

What is a Veterinary Behavior Technician?

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There has long been a debate about the qualifications of on-the-job-trained and credentialed technicians. There is no doubt that the best of both is a technician that has both the experience and the education to back it up. There are many veterinary technicians that go on to become trainers and many trainers that go on to become veterinary technicians. This is more so the case with technicians that have an interest in animal behavior, where it becomes a natural progression through simply adding puppy classes to the practice or branching out with more services.

Trainers Vs. Veterinary Technicians

There is a major distinction between dog trainers and credentialed technicians. Trainers may assess a dog and determine that it displays behaviors of separation anxiety or aggression, whereas veterinary technicians cannot do this as they risk losing their license. In the veterinary field this is considered diagnosing (as these are considered medical conditions) and only veterinarians can diagnose medical conditions. In veterinary medicine, the DVM and the technician are designed to compliment each other. The veterinarian analyzes the behavior history, assesses the patient, diagnoses the problem, prescribes medication if indicated and creates a treatment plan. The technician then steps in and helps the pet parent carry out the prescribed treatment plan. The success of a behavior modification plan can hinge on client compliance and understanding of the program. This is where technicians are vital to the success of the pet. Technicians can demonstrate techniques and provide the follow-up calls and visits to guide the client through the program, keeping them on track and moving forward.

Becoming a Veterinary Behavior Technician

Education and certifications add to professional credibility, no matter what field you are in. Veterinary technicians obtain their formal education by attending an AVMA-accredited school of Veterinary Technology and can earn either an Associate or a Bachelor's degree. All states require veterinary technicians to pass a state regulatory examination which credentials them to work as a technician in their state. Depending on the state, veterinary technicians are credentialed as a licensed veterinary technician (LVT), certified veterinary technician (CVT), or registered veterinary technician (RVT). Each state's requirements can be found through the American Association of Veterinary State Boards (www.aavsb.org). For those considering becoming credentialed, getting a degree in veterinary technology is more convenient now with the availability of online education. With online education the students are still responsible for doing hands-on work that they perform with a mentor at a small animal practice, with rotations at shelters and after hours emergency veterinary hospitals.

The Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (SVBT) (www.svbt.org) is an organization for individuals interested in behavior, and there are many available member-

ship levels. The SVBT has an online forum so that members can ask questions and get feedback from other members as well as a quarterly newsletter and member discounts. The newest advancement for our profession is the Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians, which is now a NAVTA (National Association of Veterinary Technicians)-approved specialty. The Web site is expected to be up by the summer of 2009 and the first exam is projected for 2011, which will give credentialed technicians the designation of VTS (Veterinary Technician Specialty) in Animal Behavior.

The learning doesn't stop there! There is plenty of continuing education available to keep up-to-date on current techniques (upcoming CEU opportunities are listed on the SVBT Web site). One of the most popular continuing education courses is at Purdue University. It is a five-day course held each spring for technicians called "DOGS!" This continuing education course is directed toward assisting veterinary support staff in problem prevention, training and educating the client in the

application of the veterinary's treatment plan. Another popular CEU opportunity is at the University of Georgia, which has a yearly behavior conference for technicians and veterinarians. More information can be found at www.georgiacenter.uga.edu/conferences.

Whether you plan to become credentialed or not, another great opportunity for those in the animal profession is the Karen Pryor Academy for Animal Training and Behavior. This is a program that teaches the students to become skilled trainers and effective teachers using positive methods. The faculty at Karen Pryor Academy is made up of respected veterinary professionals and dog trainers. This program is also a combination of distance learning with hands-on workshops.

The Role of the Veterinary Behavior Technician

The role of the behavior technician in the practice will vary widely depending on the technician's interests. Puppy classes are a great way to begin to bring behavior into the practice. The puppies love coming into the hospital because the association has been made positive with socialization to people, playtime with other puppies and treats rather than negative as a result of restraint, vaccinations, obtaining stool samples, surgery, etc. The other benefit is that it bonds both the client and the puppy to the practice.

Nail trim phobia is another common problem in the veterinary practice. It is a difficult cycle: the pet is fearful or aggressive and as a result the staff has to muzzle and/or use more restraint which causes the pet to be even more fearful with each subsequent visit. With time and patience the behavior technician can work with the dog to tolerate having its nails trimmed rather than having to be held down, muzzled or sedated, which is difficult not only for the dog, but for the pet parent as well.

Summary

Becoming a credentialed technician opens up a lot of doors for animal professionals. With the education to back up our hands-on expertise, you now have added credibility which can lead to wherever you want it to go—from private practice, to lecturing to other professionals, to writing articles for publication. The sky is the limit!

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Web Sites of Interest

The Society of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (SVBT) - www.svbt.org

The Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (AVBT) - www.avbt.net

Animal Behavior Network - www.animalbehavior.net

Purdue University DOGS! Course - www.vet.purdue.edu/animalbehavior/pages/dogs/dogs_general.htm

The Karen Pryor Academy for Training and Behavior - <http://karenpryoracademy.com>

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) (Contains listings of accredited schools by state) - www.avma.org

Animal Behavior Resources Institute, Inc. (Contains behavior-related videos, podcasts, articles, and reviews) - www.abrionline.org

University of Georgia (yearly behavior conference for technicians and veterinarians) - www.georgiacenter.uga.edu/conferences

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To Buy Or Not To Buy: A Guide to Dog Training Equipment. Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior, 1(1), 46-55.

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