Reasonable Expectations

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Relationship Centered Care

In the world of human medicine two major styles of communication exist between physicians and their patients. They are referred to as "relationship centered care" and "paternalistic care." The same terms can be applied to communication styles between veterinarians and their clients.

It is perfectly reasonable to expect relationship centered care from your veterinarian. Relationship centered care happens to be my "pet expectation" (pun intended) because, once fulfilled, satisfaction of all of the other expectations within the pages of this book will more naturally follow. Here is some information to help you understand

the differences between relationship centered and paternalistic care.

Veterinarians who practice relationship centered care hold their clients' opinions and feelings in high regard, and allow enough time during the course of an office visit or telephone conversation to hear them. They learn about the special role their patients play in the lives of their human families and acknowledge the level of emotional attachment. Vets who practice relationship centered care recognize that their responsibilities expand beyond their patients to include the emotional well being of their clients. They are willing to be a source of empathy and support. Vets who are oriented towards relationship centered care believe in collaborative decision-making. Rather than telling their clients what to do, they make recommendations, and then ask for feedback, questions, and concerns.

Veterinarians who communicate paternalistically tend to dominate the office visit interaction, providing little opportunity for client questions, discussion or collaboration. Paternalistic care providers purposefully maintain an emotional distance from their clients. They accomplish this by conveying little to no interest in their clients' feelings or their special relationships with their dogs. They provide their medical recommendations based on what *they* believe is

best for the patient without consideration of their clients' knowledge, experience, or feelings. Listen carefully for sentence starters such as, "If I were you I would.....," "You need to.....," "You have to....," or "You should......" Each phrase is a sure tip off that you are working with a veterinarian who communicates paternalistically.

I acknowledge that relationship centered care is not for everyone. Some people prefer that the professional involved be the decision maker (certainly the way I feel when my car is in need of repair). However, if you prefer relationship centered care from your vet (or for that matter, your own physician), you owe it to yourself to settle for nothing else. Need some advice on finding such a veterinarian? I encourage you to read "Finding Dr. Wonderful and Your Mutt's Mayo Clinic" in Speaking for Spot.

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