Veterinarians have long understood the importance of effective communication in our profession. How can we say this with confidence? Because when veterinarians set out to hire veterinary associates, their first question of a referee is often, “Can the applicant talk to people? Will he/she do well with my clients? What are his/her people skills?” Ironically, although veterinarians understand the importance and necessity of communication skills to ensure successful practice, they have long considered learning these skills to be exercises in the “warm and fuzzy” or “touchy feely” category. Assigning such labels to the core skills that comprise effective communication may reflect the discomfort that we as veterinary professionals experience when examining how our interpersonal skills are perceived by others. Such labels may also create barriers to actively engaging in communication skills training. As a profession, we are eager to pursue the latest in “hard” science, eg, diagnostics and therapeutic techniques; however, the best diagnostic and treatment competencies fall short if the ability to relate to clients, colleagues, and staff is lacking. The importance of balancing what has been traditionally known as hard science with communication skills has been underscored since the publication of the KPMG and Brakke studies. These studies have highlighted the importance of integrating communication training throughout all levels of veterinary education. Moreover, there has been a preponderance of research evidence in human medicine that has demonstrated a strong correlation between communication and several healthcare outcomes, including satisfaction, adherence to treatment, malpractice risk, and diagnostic accuracy.
The results of these and other studies identify communication skills as a critical skill set that has been lacking in veterinary medical education. What was once considered a “soft” skill is now acknowledged as essential to providing high-quality clinical care for our clients and patients. This issue of the *Veterinary Clinics of North America* focuses on the role of communication in the practice of veterinary medicine. It is intended to identify essential communication tools, provide useful examples of how these tools can improve your practice in a variety of contexts, and offer suggestions for the use of such tools within the practice team. It is important to note that the editors and authors of this issue represent an array of disciplines, including veterinary nutrition, large and small animal surgery, critical care, exotic animal medicine, and large animal ambulatory practice. Also included among the authors are experts in the fields of social work, psychology, human medicine, and law—all specialists who work within veterinary settings or who collaborate closely with members of the veterinary profession. We believe that this multidisciplinary approach emphasizes the importance of communication and the need for collaborative approaches across our profession.

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