

ABTC Standard - Clinical Animal Behaviourist

Overview

This standard relates to the clinical application of the science of animal behaviour, and the modification of the behaviour of animals that are demonstrating all types of undesirable, inappropriate, problematic or dangerous behaviour, including those with a potential link to pathologies that require diagnosis in collaboration with a veterinary surgeon.

This standard involves understanding how to evaluate, prevent or address inappropriate or problematic behaviours within individual animals, through the development of suitable environments and management/treatment regimes that are likely to be effective, based on best practice and scientific evidence. These may be for training rehabilitation or prevention purposes, when caring for the animal or when assisting and advising another person or organisation on undesirable behaviour in their animal/s.

This standard is suitable for those working in the animal care sector, with responsibility for planning and managing humane approaches to the addressing of inappropriate behaviour of animals, and who have an extensive understanding of clinical animal behaviour and the related scientific/clinical literature. The Veterinary Surgeons Act limits the activities which may be carried out by those who are not qualified veterinary surgeons. All activities should be carried out within the constraints of the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

Performance Criteria

You must be able to:

1. Critically evaluate the needs of a range of animal species and how these may be provided for whilst under your duty of care.
2. Identify the appropriate animal health and welfare legislation, associated codes of practice and other legislation relevant to the animals being worked with and take any action necessary to ensure these are followed.
3. Undertake risk assessments in line with current health and safety legislation
4. Identify and act in ways that best ensures the well-being of the animal, protecting and promoting welfare both within the short and long term.
5. Gather evidence about the behaviour of the animal and the problem(s) for which advice is being sought from all sources identified as likely to provide relevant information. This could include direct observation, discussion with owner/keeper, assessments supplied by veterinary surgeons, case history. Critically evaluate the quality of this evidence and act appropriately to remedy any areas of concern or deficiency in it.

6. Critically evaluate the effect of physical factors on the animal's behaviour including species, breed, parentage, sex, age, medical conditions, physiological status, developmental history and identify those most relevant to the problem(s) and areas of concern identified and for those for which help is being sought.
7. Critically evaluate the impact of external factors on the behaviour of the animal, the problem(s) and areas of concern identified and those for which help is being sought, to include: immediate surroundings, wider environment, environmental pressures, ethological requirements, previous experiences.
8. Critically evaluate the impact that husbandry/management practices have had on the behaviour of the animal, the problem(s) and areas of concern identified and those for which help is being sought, including: presence/absence of environmental enrichment, social contact, physical activity, interactions and relationship with owner/keeper and other humans, diet. Critically judge the evidence gathered, distinguishing between competing causes, assumption and explanations for the behaviour, and identify the most appropriate treatment regime for the animal, that is likely to effectively address the problem(s) and concerns identified and the animal's particular set of circumstances.
9. Critically evaluate issues concerning the safety, efficacy and reliability of complementary and alternative or non-prescription or prescribed therapies or products.
10. Demonstrate skill and competency in the selection and use of a wide range of behavioural modification techniques and training aids to address undesirable and problematic and be able to teach others how to use these effectively as appropriate, to ensure their effective use, and protect against their misuse, and ensure owners/keepers protect the welfare of the animal.
11. Apply the principles of animal learning theory to humane training methods to achieve agreed goals.
12. Demonstrate the ability to train an animal to do the exercises appropriate to the animal species, context and desired behaviour, in a number of different ways, taking into account the animal's species, breed, type and physical capabilities.
13. Justify why a particular treatment regime has been selected to address the problem(s) identified, against any other possible regimes.
14. Devise and implement a structured treatment regimen, that identifies and sets realistic goals and time scales for monitoring of its progress and assessment of its success.
15. Discuss and agree treatment regime with the owner/keeper and others involved with the animal for which advice is being sought, rectifying areas of misunderstanding, confusion or concern where appropriate, and obtaining their informed consent.
16. Ensure the owner/keeper understands their role in the delivery of an effective programme of treatment and the importance of maintaining the desired change to behaviour once it is achieved.

17. Identify and liaise with other professionals (e.g. veterinary surgeons, breeders) and organisations involved in the care of the animals for which advice is being sought to ensure a consistent and appropriate approach to resolution of the problem that both promotes animal welfare and is legally compliant.
18. Identify any professional, ethical or other issues that have arisen when working with the animal, owner/keeper or other individual and take appropriate action to address these.
19. Explain to the owner/keeper of the animal, through written guidelines or other appropriate system of feedback, the areas of concern regarding their animal that have been identified, their possible causes and the rationale behind the treatment regime selected to remedy these and any other associated issues that have been identified.
20. Critically evaluate the effectiveness of the treatment regime through appropriate follow-ups which may include direct observation of the animal and/or liaison with the owner/keeper and others involved with the animal. As appropriate, revise the regime in response to this feedback to ensure its effectiveness and success.
21. Maintain required records on each animal so that it is possible to critically reflect on the appropriateness and success of different treatment regimes; identify any improvements to practice that could be made.
22. Maintain a high level of professional conduct including an awareness of own limitations and refer cases on when appropriate.
23. Identify gaps in own knowledge and understanding; and plan, record and evaluate a personal Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme to address these.

Knowledge and understanding – This standard is at Level 6

You need to know and understand:

Animal Behaviour

1. The ethology of vertebrate animals, including perceptual abilities, maintenance and social behaviours and communication, their function and their motivational basis in the most commonly kept domestic species.
2. How to recognise, evaluate and report on the behavioural states of the most commonly kept domestic animals and those that most commonly contribute to the caseload of a clinical animal behaviourist, to include signals indicative of key behavioural states such as fear, nervousness, aggression, ill-health, threat-reduction, play and relaxation.
3. Behavioural ontogeny; to include sensitive periods, socialisation and attachment theory.
4. The interaction between biological and evolutionary influences and the environment in which an animal is kept, and their roles in the development of behavioural disorders for a range of the most commonly kept domestic animals.

5. The process of domestication and its effects on the behaviour of animals and the common interactions between animals and humans and how these can contribute to the development of problematic owner/animal relationship, to include animal abuse, abandonment, animal-hoarding.

Animal Health and Welfare

6. The key ethological, psychological and physiological concepts that underpin animal welfare.
7. The physiological and behavioural indicators of welfare in vertebrate animals and their limitations and how to use these practically to assess welfare in the commonly kept domestic species.
8. Welfare considerations in the management and training of animals and in clinical practice.

Animal Learning and Training

9. The theory of animal learning to include habituation; sensitization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, insight and social learning, animal cognition and the concept of consciousness.
10. The theory underlying learned problem behaviour and training techniques.
11. The principles and rationale behind the use of the range of behavioural modification techniques, to include systematic desensitization, counter-conditioning and the use of clickers.
12. The techniques most appropriate for the treatment of a range of common behavioural disorders and learned problem behaviours, the rationale for their use/application, and the strengths and weaknesses of each.

The Interaction between Health and Behaviour

13. The functional anatomy and physiology of the vertebrate nervous and endocrine systems and their role in mediating behaviour.
14. The concept of neural plasticity and the relevance and influence of environmental and genetic factors in the development of the nervous system.
15. The signs of ill-health and common conditions influencing behaviour and associated veterinary terminology.
16. The interaction between health and behaviour in vertebrate animals.
17. The behavioural consequences of medical disorders.
18. The evidence for and against a medical component contributing to competing explanations of a behaviour.

19. Psychopharmacology and the mode of action of the major classes of drugs used in clinical animal behaviour, their role and correct application, and constraints and contra-indicators to their use.
20. The ethics of psychopharmacological intervention and legal position of the clinical animal behaviourist, veterinary surgeon and others regarding the diagnosis, prescription and use of drugs and provision of advice.

Clinical Procedures

21. The range of common behavioural disorders in animals to include phobias, aggression, stereotypies, anxiety related behaviours, and how to identify and critically evaluate contributing factors.
22. The appropriate application of the principles of ethology and learning theory to the diagnosis and treatment of common problems.
23. The key principles in human and family psychology, to include attitude theory, processes of inter-personal relationships, grief and bereavement.
24. The principles of effective counselling and how to apply to facilitate and maintain behavioural change.
25. The range of effective communication skills, both in the collection of relevant information and provision of advice in face to face or remote consultations and communication via telephone, email, letters and reports with clients and relevant professionals, and how to assess and resolve issues relating to client understanding.
26. The interactions appropriate in professional relationships and how to apply these in practice.
27. The common professional, ethical or other issues that need to be considered or may arise before, during and after a consultation; and the action that is appropriate to address these, including an appreciation of the value of further referral.
28. Methods for gathering and recording information relevant to the diagnosis of a behavioural disorder and how to critically evaluate and appraise it.
29. The construction and delivery of appropriately structured treatment regimes that are likely to be effective for behavioural disorders identified.
30. How to identify situations where further action may be necessary, including ways in which compliance with an extended treatment regime may be encouraged.

Law and Ethics

31. UK and other relevant legislation that relates to the ownership and use of animals and the role and duties of the clinical animal behaviourist, veterinary surgeon, paraprofessionals, owners and others within it; to include the legal implications and duties associated with the provision of advice and professional liability and client confidentiality.

32. Employment law, health and safety legislation and the Data Protection Act; and their implication for the clinical animal behaviourist, their clients and others.
33. The ethical guidelines relating to the use of animals.

Critical analysis and research

34. How to critically evaluate the quality of research in terms of the methodology, robustness of data gathered and validity of findings and conclusions, from a range of publications and other sources, in order to judge its suitability as evidence on which to base clinical practice.
35. How to demonstrate understanding of cognitive biases (e.g. availability and confirmation) and their impact on the clinician and clients.
36. How to use appropriate methods for the assessment of the effectiveness of suitably structured treatment regimes.