

Problem-solving

A key aspect of providing excellent clinical care for patients is the ability to **effectively** solve problems.

Clinical problems are not always straightforward to solve, and animals may present with a number of different clinical signs. An employable vet will be able to collect and collate the information necessary to be able to solve these problems, and include consideration of the owner's circumstances when presenting options, **helping them make an informed decision.**

The information available to solve problems comes in the form of **history** given by the client and the **results** of physical examinations and diagnostic tests, alongside **observation** of the animal. Problems may need to be solved very quickly and decisively in an emergency situation, but during complex diagnoses problem-solving is often protracted and involves a number of different steps.

Not all problems that vets face are clinical in nature – vets also solve numerous problems during the day-to-day leadership of a clinical team or management of a veterinary practice. The good news is that **problem-solving skills are generic**, and it is likely that if you are an effective clinical problem solver you will also be able to manage non-clinical problems, such as managing staff or dealing with financial issues.

What they said

"It is important that I believe my vet knows what is best and will prompt me to make the right decision. I appreciate being given the option to choose, but I do appreciate hearing their personal decision, as if it were my vet's animal." (Client)

"In life or death situations, we need our vets to make quick, clinically effective decisions. We don't want our animals to suffer unnecessarily." (Client)

"Having [a] good problem-solving approach, so recognising when they don't know the answers to questions, and where to go, rather than having [answers] all on the top of their head ... so you have a new graduate who knows all of the answers, and you have someone who knows they don't know all the answers but has a really good way of working them out, I think they actually sit on an equal level in terms of value as a new graduate." (Employer)

"Good decision making and problem-solving skills instill a high degree of confidence that the practitioner is giving you the best advice in a particular situation." (Client)

How is effective problem-solving recognised?

Perceived by you:

- You can confidently apply your knowledge, skills and experience to solve complex medical problems
- You can logically and efficiently work through problems
- You can adapt to novel situations and 'think on your feet'
- You ask for, or establish, the correct information necessary to solve problems
- You are comfortable making decisions in the face of incomplete information
- You are calm and pragmatic in an emergency situation as you are able to quickly process information and make decisions

Perceived by others:

- Uses evidence in support of clinical reasoning
- Follows a logical process
- Can make timely decisions, without being paralysed by incomplete information
- Able to prioritise and triage
- Shows good judgment and 'common sense'
- Considers the "big picture" of client as well as patient factors when solving clinical problems
- Asks for help when required in order to progress through a complex situation

Why is effective problem-solving important to employability?

Employers reported that they found that if vets were able to solve problems effectively, this became an **enabler of other capabilities** such as resilience, by removing a key pressure. New graduates experience more **job satisfaction** if they are able to work through cases in a logical manner and come to a conclusion, involving the client and seeking help when required.

The VetSet2Go project found that clients require a vet to be able to work through whatever complex issues their animal has, and that in some situations where **immediate decisions** are required they wanted “straight talking” and decisive actions. However, on other occasions, where a number of options are the result of problem-solving, the process needs to be **slower and involve the client at all stages**, so that they can solve the problem together and get the right outcome for all. Employers benefit from this because the **client is more satisfied** and likely to return to the practice on another occasion. Good problem-solving skills engender a trusting relationship between client and vet.

“Well, you can see that there’s a thinking process going on ... that’s what we are looking for. You want them to say, “I’m thinking about this because, but ... and if this doesn’t work there are some other possibilities that I’m thinking of ...” (Employer)

“In very emotional emergency situations, where I do not have the opportunities to research and think about options, it is important that the vet is able to take more of a lead. Thinking outside the box is important as not all animals have read the text books!” (Client)

“Sometimes you can feel that you are being backed to a corner with only one solution to a problem which might involve more money than you can afford.” (Client)

“I think honesty should also come into problem-solving skills. I would much rather a vet referred me to a specialist in the field if they don't know what exactly is going on or have little knowledge in a specific area rather than having endless tests.” (Client)

Possible strategies to enhance your effective problem-solving

Develop a process:

Demonstrate methodical (but not rigid) thinking:

- Identify body systems involved, time and severity
- Decide what questions to ask and use a variety of resources to get answers, e.g. references, employer, specialists
- Carry out tests as appropriate to generate further information
- Bring the information and options to the client for a two-way discussion in order to reach the best possible outcome
- Write concise factual notes in the medical record that reflect your thought processes.

Develop the ability to triage:

Categorise what is critical to act on now and make decisive actions, communicating with your team and client as you go.

Apply common sense and be practical:

Use a calm and methodical approach. Common things occur frequently and so always place these high on differential lists until further information proves otherwise. Don't test for the sake of testing and communicate test choices to owners so that they are appraised of the financial options.

Think on your feet:

Often decisions will have to be changed as other issues arise – read the situation and recognize new problems in a dynamic fashion. Expect the unexpected and be ready for it.

Don't forget the big picture:

Always think holistically about the situation you are dealing with – animals usually have owners who may find certain options challenging from a financial or logistical perspective. The context of the animal is also important, e.g. production animals and antibiotic use. Step back as you problem-solve, and involve the owner at all stages.

Know your limitations:

When you cannot solve a problem, or think of the right way to approach a problem, it is important that you seek help from colleagues. Clearly explain the problems and invite their perspective – two heads are usually better than one.

Practice makes perfect:

The more cases you deal with, the more you will begin to recognize certain “patterns” in presentation. Whilst it is important not to jump to conclusions, these patterns will help you identify common presentations as you gain more experience.