Have you faced a dilemma that you would like considered in a future instalment of Everyday Ethics? If so, e-mail a brief outline to inpractice@bva-edit.co.uk. We pay a small honorarium for contributions that are published.

Steve McCulloch’s approach to rejecting the use of flirtation with clients within veterinary practice is based on the risk of undesirable outcomes for the client, the patient, and/or the profession. This may lead us to think that flirtation could be acceptable, even useful, if it was found to improve patient outcomes or other important outcomes, especially if this benefit was over and above what could be achieved through genuine friendliness.

However, an alternative approach may be to consider how appropriate the human characteristic of flirtatiousness is for the veterinary professional – a virtue ethics approach. One of the difficulties of this approach is that it is not always easy to agree on the virtues of a good person, let alone a good vet. Trustworthiness, integrity, compassion, discernment and conscientiousness have been proposed as important virtues for medical professionals (Beauchamp and Childress 2001) and could be suitable for veterinary professionals too. It would be hard to see how flirtatiousness towards many clients, without any serious intentions, could accord with the need for trustworthiness. There is a recognition within this list of the need for attributes other than those that relate to interpersonal relationships in order to fulfil the professional role. The place of the other two of the 3Fs (friendliness and fun) are not stated explicitly in these virtues, but perhaps a true friend would display at least trustworthiness, integrity and compassion towards you. And, as having fun with children in veterinary settings was encouraged in the original discussion, can we not extend this beyond interactions with children, and bring a smile to the faces of those of all ages?

Reference

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