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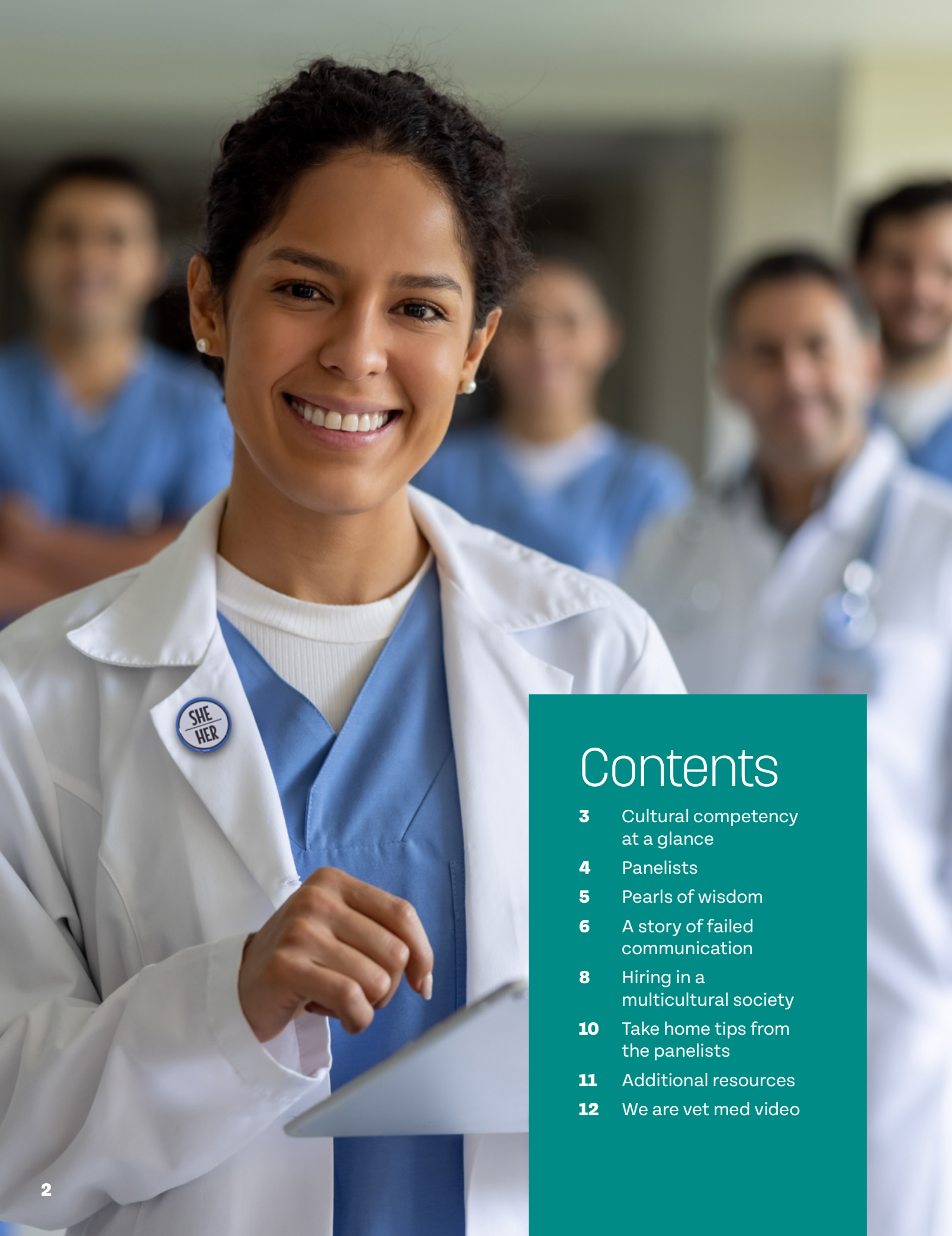


AMERICAN ANIMAL HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

Cultural Competency

Fostering Belonging and Trust among Veterinary Teams and with Clients

TOOLKIT



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Cultural competency at a glance

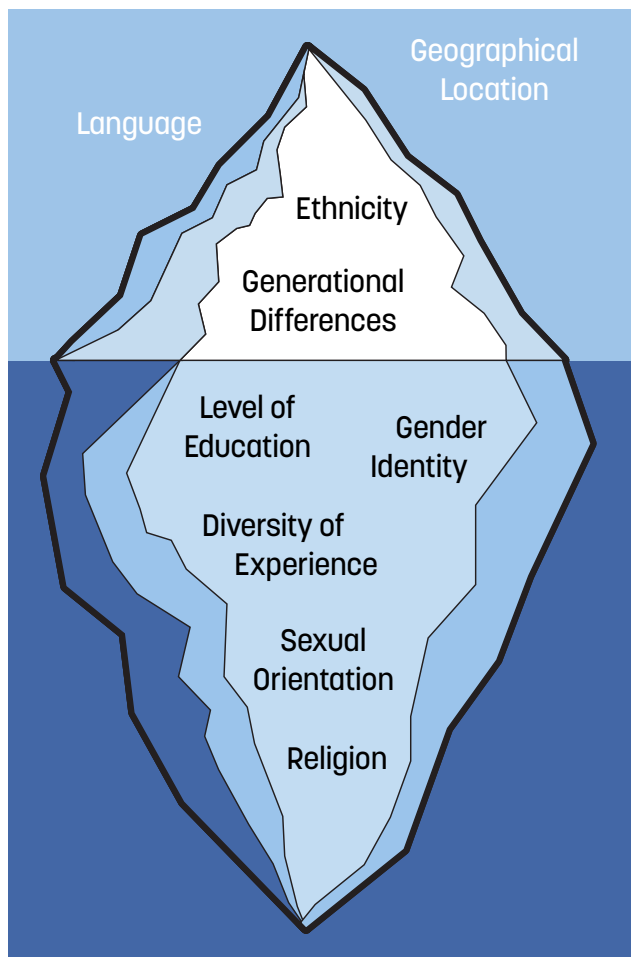
What is cultural competency?

How does it affect your interactions with your clients and the care your patients receive?

How do you develop more cultural competency within your team?

To answer these questions, we must define culture. In some contexts, it is defined as a set of learned beliefs, values, or behaviors that are shared by a group of people. Other definitions are broader and include more intrinsic aspects of an individual's way of being, such as their gender identity or sexual orientation.

Some elements of a person's culture are easily noticed and apparent. Others may be less visible or completely unknown. These are just a few examples of the various cultural elements that can affect an individual's beliefs, behaviors, and preferred communication style.



Culture is important to consider in veterinary practice.

Why? Because it's backed by data.

Research has shown that members of one cultural group may not always understand or communicate well with those who are not members of that group. This can lead to disagreements and a lack of belonging among teammates. A lack of cultural competency can also contribute to misunderstandings and lack of trust on the part of pet owners, which can in turn affect the care that their pet receives.

Cultural competency in veterinary medicine is crucial to interacting effectively and respectfully with clients of various cultures. It involves:

- understanding the impact of culture on pet ownership, decision-making, and communication
- a willingness to learn
- humility, introspection, and a willingness to examine personal biases and misconceptions

The hard work needed to become more culturally competent can pay off in increased client trust and compliance and better patient outcomes, making it well worth the effort.

Just as importantly, cultural competency within the team helps all team members feel a sense of safety and belonging, making them much more likely to stay and thrive in the workplace. When we approach this task with humility and a willingness to listen and learn, we set the tone for a more trusting and respectful relationship.

Panelists

AAHA hosted a webinar with generous support from Hill's Pet Nutrition entitled Fostering Cultural Competency in Veterinary Medicine. Four expert panelists provided their insight and experience on this important topic. Learn more about them here:



Omar Farías, VMD

Dr. Farías is the Director of Scientific and Academic Affairs for Hill's Pet Nutrition. He has over a decade of experience in small animal private practice as both an associate and a practice owner, while also devoting time to help local animal welfare organizations. He is the President of the Pride Veterinary Medical Community and a board member of both the Mark Morris Institute and the Diversity Veterinary Medicine Coalition. Originally from Puerto Rico, he now lives with his husband in Kansas City, Missouri.



Marina Tejada, DVM

Dr. Tejada is the Supervising Veterinarian for the North Shore Animal League America in New York City and the Director of Outreach for the Latinx Veterinary Medical Association. A Colombian American and a Cornell College of Veterinary Medicine graduate, she also serves on her alma mater's Alumni Association Executive Board and the President's Council of Cornell Women. She has strong interests in mentoring pre-veterinary and veterinary students and promoting diversity and inclusion in veterinary medicine.



Sara Taylor, RVT

Sara is the Director of Community Medicine at the San Francisco SPCA. In this role, she oversees approximately 50 registered veterinary technicians and 40 veterinary assistants. A self-described "leadership nerd," Sara strives to make careers as credentialed technicians sustainable and enjoyable for her staff. As a part of this, she has been a champion of diversity, equity, and inclusion.



Tyler Primavera, DVM

Dr. Primavera is a founding member of Vetspacito, a "business and movement aimed at helping Spanish speaking pet parents and pets receive better veterinary care." A Hawaii native and a graduate of Oregon State University College of Veterinary Medicine, Primavera also works as a relief veterinarian and a speaker on overcoming language barriers in veterinary medicine.

Pearls of wisdom

Our panelists were asked about what cultural competency means to them, why it is important, and how veterinary teams can work to improve their cultural competency. Here are just a few inspirational quotes from these experts:

Cultural competency is a commitment to fostering connecting, trust, and understanding with diverse audiences. We need to learn where we come from with our own assumptions and biases in order to create respect.

—SARA TAYLOR, RVT

Cultural competency is a process that requires awareness, education, and taking action.

—TYLER PRIMAVERA, DVM

It's important for our staff to understand each other and work together so that we can comfortably and positively interact with each other. We need to be able to communicate with each other even if we don't agree so that we can provide adequate care to our patients.

—MARINA TEJADA, DVM

Our values and perspectives may be different, and that's ok. We need to come up with solutions that allow us to work together.

—OMAR FARIAS, VMD

Take time, even when the day is busy, to connect with clients whenever possible. Be with them where they are, ask questions, and find out what they need. Resist the urge to judge a client as noncompliant when they decline recommendations. Instead try to look for an underlying reason, which may lead to an opportunity to connect.

—SARA TAYLOR, RVT

People try so hard to make their life perfect, and we as a profession are often perfectionists. Life is not that easy, we are going to mess up. Intent is so important. If you have good intentions and lead with good intentions, that is a good place to start.

—OMAR FARIAS, VMD

Invest in your team.
Employers and managers should recognize the value of bilingual employees and compensate them accordingly.

—SARA TAYLOR, RVT

Take a self-assessment (such as the one offered by the AVMA) and encourage your team members to as well. This can be humbling, as you may not recognize where you have biases.

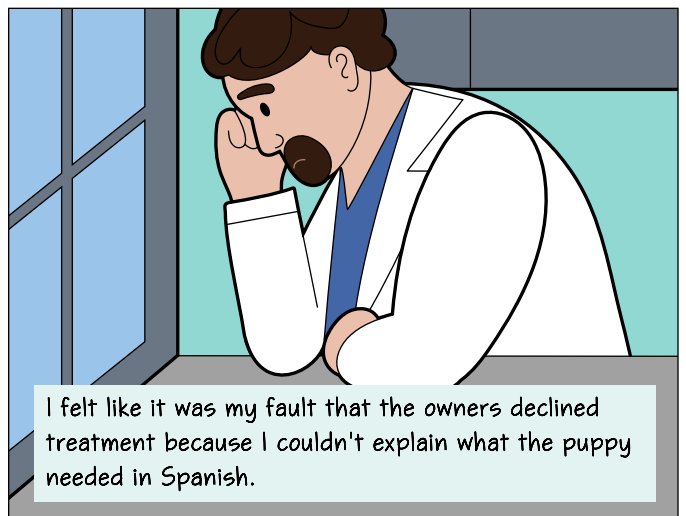
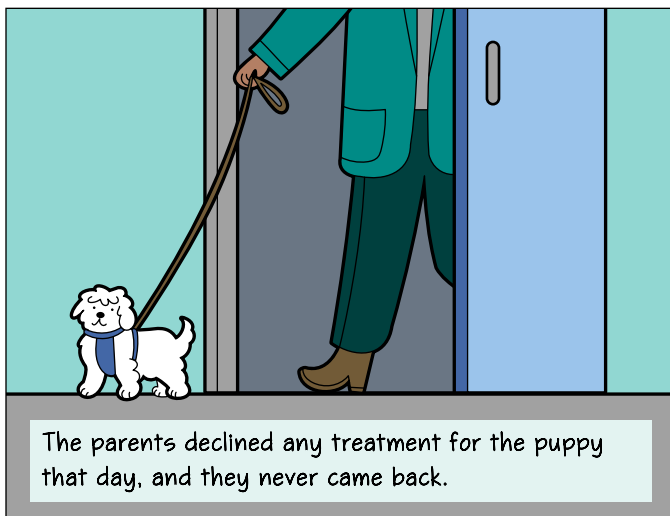
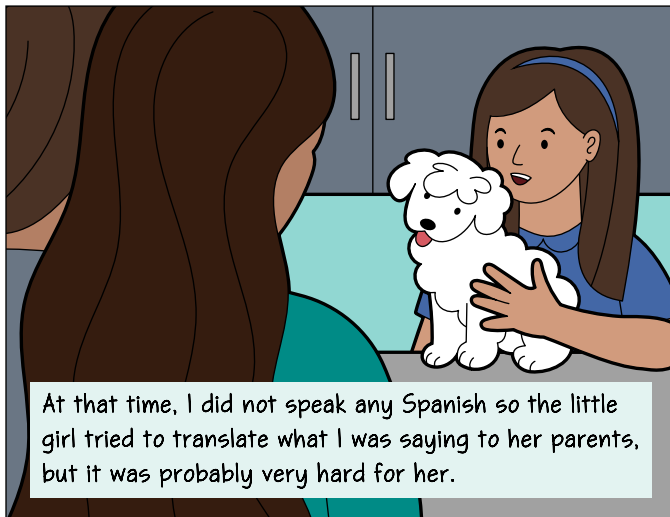
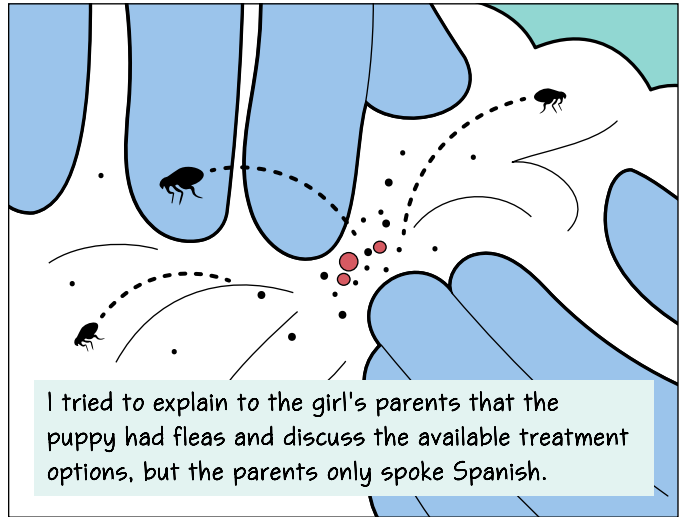
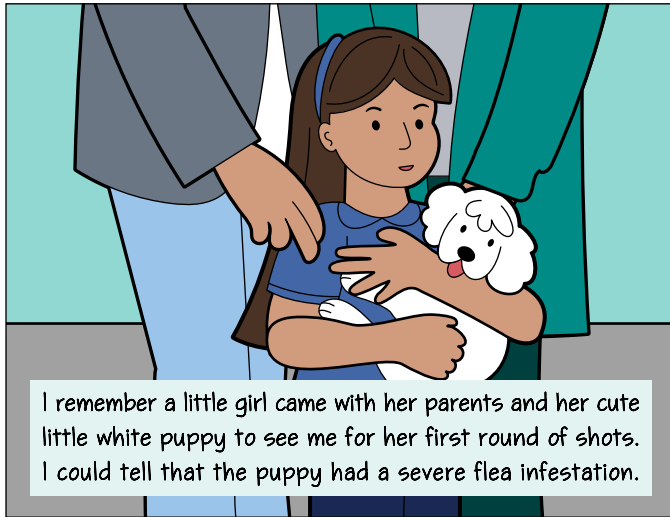
—MARINA TEJADA, DVM

People want to work for a mission. If clinics don't have a clear mission on how they are serving the community, it can be hard to prioritize cultural competency.

—TYLER PRIMAVERA, DVM

A story of failed communication

with Tyler Primavera, DVM



“ That was part of my inspiration to learn Spanish and ultimately found Vetspacito. I've been learning Spanish for 2 years, and through Vetspacito we have created a series of videos that are on YouTube that explain important topics like the importance of bloodwork and radiographs in Spanish to clients who need this education in their own language. That way veterinary teams without a bilingual staff member can refer their clients to these resources and help them have a better understanding of the recommendations the team is making. ”

—Tyler Primavera, DVM



Takeaways



Language barriers between veterinary staff and clients can be a huge barrier to understanding and consenting to care.



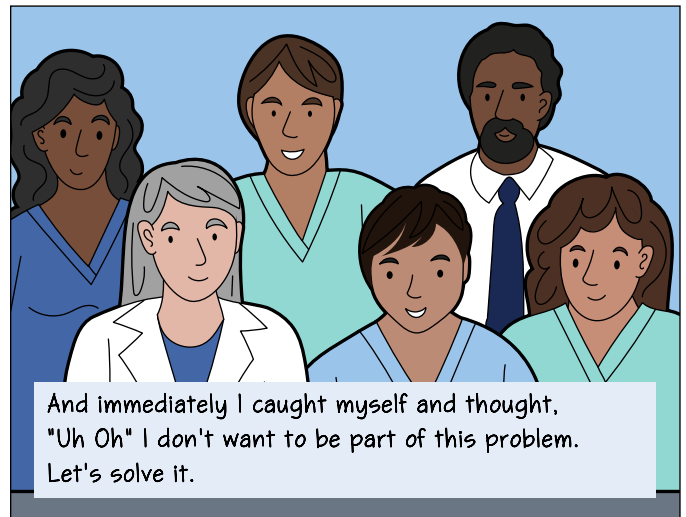
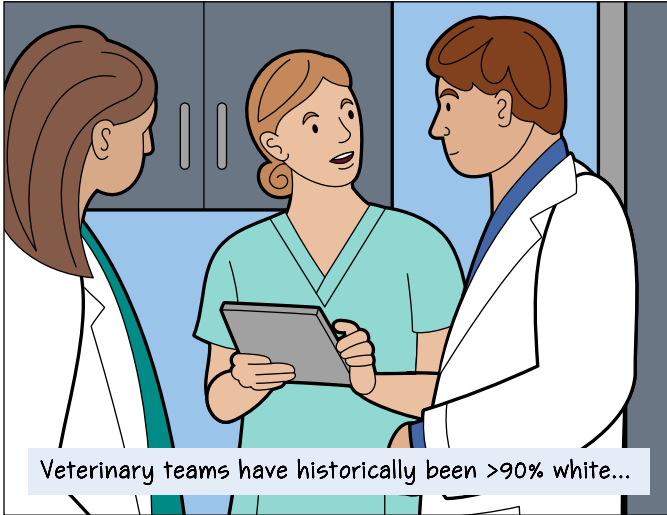
While bilingual family members are often used to translating, they don't always have the medical knowledge needed to adequately explain the topics the veterinary team needs to discuss. This is especially true when children serve as translators.



Having bilingual staff members who not only have language skills but also medical knowledge can make a huge difference in clients' understanding and comfort level with the recommendations made for their pet. Even in cases where no one on staff speaks the client's language, there are many options for offsite translation services that can facilitate understanding.

Hiring in a multicultural society

with Sara Taylor, RVT



“ I'm big on adding diversity to teams and making sure we represent the communities we serve. This means being intentional about hiring bilingual and valuing bilingual. This may also mean not always requiring previous experience from potential staff members and being willing to train from the ground up. This investment in our staff can lead to higher retention and satisfaction and increased diversity within the team.

A few years ago, we identified a veterinary resource desert in the San Francisco area. We were able to learn more about the area and to find out what their needs were and what languages were spoken. Under the direction of Dr. Jena Valdez, we started our first Community Veterinary Clinic in that area. It was staffed with vet assistants and CSRs who were bilingual and many of whom lived in the community along with bilingual doctors. It is fun to see in action and to see that it is possible. It's exciting!

—Sara Taylor, RVT



Takeaways



Increasing the diversity of veterinary teams requires intentional effort from hiring managers.



Communication skills, including knowledge of a second language and an ability to engage with clients from diverse communities, can be just as important to a veterinary team as animal handling and other technical skills.



Hiring team members who reflect the makeup of the community is a great way to increase access to care, especially in underserved communities and veterinary resource deserts.



Take home tips from the panelists



Have all members of the team complete a cultural competency self-assessment ([like this one from the AVMA](#)) to identify areas where additional training and support would be helpful. It can be humbling, but it's an important first step!



Prioritize cultural competency training just as you would training for cybersecurity and harassment. That way, all team members can be more intentional about their efforts to be welcoming and respectful of others.



Utilize resources that resonate with the community the practice serves. This can include documents and videos translated into other languages where appropriate. Hire and compensate bilingual staff accordingly.



Consider tools such as telehealth and home visits where appropriate to help improve access to care in the community.



Invite team members and clients to bring their whole selves to the practice. This can include demonstrating curiosity about cultural attributes that are different from your own. Be aware, however, that not every individual will want to take on the responsibility of teaching others about their unique cultural attributes or be defined by them.



Whenever possible, assume the best intent when there is a misunderstanding. Practice humility and curiosity to help foster understanding and trust.



By the same token, practice self-compassion. Veterinary professionals tend to be perfectionists, *Farías* offered, which can lead to guilt and shame. "Own your mistakes and move on. Don't be too hard on yourself."



Additional ways to support a culturally competent veterinary practice:

- Enforcing a no-tolerance policy on bullying, hate speech, and any discriminatory behavior by hospital personnel and clients.
- Soliciting feedback from employees on ways to improve interpersonal communication and collegiality in the workplace.
- Providing accommodations for employees who observe specific religious fasting or prayer rituals.
- Acknowledging and celebrating holidays and other observances (including Black History Month, Hispanic Heritage Month, and Pride Month) that are important to members of the team and the community.
- Utilizing translation services as needed to aid communication with clients when an adult interpreter is not available on-site.
- Conducting outreach efforts to learn about the community, to improve communication and delivery of care in a way that is accessible and approachable.

Additional resources

Book recommendations:

[The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures](#)

[Spanish for Veterinarians](#)

[Spanish Terminology for the Veterinary Team](#)

Website recommendations:

[BlendVET DEIB Certifications for Veterinary Teams](#)

[LatinX Veterinary Medical Association \(LatinX VMA\)](#)

[Pride Veterinary Medical Community \(Pride VMC\)](#)

[Vetspacito](#)

[Pawsibilities Vet Med](#)

[Multicultural Veterinary Medical Association \(MCVMA\)](#)

[AVMA Journey for Teams](#)

[AVMA Client Brochures in Spanish and Other Languages](#)

[Vetmedspanish: RACE Approved CE](#)
(Use code AAHA to save 10%)

[New Client Form \(Bilingual\)](#)

[Spanish for Vet Pros: RACE Approved CE](#)

[Pets for Life Program Providing Culturally Competent veterinary Care to Underserved Communities from the Humane Society of the United States](#)

AAHA's resources:

[Fostering Cultural Competency in Veterinary Medicine](#)

[Webinar Takeaways: Starting Your Cultural Competence Journey](#)

[Proactive Personal Pronoun Use: Creating a Culture of Inclusion in Your Practice](#)

[The 5 Critical Elements of Leadership: The Link Between Leadership and Culture](#)

[Reprogramming Team Culture Toward Equity, Dignity, and Empowerment](#)



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