

Small animal consultations: is a diagnosis always reached?

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A diagnosis has been defined as ‘the label given to a disease with certain clinical or pathologic characteristics applicable to a particular case’. However in first opinion practice a definitive diagnosis may not always be reached, yet decisions on how to proceed still have to be made. The aim of this study was to determine the types and frequency of diagnoses made during small animal consultations in 8 practices. For each consultation, data were collected on all complaints discussed, the body system affected and the type of diagnoses made. Definitions including Definitive, Previous and Open diagnoses were developed to allow consistent categorisation across consultations. Data were collected over 9 weeks by direct observation of consultations. In total 1,015 consultations were observed involving 2,589 problems in 1,132 animals. For presenting problems, Previous diagnosis (27.3%) and No Diagnosis Required (38.4%) were most frequently recorded. Definitive diagnosis (7.0%) was rarely made. Diagnosis type varied with the body system affected, Definitive diagnoses were made for 67.5% of dental problems (n=160) but never reached during renal (n=17), endocrine (n=49) or neurological consultations (n=41). Open diagnoses were made most frequently for behavioural (71.2%; n=59) and least frequently for haemopoetic problems (0%; n=8). The high number of cases assigned to Previous diagnosis or No Diagnosis Required likely reflects the large proportion of caseload involving ongoing cases and preventive medicine. The low numbers of Definitive diagnoses suggests decisions are often made before a final diagnosis is reached, and it appeared that type of diagnosis varied with body system affected. Future work will examine the influence of other factors on the type of diagnosis made, and on the outcome of the consultation.