



**VCA Canada Chair in
Relationship-Centred Veterinary Medicine**
Annual Report 2022

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of GUELPH

VCA 
Animal Hospitals

IMPROVE LIFE.

THE FUTURE VIABILITY OF PRIMARY VETERINARY HEALTHCARE

“We’re excited by this collaboration with VCA Canada and appreciate your industry leadership in choosing to invest in this new Chair.”

The pandemic has laid bare many truths, including the challenge faced by our veterinary human resources to meet the increasing caseload and expectations of pet owners. Graduating more and more vets is not the only answer. It is only through multi-faceted research that addresses our multiple challenges that we will arrive at evidence-based solutions to enhance the wellness of veterinary staff, their clients and pets, and the future viability of veterinary practice.

Dr. Jason Coe, the VCA Canada Chair in Relationship-Centred Veterinary Medicine, will lead the way for veterinary medicine to join other human-service industries in the refinement of team functioning to improve coordination, staff wellness, and patient outcomes. He will continue to focus research on improving client communications to enhance adherence to veterinary advice and bolster the veterinarian-client relationship. Dr. Coe will also investigate the role that technology could play in reinforcing the direct-service experience and in the provision of virtual care, as well as the challenges in accessing veterinary care. What OVC required was financial investment and an industry partner who could enable the timing and scale of research to meet this moment with the prospect of positive change nation- and industry-wide.

We thank VCA Canada, as a subsidiary of Mars Veterinary Health, for being that partner, for your foresight and shared interests in the wellbeing of veterinary staff and the sustainability of veterinary practice.

Jeffery Wichtel
Dean, OVC



“ I am so grateful for the opportunity to serve as the VCA Canada Chair in Relationship-Centred Veterinary Medicine. ”

Equally important as the financial support, I am thankful for the access to VCA Canada teams and data that will help us unlock answers to many vexing questions you and the industry now face in the midst of an evolving veterinary profession.

Like most endeavors, the success of this research depends on attracting the right people and talent to support the Chair’s vision. In this report, I am pleased to introduce you to the initial team we have developed who are contributing to the foundational work of this Chair, as well as a number of graduates with whom I have recently collaborated. Chief among them is OVC Master of Science (MSc) and PhD graduate Dr. Natasha Janke, who will begin a Mitacs Elevate and VCA Canada-funded post-doctoral fellowship, in July 2022. In this role, Dr. Janke will spend 50% of her time with VCA Canada and 50% with our research team at the OVC. This position has been established to further support and enhance the collaboration between VCA Canada and OVC, with respect to Chair activities.

During her PhD, Natasha led several research projects, including her work as co-lead of an observational study involving more than 900 video-recorded veterinarian-client-patient interactions involving 60 veterinarians. It was an enormous undertaking that has contributed to several research projects examining various aspects of the veterinarian-client exchange. Insights from this work have added greatly to our understanding of the day-to-day relationships between veterinarians and clients, which in part informs our future research. Some of the findings from research associated with this large observational study and other work of the past year are highlighted in this report.



I am also excited as I look ahead to new areas of research exploration from PhD candidates Rosalie Fortin-Choquette, Catherine Groves, and Leandra Nogueira Borden, as well as the work of a second post-doctoral colleague, Dr. Katja Sutherland. Furthermore, we are all fortunate to benefit from the support of Research Assistant, Dr. Kirsten Blokland. I am proud of the research team we have established in the first year of the VCA Canada Chair, which represents a solid foundation for the Chair’s future success.

In this document, I share my vision and initial steps in laying the groundwork for research that will inform the veterinary profession, including VCA Canada. The VCA Canada Chair in Relationship-Centred Veterinary Medicine at OVC is currently founded on five avenues of research: Clinical communication; veterinary training; virtual care; accessing veterinary care; and team-based veterinary healthcare. Herein, we offer a glimpse of the recent and current investigations of our research team in these areas.

Thank you for your support in building this team and for recognizing that change based on clear supportive evidence minimizes risk and maximizes the return for the entire veterinary industry.

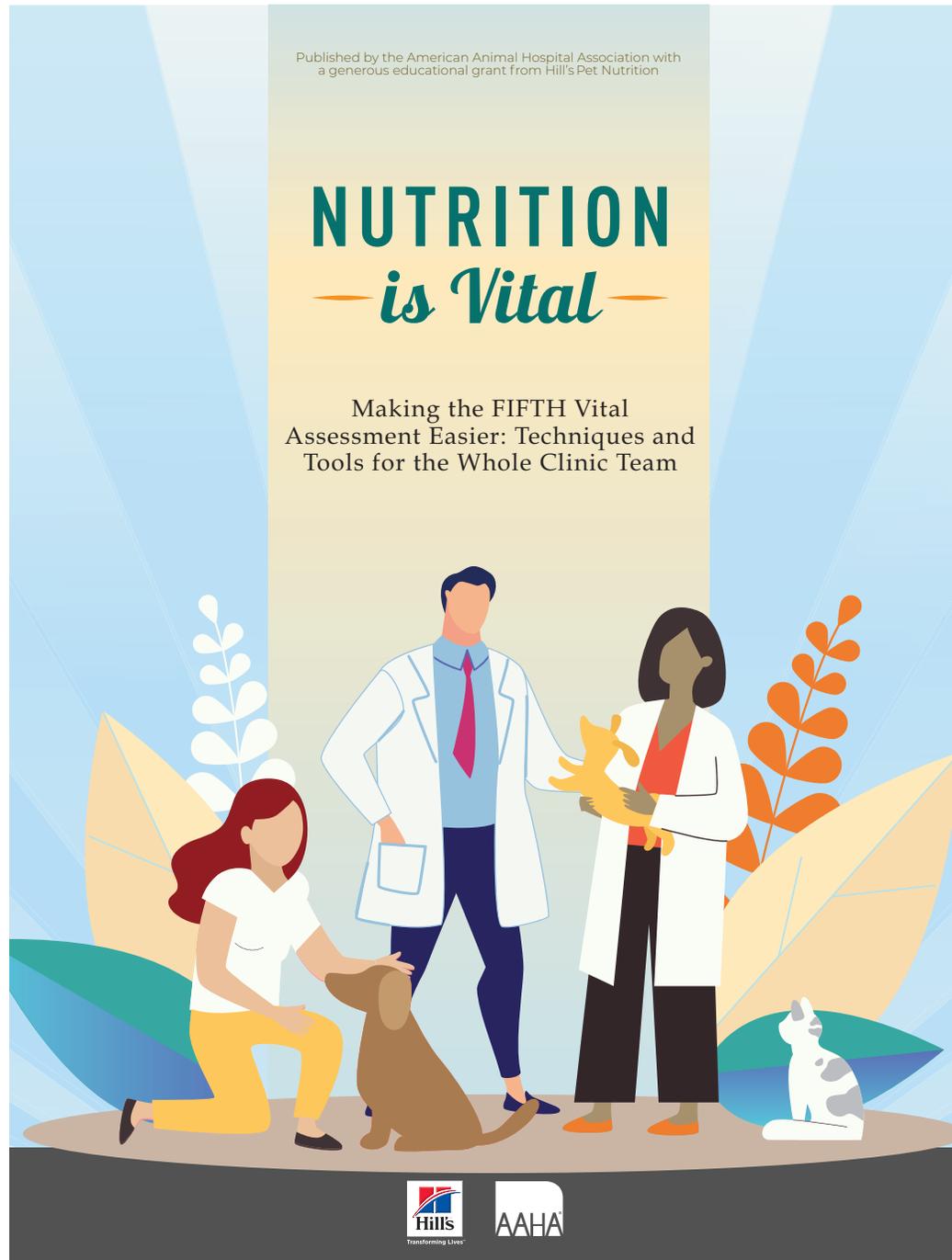
Jason Coe
VCA Canada Chair

JASON COE DVM, PhD

Dr. Jason Coe is a leading expert in veterinary clinical communications at the University of Guelph's OVC and a Professor in the Department of Population Medicine. Having graduated from the College in 2001, he returned from mixed-animal practice to complete his PhD in veterinary communications in 2008. He then joined OVC as a faculty member and researcher, focused on the communications that shape the varied relationships between clients and veterinary team members, for better or worse.

Given Dr. Coe's international reputation and research specifically examining communication in relation to nutrition in veterinary practice, he was approached by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) to co-author the 2021 AAHA *Nutrition and Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats*. He was specifically invited to write the section on how to discuss nutrition with clients. This represented a new subject area for the AAHA Guidelines, and a highlight of the 2021 issue. As a result, Dr. Coe also co-authored the AAHA companion piece titled *Nutrition is Vital* — a practical how-to booklet that details the steps and common missteps in managing pet nutrition. (The cover is pictured at right.)

In the past year, Dr. Coe has joined several committees and taskforces to inform the development of the VCA Canada Chair, and to share knowledge gained through the Chair with the profession. A brief list is presented on the following page.



Graphic provided courtesy of AAHA.

Dr. Coe's recent external roles and accolades include:

- >> Subject-matter expert for the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association's Canadian Veterinary Workforce Shortage Initiative
- >> Member of the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges' Team-Based Veterinary Healthcare Task Force
- >> Member of the AAHA Veterinary Visionaries Collaborative, examining retention in the veterinary profession
- >> Subject-matter expert for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty for Animals to aid in the identification of the 20 most important research questions to improve access to basic veterinary care; and
- >> Member of the International Council for Veterinary Assessment's Communication Skills Assessment Task Force
- >> Dr. Coe's research and leadership contributions to the veterinary profession were recognized this past year with the award of the **American Veterinary Medical Association's 2021 Bustad Companion Animal Veterinarian of the Year.**

Nearly two decades of research by Dr. Coe and his graduate students has established that effective communication increases client adherence to veterinary advice, enhances satisfaction in the service relationship for both clients and veterinarians, and improves the welfare of animals. Now, Dr. Coe's students are expanding the tools of assessment and observation to veterinary settings other than the examination room, and also delving into the management of communication regarding complex decision-making or emotionally laden issues like diet.

In addition to the large observational study mentioned previously, PhD researcher Dr. Natasha Janke's work also focused on the divergent frames of reference of clients and veterinarians in the decision-making process and how that could impact the relationship. In the companion animal setting, Dr. Janke's (2021) focus group study suggested that pet owners view themselves as equal partners in the veterinary-client relationship, as they see themselves providing invaluable observations and understanding of their pet. Clients expect veterinarians to embrace the importance and equality of their role in decision-making regarding their pets' health. Furthermore, they expect their vets to acknowledge their emotional states, and tailor medical information to ensure their clients' full understanding. When client expectations are not met, Dr. Janke writes, "Breakdowns in the information-exchange process can impact pet owners' perceptions of veterinarians' motivations."



Graphic provided courtesy of AAHA.

RESEARCH TEAM

Natasha Janke

PhD, Post-Doctoral Fellow



Dr. Natasha Janke completed her MSc and PhD in veterinary epidemiology at OVC. Her research has ranged from assessing the impact of a management model aimed at enhancing outcomes of shelter cats, to exploring pet owners' expectations of information exchange and decision-making during veterinary appointments. Currently, she is evaluating the impact of a 15-month in-practice communication training intervention on various practice level outcomes.

Currently, she is evaluating the impact of a 15-month, in-practice communication training intervention on various practice level outcomes at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine. Dr. Janke will rejoin Dr. Coe's team in July 2022 as a Mitacs and VCA Canada-funded post-doctoral fellow.

In the past year, Dr. Coe and PhD researcher Katja Sutherland published a study examining video-recorded veterinarian-client interactions on the subject of weight management. When the issue of the pet's obesity was raised, the veterinarians were observed to recommend a course of action in less than half of the cases and offered a reason to pursue a healthy weight in less than a third. In addition, focus groups were conducted, which revealed that many veterinarians are not comfortable discussing pet obesity with obese owners and held the perception that clients were in denial or resistant to discussing an overweight or obese pet. The authors found support for the veterinarians' assumptions. A survey of pet owners of acknowledged overweight or obese animals indicated low readiness to change. Drs. Coe and Sutherland are continuing this research in alignment with the VCA Canada Chair, with support from a Mitacs Elevate and Royal Canin-funded post-doctoral fellowship. They will develop and evaluate an educational intervention intended to help address the epidemic of pet obesity through improved veterinary communications strategies and techniques.

Also in the last year, Dr. Coe and MSc student Dr. Judith da Costa analyzed recorded appointments to determine whether veterinarians tend to verbally describe to the client what they are doing and why, during the course of the companion animal physical exam (CAPE). Having previously determined the standard components of the CAPE, they found veterinarians shared what they were measuring with their clients a little more than half of the time (56%). When they did mention the result, they did not always say whether it was normal or not or what it meant for the patient's health. The researchers promote the use of what they term the Talking Physical Exam, a narrative strategy to ensure that the most important positive and negative results are shared with the client. The development and use of this strategy will help ensure that the value of conducting the CAPE is clear and that the client is fully informed.

Dr. Coe uses this research to inform and constantly evolve the DVM communications curriculum. Patterns of miscommunication documented in observational studies are dissected and new messaging is formulated to be piloted by the students with their clients. This comprises another avenue of research for the VCA Canada Chair in the development of robust, evidence-based veterinary communication training.

VETERINARY COMMUNICATION TRAINING

Katja Sutherland

PhD, Post-Doctoral Fellow



Dr. Katja Sutherland completed a Bachelor of Science (BSc) degree in Animal Biology and her MSc in Animal Nutrition at U of G. During her PhD in the Department of Population Medicine at OVC, she explored the communication between veterinary professionals and their clients regarding their pets' obesity. Now Dr. Sutherland is engaged in an educational intervention study for veterinary professionals that focuses on the prevention and treatment of obesity in dogs and cats through improved communication and management protocols.

Dr. Coe has developed a comprehensive communication skills training curriculum for student veterinarians at OVC. For the first three years, DVM students practice in a simulated environment with actors posing as clients, as depicted in the session below. Then, in their fourth-year rotation at the on-campus clinic, students receive in-the-moment feedback on their use of the communication skills they have acquired during real-life client consultations. Other DVM students and clinicians can observe and make suggestions from an adjoining room that was designed specifically to allow for nonintrusive observation.

In this program, the students benefit from an evidence-based approach to engaging with clients and the broader communications research benefits through trial-and-error study of promising interventions. Successful communication strategies can be honed for possible inclusion in larger-scale trials. Once validated, Dr. Coe hopes to inform industry guidelines, like the *2021 AAHA Nutrition and Weight Management Guidelines for Dogs and Cats*.

Dr. Jason Coe (left) facilitates a communication coaching session with a student veterinarian (center) and simulated client (right).

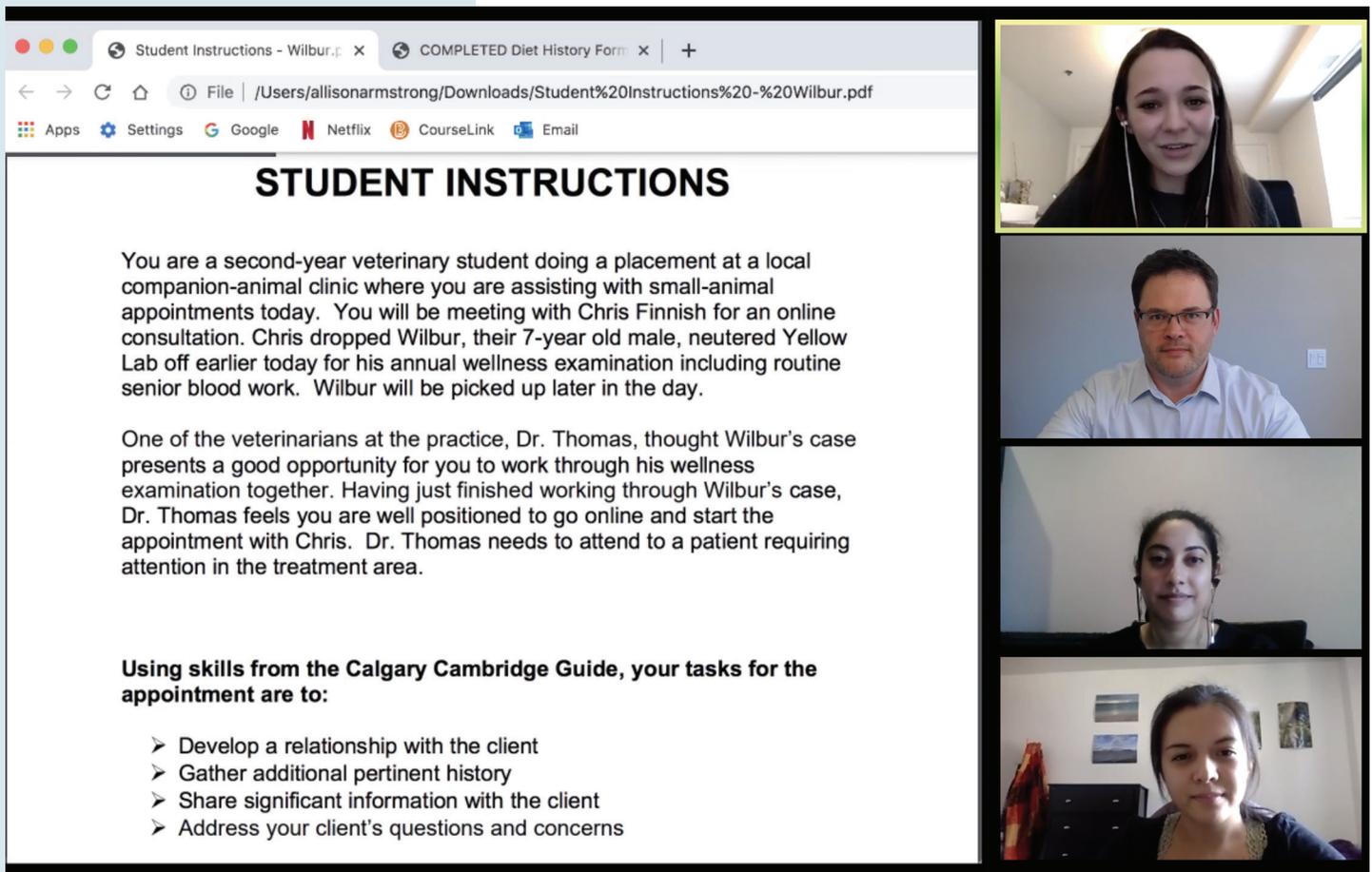


VETERINARY COMMUNICATION TRAINING Continued

In the screen capture below, from top to bottom, the participants in this virtual communication lab are student veterinarian Allison Armstrong, Dr. Jason Coe, Dr. Emerald Saldanha, and student veterinarian Alina Cota-Merlo. At this point in the session, Allison was reviewing the on-screen student instructions prior to the meeting with the simulated client. Dr. Coe was serving as coach and facilitator. A 2016 OVC graduate and veterinarian, Dr. Saldanha, was shadowing the labs in preparation for the role of a coach, and Alina was acting as a peer-student coach.

Given the pandemic, DVM students have been conducting communications training virtually over Zoom and other video technology for more than two years. The screenshot below depicts a virtual pre-briefing for a communication practice session that was part of the *Art of Veterinary Medicine 2* curriculum.

The OVC student experience may be permanently altered in favour of a hybrid — digital and/or in-person — learning environment. Our graduates have become facile in the use of video services that enhance communication, productivity, and efficiency. It seems likely that current and future cohorts of graduates will enter the workforce with greater awareness of, if not preference for, the potential of virtual care. This may result in increased adoption of virtual services in clinics across the country.



The screenshot shows a Zoom meeting interface. On the left, a document titled "STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS" is displayed. The document content is as follows:

STUDENT INSTRUCTIONS

You are a second-year veterinary student doing a placement at a local companion-animal clinic where you are assisting with small-animal appointments today. You will be meeting with Chris Finnish for an online consultation. Chris dropped Wilbur, their 7-year old male, neutered Yellow Lab off earlier today for his annual wellness examination including routine senior blood work. Wilbur will be picked up later in the day.

One of the veterinarians at the practice, Dr. Thomas, thought Wilbur's case presents a good opportunity for you to work through his wellness examination together. Having just finished working through Wilbur's case, Dr. Thomas feels you are well positioned to go online and start the appointment with Chris. Dr. Thomas needs to attend to a patient requiring attention in the treatment area.

Using skills from the Calgary Cambridge Guide, your tasks for the appointment are to:

- Develop a relationship with the client
- Gather additional pertinent history
- Share significant information with the client
- Address your client's questions and concerns

On the right side of the screenshot, there is a vertical grid of four video thumbnails. From top to bottom, they show: Allison Armstrong (a young woman with long dark hair), Dr. Jason Coe (a man with glasses and a white shirt), Dr. Emerald Saldanha (a woman with dark hair), and Alina Cota-Merlo (a woman with dark hair). The browser tabs at the top indicate the document is titled "Student Instructions - Wilbur.pdf" and "COMPLETED Diet History Form".

Rosalie Fortin-Choquette MA, PhD Candidate



PhD Candidate Rosalie Fortin-Choquette earned a Master of Arts degree at the U of G School of Literature and Languages in 2019, where her research focused on the evolution of communication through social media. During her PhD, she will pursue her interests in telemedicine, telehealth and clinical communication in veterinary medicine as she investigates the barriers and the potential benefits associated with virtual care platforms.

Dr. Coe's students have begun to assess the baseline use of technology in the veterinary space. As necessary as the in-person engagement and interaction are to the security of the veterinarian-client relationship, virtual care offers the veterinary profession another avenue to support the veterinary-client relationship. Understanding where, how and when virtual care can be used to support the delivery of client services and patient care is important for its adoption in veterinary medicine.

As a foundation for this research, Dr. Coe's and MSc researcher Dr. Debbie Sigesmund's recent study sheds light on veterinarians' and pet owners' perceptions of virtual care in veterinary practice. The research indicates that while veterinarians have increased their usage of virtual consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic, it appears they may have done so reluctantly. To enhance adoption of virtual veterinary care, support tools are needed to better prepare veterinary professionals to conduct virtual physical examinations and use technology to reinforce communication.

With often-restricted client access to the veterinary clinic during the pandemic, virtual care was necessarily fast-tracked in VCA clinics. In cooperation with VCA, current PhD researcher Rosalie Fortin-Choquette will launch a study into its use across VCA's nearly 140 clinics. While the hope is that virtual care will someday increase efficiency and cut costs, there is no evidence of the conditions of deployment that hold the greatest promise. To bridge this gap, Fortin-Choquette will analyze anonymized VCA data regarding client satisfaction surveys, outcome of the visit, and demographical information associated with the implementation of VCA's virtual care and telemedicine program.

Dr. Coe serves on Dr. Barr Hadar's graduate advisory committee. In support of virtual care interactions, this PhD Candidate investigated the utility of home pet-health technology, like a smart feeder and weigh scale, in managing feline weight loss. In the coming years, these appliances may empower owners to take more control of their pets' health and allow veterinarians more facility to monitor their patients. While the potential of home pet-care technology is intriguing, as this technology evolves, further research will be needed to determine how it is best integrated within modern veterinary practice.

It is hoped that virtual care will offer another way of accessing veterinary care for pet owners. OVC and other clinics are equipped to offer laparoscopic surgery, cancer radiation treatment and physical and hydrotherapy — options that never would have been considered for pets 20 years ago. This evolution in perspective has created the need to consider and manage communication with clients regarding the diversity of care available, because the costs and the options have never been so broad. Hence, accessing care in the veterinary space has emerged as another avenue for research for Dr. Coe's lab.

ACCESSING VETERINARY CARE

Catherine Groves MSc, PhD Candidate



Catherine Groves recently graduated with an MSc in Population Medicine at OVC. This degree, along with her undergraduate program in Biomedical Science were the foundation for her passions for animal health, epidemiology, and communication. In Grove's PhD studies, she will continue to explore clinical veterinary communication and epidemiology while examining barriers to accessing veterinary care.

PhD Candidate Catherine Groves' work with local animal rescues fueled her interest in researching veterinary-client decision-making in the context of accessing veterinary care for pets. In her MSc research with Dr. Coe, she explored the prevalence and nature of cost conversations, and gained insight regarding the financial barriers that clients face.

Now, in her doctoral study, Groves hopes to further explore how the options for care are presented to clients, particularly the communication of their value. Groves will use Discrete Choice Analysis to explore client choice as both a function of the treatment option and of the client's value attributions. These functional parameters can then be entered into statistical analysis to determine the explicit benefit and value of these options and the way they interact with client characteristics. She anticipates her data will reveal differences between the preferred and the selected options, why these differences may exist, and how veterinarians might better communicate the range of options for clients in relation to their pets' veterinary care.



OVC students offer subsidized care in mobile veterinary clinics.

TEAM-BASED VETERINARY HEALTHCARE

Leandra Nogueira Borden DVM, MSc, PhD Candidate



Dr. Leandra Nogueira Borden brings a rich academic and work history to her PhD studies in team-based veterinary healthcare. For her MSc in Epidemiology from OVC, Dr. Nogueira Borden investigated veterinarian-client communication regarding euthanasia and end-of-life decision making. Over the course of her veterinary career, she has worked in small animal practice, academia, non-profit research organizations, government, and community outreach.

For PhD Candidate Dr. Leandra Nogueira Borden, the efficient functioning of the veterinary teams themselves should be a primary consideration in any effort to relieve the pressure of burgeoning caseloads and client expectations for care. During her PhD, she will survey veterinary teams across Canada to provide a snapshot of the state of the industry and how veterinary teams work together.

In addition, Dr. Coe and his team have developed a study in collaboration with VCA Canada to investigate the coordination of tasks across different roles at the veterinary clinic. The project is titled *Examining the impact of an in-hospital intervention on veterinary team coordination, employee mental health and commitment, and veterinary hospital business metrics*.

Led by VCA Canada, and part of Dr. Janke's Mitacs and VCA Canada-funded post-doctoral fellowship, an organization-level training intervention will be conducted. The 90-minute training will allow employees to reflect on the challenges and successes they experienced as a team during the COVID-19 pandemic, assess their strengths and weaknesses, and to commit to improving one of four features of team functioning in each quarter of the year: Quality medicine; commitment to client experience; industry-leading associate experience; and impactful support of the community. The effect of the training and subsequent focused commitment will be assessed across the nearly 140 VCA Canada hospitals. Those clinics that demonstrate the greatest increases in business metrics after the first two quarters post-training will undergo observational study to identify their best practices. The resultant recommendations will be used to make appropriate adjustments to the original training and will be shared through publication in peer-reviewed journals. The recommendations will also serve to guide future research in Dr. Coe's lab relating to the delivery of team-based veterinary healthcare.



“VETERINARY MEDICINE IS A TEAM SPORT.

The more we get together around shared goals, shared knowledge, mutual respect and frequent, timely, accurate communication, the



THE HAPPIER A VETERINARY TEAM WILL BE.

Placing your focus on teamwork benefits everyone! ”

— Jason B Coe, DVM, PhD

ADDITIONAL GRADUATE-STUDENT COLLABORATORS

Kirsten Blokland

PhD, Research Assistant



Dr. Kirsten Blokland completed her PhD in Psychology at the University of Toronto and the Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids). For 20 years, she continued her service at SickKids as a clinical research project manager for several large studies. These studies examined family dynamics in parent-child attachment and in the management of children's antisocial behaviour, and the genetics underlying attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and reading disabilities. Given this background, Dr. Blokland is well-prepared to support the study of relationships and communication within veterinary medicine.

Judith da Costa

DVM, MSc

A three-time alumnus of U of G, Dr. Judith da Costa earned her BSc in 1993 and DVM in 1998. Post-graduation, she immediately entered companion animal practice in the Greater Toronto Area. After a career spanning 21 years, she returned to OVC and completed her MSc in Population Medicine with Dr. Coe in 2021.



Barr Hadar

DVM, PhD Candidate

Dr. Barr Hadar received his BSc in Animal Science from California Polytechnic State University, and his DVM from Colorado State University in 2014. After a brief career working in small animal clinics and mobile practices, he came to OVC to pursue his interest in the application of technology to veterinary practice, and is nearing completion of his PhD.



Debbie Sigesmund

DVM, MSc Candidate

Dr. Debbie Sigesmund received a BSc in Biochemistry from the University of Toronto, and her DVM from OVC in 2000. Following a 20-year career in clinical practice and veterinary industry, including as a senior veterinary communications manager at Nestlé Purina Canada, she returned to OVC to complete her MSc with Dr. Coe.



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