

# Common feline behaviour problems

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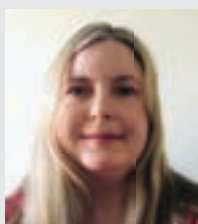


**A collaborative research project on veterinary professionals' understanding of common feline behaviour problems and use of 'cat-friendly' practices found that there is a need for formal training in these areas**

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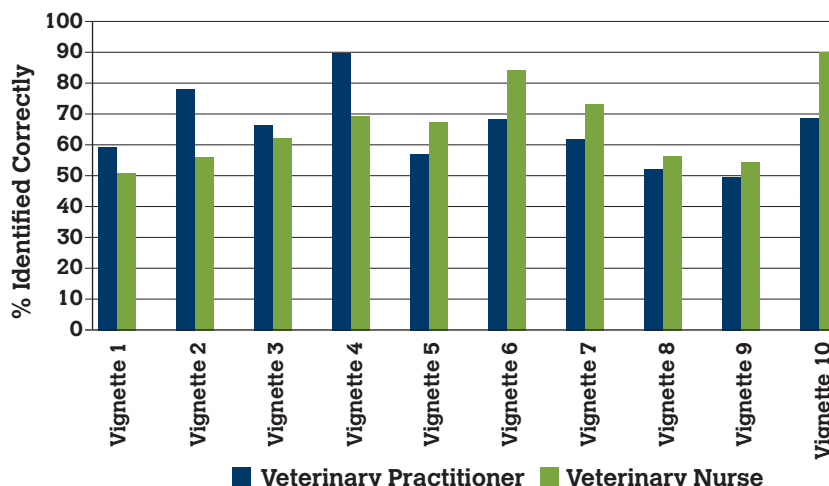
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This Summer Student Research Award project formed the third part of a series of studies designed to explore Irish veterinary professionals' educational needs in the area of veterinary behavioural medicine (VBM). The project aimed to assess veterinary professionals' ability to identify appropriate behavioural advice (advice that would promote a 'best outcome' for cats engaged in problem behaviours (Goins et al, 2019). A 'best outcome' was defined as a successful resolution of the behaviour problem without a negative impact on animal welfare (Shalvey et al, 2019). A second aim was to investigate the use of 'cat-friendly' initiatives in Irish veterinary practice (Goins et al, 2019).

## BACKGROUND

Veterinary professionals are frequently asked to provide advice on behaviour problems as part of feline healthcare (Golden and Hanlon, 2018). However, very few 'cat-friendly' practices are registered in Ireland (<https://catfriendlyclinic.org/cat-owners/find-a-clinic/>). In addition, many



**Figure 1.** Percentage of veterinary practitioners (n=42) and veterinary nurses (n=53) who identified likelihood of advice to support best outcome for the cat(s) for each vignette.

Irish veterinary professionals feel inadequately prepared for their role in VBM (Golden and Hanlon, 2018). However, no previous research has specifically investigated Irish veterinary professionals' knowledge gaps in feline behavioural medicine or the extent of their use of 'cat friendly' initiatives.

## METHODS

An online survey was designed, consisting of 21 questions spread across three sections (professional role and experience, scenarios of feline behavioural problems and 'cat friendly' practice management). Ten vignettes were included in the scenario section. Each of these presented advice given by a veterinary professional on a common feline behavioural problem:

1. Inappropriate toileting;
2. Spraying;
3. Destructive behaviour;
4. Self-mutilation;
5. Anxiety-child related;
6. Anxiety-moving home;
7. Fear-loud noises;
8. Fear-strangers;
9. Aggression-play related; and
10. Aggression-cat/cat resource-based aggression.

Vignettes 2, 3, 5, 6 and 10 were likely to lead to a best outcome, while vignettes 1, 4, 7, 8 and 9 were unlikely to do so. Participants were asked to rate the effectiveness of the advice (ie. its ability to promote a 'best outcome' for the cat) on a six-point scale. The third section of the survey gathered information on aspects of the respondents' practices that were likely to cause or alleviate distress in cats. The survey was published online via SurveyMonkey® and was open for responses between July 1, 2019 and July 22, 2019.

## RESULTS

Ninety-seven respondents completed the survey – 42 veterinary practitioners (VP) and 53 veterinary nurses (VN). Confidence in advising on feline behavioural problems ranged from 10% to 100%. The mean confidence levels were 61.5% for VP and 63.4% for VN. At least 50% of both VP and VN correctly categorised the likelihood of 'best outcome' for each vignette (see Figure 1). VPs were more successful than VNs in correctly categorising the advice for spraying (clean spray marks, apply feline synthetic pheromones, block neighbouring cat's vantage point



– likely to result in 'best outcome') and self-mutilation (only wrapping the area – unlikely to result in 'best outcome'). In contrast, VNs were more successful than VPs in correctly categorising the advice for aggression-cat/cat resource-based aggression (provide at least two litter trays for two cats). Many veterinary professionals supported the use of aversive training (use of a water gun for play-related aggression – 50% of VPs, 45.3% VNs) and an inappropriate approach to kitten socialisation (flooding for fear of strangers – 47.6% VPs, 43.4% VNs). The main 'cat-friendly' initiatives available at respondents' practices

were towels to cover cat carriers in the waiting area; cat-only wards; keeping a cat in the same cage for his/her entire stay; and allowing belongings or food to be brought in from home. Only a small proportion of respondents had access to a cat-only waiting room or consultation times and few used feline synthetic pheromones.

### DISCUSSION

Overall, Irish veterinary professionals lack confidence in feline VBM. In addition, many VPs and VNs supported the use of aversive training and flooding and these approaches may negatively affect feline welfare.

Some misunderstanding also remains about how to manage spraying, self-mutilation, and cat/cat resource-based aggression. This indicates that formal education in feline behavioural medicine would be a beneficial addition to veterinary curricula. Our study has also found that few veterinary practices offer 'cat friendly' environmental modifications (particularly in outpatient areas). Therefore, 'cat friendly' approaches need to be better promoted.

### CONCLUSIONS

Our findings indicate that Irish veterinary professionals would benefit from additional education in feline behaviour problems and in how to integrate 'cat-friendly' approaches into veterinary practice.

### REFERENCES

1. Goins M, et al. (2019) Anim. 9(12), 1112.
2. Shalvey E, et al. Ir. Vet. J. 72(1)
3. Golden O, Hanlon AJ. (2018) Ir. Vet. J. 71(12).

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