Dog welfare and emotions: The diagnosis and treatment of canine anxiety disorders

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Behaviour problems in dogs are a major reason that veterinarians are requested by their owners to euthanise dogs. Behaviour problems are also among the main reasons that dogs are relinquished. As such, a serious welfare problem becomes apparent. Welfare is further compromised when these animals are also subjected to inaccurate diagnoses, and flawed treatment strategies even when correctly diagnosed.

Behaviour problems can be a manifestation of undesirable (as far as the owner's concerned) but perfectly normal behaviour. Behaviour problems can also be a result of an animal suffering from pain or metabolic disease. Aside from this, behaviour problems can be due to neurochemical imbalances in the brain such as those that result in true anxiety disorders. Validated diagnostic criteria in dogs are largely lacking. Currently we rely on phenotypic descriptions that are thought to reflect the emotional state of the animal but which are seldom sufficiently discrete to inform diagnoses of neuropathology. Veterinary behaviour specialists rely on measuring behaviour through direct and indirect observation, questionnaires and consultation for patient monitoring, all of which are currently unstandardised. In this presentation we will review the current literature as pertains to diagnosing anxiety disorders in dogs based on symptoms and suggest where diagnostic nuclear imaging techniques can be used to validate true neuropathology.

We will review the current literature as pertains to available routine treatment modalities and diagnostic nuclear imaging techniques that can be used to validate these treatment protocols. We will also expound in this presentation on treatment modalities that are currently explored in treatment of refractory human depressive and pathologically anxious patients that are of potential interest for our veterinary patients.