We need to focus on our ability to provide veterinary healthcare to best serve the variety of diverse pet owners in our hospitals.

How do we ensure every client who comes to the clinic benefits from good communication skills so that they feel welcome? Do we invest in training our teams to communicate well without unconscious biases while providing empathy? Communication is based on a shared understanding, and we need to ensure that we are taking the time to understand our clients and their needs, not just the needs of their pets.

It's important to make certain that each one of our clients can communicate with the healthcare team about the needs of their pet. Providing services for language interpretation, as well as for the hearing impaired is valuable and should be incorporated into our business models. Whether it's the use of a digital app such as Google Translate or clinic brochures in languages commonly seen in your clientele, we need to have a solution to communication barriers. Depending on your area and the demographic of clients, you may need to have multiple language versions of your most used brochures and forms. Having a plan in place for visually impaired clients is also something that should be considered.

It can be particularly difficult to know whether every client understands the information and questions that the healthcare team is conveying to them, especially if there's a language or impairment barrier. Incorporating virtual modalities so that we can speak to family members who may not be present but can aid during the visit is a great option. Virtual options and telehealth allow the medical team to gather accurate and well-understood information as well as to make certain the client understands the recommendations for quality medicine, including financial obligations. We have a responsibility as healthcare providers to ensure that we can treat each patient with the best care possible knowing that a communication barrier has not gotten in our way.

In addition to taking into consideration language barriers and disabilities, educating our teams about cultural norms and differences should be included in hospital training protocols. Cultural etiquette can be difficult to navigate, but it allows us to provide better care and avoid misunderstanding. Research the demographics of your community to identify the variety of nationality, ethnic, and religious groups that you see daily in your practice. Having a member of these communities meet with your teams to discuss their culture and what is comfortable for them can be beneficial.

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For example, eye contact in different cultures means very different things. As a medical team, many times we interpret eye contact as a sign of active listening and a lack of it as disengagement or lack of interest. To Chinese, Muslim, and Navajo people, making direct eye contact means something very different, and it is part of their cultural differences (Galanti, 2000).

Let's take some time to walk through the steps of a client's experience in our hospital and point out some specific areas where diversity, equity, and inclusion components should be considered. There are many more examples than what are discussed here. Following up with a team brainstorming session on areas of your specific hospital's workflow will prove beneficial.

When a client brings their patient to the hospital, standing and verbally greeting them with a hello, a wave, and sometimes even a handshake is commonplace. Ensuring that our greeting is understood is key; perhaps a simple change to "Hola," "Bonjour," or even "Konnichiwa." As important, we need to be knowledgeable of any of our clientele for whom a handshake may be inappropriate. Handshakes for Muslim women, the elderly, potentially arthritic clients, or clients with disabilities may need reconsideration (Hastings, 2010).

Presenting our new client forms in our most commonly seen languages is necessary. Having a digital form that you can send electronically to your clients that can be translated easily is a great option. Digital forms also have the ability to be read out loud on some devices, which is beneficial to clients who may struggle to see or even to write. Including inclusive identity options on your client forms should be considered so your team is aware of preferred pronoun use.

Be prepared when entering the exam room for your clinical assessment. Do you have a client with a disability that requires an extra-large examination room? Perhaps your exam rooms are equipped with lift tables that can be adjusted accordingly to best serve your client. Another option to consider is providing small tablets or electronic devices inside the exam rooms to aid in client communication.

Communication skills are key. Active listening and utilizing the right tone, pitch, and volume are all ways to ensure understanding and show empathy but when done incorrectly can be offensive. People tend to be empathetic toward those with whom they are similar. Remember to be aware of any unconscious bias you may have toward a type of client when communicating. Do not allow any preconceived notion you may have regarding a person's education level or ability to pay factor into your options given for care. Every patient deserves the best recommendation for medical care. Effective communication requires that we recognize that all clients are different. We provide individual care plans for our patients; are we offering individualized service to our diverse clients as well?

Once we have completed our visit and have provided the patient with the best care possible, the final step is to make sure that the client feels that all their expectations have been met. Does the client truly understand any at-home instructions or need for future visits? Getting verbal or written agreement from the client is important to ensure that the patient continues to be cared for after they leave your office. If you do not have information needed for the client in their native language or in a form that is easily accessible to them, let them know that you will find a version that will be easy for them to use. Having a list of medically relevant podcasts available for visually challenged clients is an option for your practice.

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Some of these visits may require extra time. Consider providing appropriate staff training for tolerance and critical thinking outside the norm. We need to appreciate the perspectives, values, and needs of our clients to make certain that we are comprehensive in our service to all our diverse client types.■

#### References

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## RESOURCES

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# CLIENT COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH A DEI LENS



We encourage you to consider the diverse communication needs of your clients. Here are some ideas you can implement at your workplace to serve your clientele more effectively.

Note: Although we are using examples of clients in a clinical setting, a client can also refer to anyone you interact with, such as a colleague, team member, and non-clinical client.

1. Provide translation options for languages commonly used by your clientele (for example, an app like Google Translate or translated printed brochures).
2. Provide language interpretation for the hearing impaired.
3. Plan how you will record information from a client who is visually impaired.
4. Plan and practice how your team will use virtual tools to speak to family members remotely during an appointment for clients with language or impairment barriers.
5. Research the demographics of your community (nationality, ethnicity, and religion).
6. Research etiquette and cultural norms of the community you serve.
7. Review how you greet guests when they come to the clinic. Is there a more welcoming way to address certain demographics in your workplace?
8. Create digital forms that can be easily translated or automatically read aloud.
9. Consider inclusive identity options on your forms and use clients' indicated pronouns.
10. Audit your workplace to make as much space as possible to increase accessibility.
11. Consider providing tablets or electronic devices in the exam room to aid in client communication.
12. Review active listening, tone, pitch, and volume as a team to encourage understanding and empathy without being offensive.
13. Make a list of medically relevant podcasts as educational options for clients.
14. Discuss as a team that time requirements may be different for diverse clients.
15. Confirm your clients' understanding (verbally or in writing) of at-home instructions.