

NEED FOR 'PARADIGM SHIFT' IN DENTISTRY SAYS EXPERT

ONLY four per cent of animals undergoing operative dental treatment were initially taken to the vets for an oral problem, according to a veterinary dental expert speaking at the British BSAVA Congress.

Norman Johnston, a European and American expert in veterinary dentistry based at Dental Vets in North Berwick, delivered two lectures at the congress, which took place at Heriot-Watt University. The sessions focused on feline chronic

report by
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gingivo-stomatitis (FCGS) and top tips in dentistry.

In the top tips session, Mr Johnston attributed owners' ignorance of pets' dental problems to a lack of awareness of the pain they may be suffering and not examining their mouths for problems.

He said: "We know that of

those animals that become dental patients, only about four per cent arrived with an owner history that there's something wrong orally. The reason for this is people are not looking in their animal's mouth and animals don't give any signs. Consequently, you have an uphill struggle to make a client believe a dental procedure is necessary."

More empathy

In relation to the vet's role in educating owners about the pain experienced by animals, he also said: "What does it feel like for an animal to have a big ulcer, a broken tooth or a toothache? We should be translating this for owners. The animals don't have to drive, go to work or use computers – if they're ill and unhappy they go and have a sleep. We need to have more empathy for what they experience. There needs to be a paradigm shift in how we look at dental pathology and deal with the consequences."

He added: "Every day I hear the view [from owners] that an animal looks fine and isn't in pain, but then we take a radiograph and see something that would have me crawling around on the floor unable to function. We see this all the time and these animals are not expressing the pain, but it doesn't mean they don't feel it. We have to be an advocate for the animals as an inability to communicate does not mean an absence of pain."

In his other session, Mr Johnston referred to FCGS research at the University of Glasgow, in which he has collaborated. He said: "The interesting thing about the research is they are not only using cultures, but they are using gene sequencing, which is expen-

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sive and difficult. The intention is to look for novel pathogens to give us an idea of what's going on in these cats' mouths. *Pasteurella multocida* appears to be a serious player in this condition."

Focusing on diagnosing FCGS, Mr Johnston also said: "It would be nice to have a complete blood count and a complete biochemistry, but if money's tight definitely go for the biochemistry because you really want to know how the cat will withstand, at the very least, anaesthesia for dental extractions."

"I would previously have said bacteriological culture wouldn't be useful, but having had some of the findings from Glasgow I would now consider it. It's something I would like to do rather than not do. Dental radiographs are essential for us. If these cats are not healing, we want to know why. If they have a mouth full of broken roots, they clearly are not going to heal."

Subtle changes

In relation to tooth extraction in extreme cases, he added: "If you delay elective tooth extraction, you sentence them to more pain, more inflammation and more difficulties. We know from peer review papers going back 15 years that if you take teeth out electively these cats improve markedly. Half of them need no further treatment at all."

Asked by *Veterinary Times*

to comment on the content of Mr Johnston's lectures, London and Northamptonshire-based referral vet Paul Hobson said: "I agree wholeheartedly with Mr Johnston's views on the expression of pain by the pets that we care for. Animals are their own worst enemies in this regard since their owners, and to a large extent their vets, expect them to express pain in the same way as we do. In my experience, the most common pain signs in dogs and cats are subtle behavioural changes that may not even be detected by the owner, or may be ascribed to getting older or 'slowing down'."

Commenting on Mr Johnston's presentations and applying the message more broadly, BSAVA president Andrew Aspinall said: "The main point is the difficulty of recognising pain in animals. This doesn't just apply to dental disease, but other chronically painful conditions, such as degenerative joint disease."

"We are getting much better at recognising the need to use perioperative analgesia and the benefits are clearly understood. Chronic pain is harder to recognise and, as Mr Johnston says, the animal may just choose to go to bed or avoid interaction. Educating owners about how to recognise pain and explaining the importance of tackling the underlying condition is an important role of the vet and VN."