

ABTC Standard - Clinical Animal Behaviourist

Overview

This standard is for those working in the animal care sector, with responsibility for planning and managing humane and evidence-based approaches for the prevention and/or modification of undesired and problematic behaviours in animals. The Clinical Animal Behaviourist will understand and demonstrate the process of critical evaluation and the effective application of animal behaviour science, to modify animal behaviour. This includes, dangerous behaviours, as well as behaviours linked to potential pathologies diagnosed by a Veterinary Surgeon.

Core competences include: understanding how to recognise different emotional states in individual animals; how to identify and address the welfare needs of individual animals; understanding how to develop and apply effective and humane behaviour management/modification programmes. The Clinical Animal Behaviourist will demonstrate the skills and competences necessary for effective communication with owners/guardians/handlers and/or co-professionals, when making recommendations on how to improve animal welfare. These programmes may involve training and/or rehabilitation and may be implemented directly by the Clinical Animal Behaviourist or indirectly, through another suitably qualified person or recognised organisation.

Animals undergoing behaviour modification by a Clinical Animal Behaviourist will be seen on veterinary referral. The Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) limits the activities which may be carried out by those who are not registered veterinary surgeons. All activities must be carried out taking into account the constraints of the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

In accordance with the ABTC Code of Professional Conduct, all individual practitioners are required to work within this ABTC Standard and their professional competences. All cases that are, or, develop beyond the scope of this ABTC Standard should be referred on responsibly (see Code of Professional Conduct section 1.2).

All practitioners should be familiar with the ABTC Standard for their role and that of all other ABTC roles, so that they understand the differences between the roles and refer on when necessary.

Knowledge and understanding – This Standard is at Level 6

You need to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of these learning outcomes:

Animal Behaviour

1. Critically evaluate and analyse the ethology of vertebrate animals, including perceptual abilities, maintenance and survival behaviours and communication, their function and their motivational basis in a range of animal species and taxa.

2. Recognise, critically evaluate and report on the behavioural states of a range of animal species and those that most commonly contribute to the caseload of the practitioners they might refer to, including signals indicative of ill health as well as key behavioural states such as fear, nervousness, aggression, frustration, threat-reduction, play and relaxation.
3. Critically evaluate the effects of behavioural ontogeny; to include sensitive periods, socialisation and attachment theory in a range of animals and their possible role in the development of unwanted behaviours.
4. Critically evaluate 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 animal species.
5. Demonstrate awareness of the process of domestication and its effects on the behaviour of animals; human/animal interactions and how these can contribute to the development of animal misuse, abuse, abandonment, animal-hoarding.

Animal Health and Welfare

6. Compare, analyse and critically evaluate the key ethological, psychological and physiological concepts that underpin animal welfare in a range of taxa.
7. Critically evaluate the welfare considerations in the management and training of animals and in clinical practice.
8. Demonstrate an awareness of disease presentation, risk and mitigation in a range of species, as well as individual animals seen in practice.
9. Demonstrate understanding of both intra and inter specific risks (human to human/zoonoses) and how to identify/ detect relevant threats; reporting procedures; management of the training and consultation environment.

Animal Learning and Training

10. How animals learn to include habituation; sensitisation, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, insight and social learning, animal cognition and the concept of sentience.
11. Critically evaluate the principles underlying unwanted behaviours and how they may develop and be maintained.
12. Critically evaluate the principles and rationale behind the use of a range of training, preventative and behavioural modification techniques, to include (but not limited to) systematic desensitisation, counter-conditioning and the use of clickers or other markers/conditioned reinforcers.
13. Critically evaluate and analyse the strategies and the range of techniques for the prevention and/or modification of unwanted behaviour, the rationale for their use/application, and the strengths and weaknesses of each, in animals of all ages.

The interaction between Health and Behaviour

14. Critically analyse the role of key anatomical and physiological systems (including the nervous and endocrine systems) in mediating behaviour.
15. Explain the concept of neural plasticity and the relevance and influence of environmental and genetic factors in the development of the nervous system.
16. Demonstrate awareness of the signs of physical ill-health, common conditions influencing behaviour and associated veterinary terminology.
17. Demonstrate awareness of the behavioural indicators and consequences of mental and emotional state (both positive and negative), and of medical disorders.
18. Critically evaluate the impact that mental and emotional state (both positive and negative), and medical issues may have on behaviour.
19. Critically evaluate the mode of action, the potential efficacy, constraints and contra-indications, and the application of the major classes of psychopharmaceutical medications used in clinical animal behaviour.
20. Critically evaluate commonly used complementary, or non-prescription therapies or products, their claimed/potential efficacy and the ethics of their use.
21. Recognise the ethical implications of psychopharmacological intervention and the legal position of the Clinical Animal Behaviourist, Veterinary Surgeon, and others, regarding diagnosis, prescription, use of drugs, and provision of information.

Clinical Procedures

22. Critically evaluate underlying causations (differentials) and contributing factors (predisposing, initiating and maintenance factors) for a range of common behavioural disorders in animals to include phobias; aggression; abnormal repetitive behaviours; anxiety related behaviours.
23. Demonstrate the ability to apply the principles of ethology and learning theory to the assessment and treatment of a range of behaviour problems.
24. Record and critically evaluate all information gathered, in order to assess unwanted behaviours, utilising a range of assessment tools.
25. Demonstrate the ability to construct and deliver structured behaviour modification programmes to effectively address a range of unwanted behaviours.
26. Effective techniques for the measurement and recording of progress of an animal/animals through a remedial plan for behaviour change and the reporting of progress to owners/guardians/handlers and other professionals.

27. Assess situations where further action may be necessary, including ways in which compliance with an extended programme for the prevention and/or modification of unwanted behaviour may be encouraged.
28. Demonstrate awareness of a range of effective and inclusive communication techniques when collecting and disseminating information, providing support and when assessing and resolving issues relating to owner/guardian/handler understanding.
29. Apply underlying principles in human and family psychology, to include attitude theory, processes of inter-personal relationships, grief and bereavement.
30. Apply the principles of effective counselling to facilitate and maintain behavioural change, both short and long term, including where the behaviour modification programme may need several revisions.
31. Demonstrate awareness of potential professional, ethical, welfare, safeguarding or other issues; and the actions necessary to address these, including appreciation of the importance of professional relationships and wider referral.
32. How to recognise compassion fatigue and emotional burden in self, colleagues and owner/guardian/handler, and when and where to seek support.
33. Demonstrate awareness of the potential environmental impacts associated with the role, and how they can be minimised.

Law and Ethics

34. Demonstrate awareness of legislation relating to ownership, welfare and use of animals; employment law, health and safety legislation, safeguarding, DEI and the UK-GDPR (United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation). This includes the implications and professional liability for the Clinical Animal Behaviourist, allied professionals, clients, veterinary staff and others.
35. Demonstrate awareness of employment law, Equality Act, health and safety legislation, safeguarding, DEI, and the UK-GDPR (United Kingdom General Data Protection Regulation); and their implications for the Clinical Animal Behaviourist, their clients and others.
36. Demonstrate awareness of the ethical frameworks and Codes of Practice relating to the welfare, ownership and use of animals.

Critical Analysis and Research

37. Demonstrate an ability 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.
38. Demonstrate awareness of cognitive biases (e.g. availability and confirmation) and their impact on the clinician and clients.

39. Demonstrate awareness of evidence-based methods to assess the effectiveness of behaviour modification programmes.

Practical Skills

Whilst carrying out this role you must be able to:

Welfare and Legislation

1. Critically evaluate the needs of a range of animal species and taxa and how these may be provided for whilst under your duty of care.
2. 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.
3. Identify, comply with, and take reasonable steps to educate others to comply with, current animal health and welfare legislation, industry regulations, organisational policies, professional codes, and other legislation, relevant to the animals being worked with; take any action necessary to comply with these.
4. Undertake risk assessments in line with current health and safety legislation, first aid, disease control and biosecurity.

Evaluating and Modifying Behaviour

5. Gather evidence about the behaviour of the animal from all sources identified as likely to provide relevant information. This could include direct observation, reviewing the case history/notes, discussion with owner/guardian/handler and other relevant professionals. Critically evaluate the quality of this evidence and act to remedy any areas of concern or deficiency in it.
6. Critically evaluate the effect of physical factors on the animal's behaviour and areas of concern identified, to include: species, breed, parentage, sex, age, medical conditions, physiological status, developmental history, husbandry and management practices, and interactions with people.
7. Critically evaluate the impact of external factors on the behaviour of the animal and areas of concern identified, to include: immediate surroundings, wider environment, environmental pressures, ethological requirements, time budgets and previous experiences.
8. Critically evaluate the impact of husbandry/management practices on the behaviour of the animal and areas of concern identified, including: presence/absence of environmental enrichment, social contact, physical activity, interactions and relationship with owner/guardian/handler and other humans, diet.

9. Critically evaluate issues concerning the safety, efficacy and reliability of complementary and alternative or non-prescription or prescribed therapies or products.
10. Critically evaluate and report on the behavioural states of 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, plan and relaxation.
11. Critically evaluate the evidence gathered, distinguishing between competing causes, assumptions and explanations for the behaviour; identifying the most likely causes and factors influencing the behaviour.
12. Explain why a particular behaviour modification programme, that is likely to effectively address the problem(s) and concerns identified, and the animal's particular set of circumstances, has been selected from available options.
13. Demonstrate skill and competency in the selection and use of a wide range of behavioural modification techniques and ethical training aids. Be able to teach owners/guardians/handlers how to apply these techniques and training aids to ensure their effective use, protect against their misuse, and ensure owners/guardians/handlers protect the welfare of the animal.
14. Devise and implement a structured behaviour modification programme, identifying and setting realistic goals and time scales for monitoring of its progress and assessment of its success making reasonable adjustments for owner/guardian/handler according to their needs and abilities.
15. Critically evaluate the effectiveness of the programme through follow-ups and feedback which may include direct observation of the animal and liaison with those involved with the animal's care. Revise the remedial programme in response to this feedback and its effectiveness.
16. Maintain records on each animal identifying the success of different approaches based on measurable outcomes.

Animal Learning and Training

17. Apply the principles of animal learning theory to humane training methods to achieve agreed goals.
18. Demonstrate the ability to train an animal towards the desired objectives, in a number of different ways, taking into account the context, species, type, breed, developmental stage and physical capabilities.

Counselling and Communication

19. Demonstrate the use of effective communication techniques and tools to explain to owners/guardians/handlers, the identified issues, their possible causes and the rationale for the behavioural modification recommendations selected.
20. Discuss and agree a programme of behaviour modification with the owner/guardian/handler and others involved with the animal.
21. Ensure the owner/guardian/handler understands their role in the delivery of an effective programme and the importance of maintaining the desired change to behaviour once it is achieved. Rectify areas of misunderstanding, confusion or concern of the owner/guardian/handler.
22. Liaise with other allied professionals and organisations involved in the care of the animal to ensure a consistent approach that protects animal welfare and is legally compliant.
23. Identify any professional, ethical or other issues that have arisen when working with the animal, owner/guardian/handler or other individual and take action to address these.

Personal Reflection and Development

24. Critically evaluate your own practice and reflect on any improvements that could be made.
25. Identify gaps in own knowledge and understanding; and plan, record and critically evaluate a personal Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programme to address these.
26. Maintain a high level of professional conduct including an awareness of own limitations and how, when and where to refer cases on.