

PET OWNERSHIP & ANTI-VAXXERS: Combating Misinformation in Pet Vaccination

Anti-vaxxers—those opposed to *nearly* all, or even all, vaccines—are gaining momentum. Their claims are based largely on misguided and even made up notions regarding human vaccines, and even more distorted information regarding vaccines for animals.

However, this isn't a small cult without impact. According to the Centers for Disease Control, there are various measles outbreaks in the U.S. with an unparalleled number of sickened individuals. In New York City, as of April 15, 2019, there have been 329 confirmed cases of measles in Brooklyn and Queens since October of last year. The CDC says this only happens because people aren't vaccinating.

In April, The World Health Organization (WHO) listed “vaccine hesitancy”—defined as the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate, despite the availability of vaccines—among the top 10 public health threats of 2019.

WHO indicates that vaccination is one of the most cost-effective ways to avoid disease, preventing two to three million deaths annually, and an additional 1.5 million more deaths could be prevented if vaccines were more widely available globally. With a vaccine on board, there's typically no need for treatment because disease is prevented, which also saves millions in medical costs across the globe.

The concern is an outgrowth with undocumented effects of vaccines, such as allegedly causing autism or various autoimmune illnesses. Human health aside,

there's no peer-reviewed study confirming that vaccines cause, or even contribute to, these problems in pets. In fact, autism has yet to be described in dogs and cats.

Lack of research to support claims doesn't seem to bother the so-called anti-vaxxers. And some of those anti-vaxxers have pets and carry their opinions over to making their pet health care decisions.

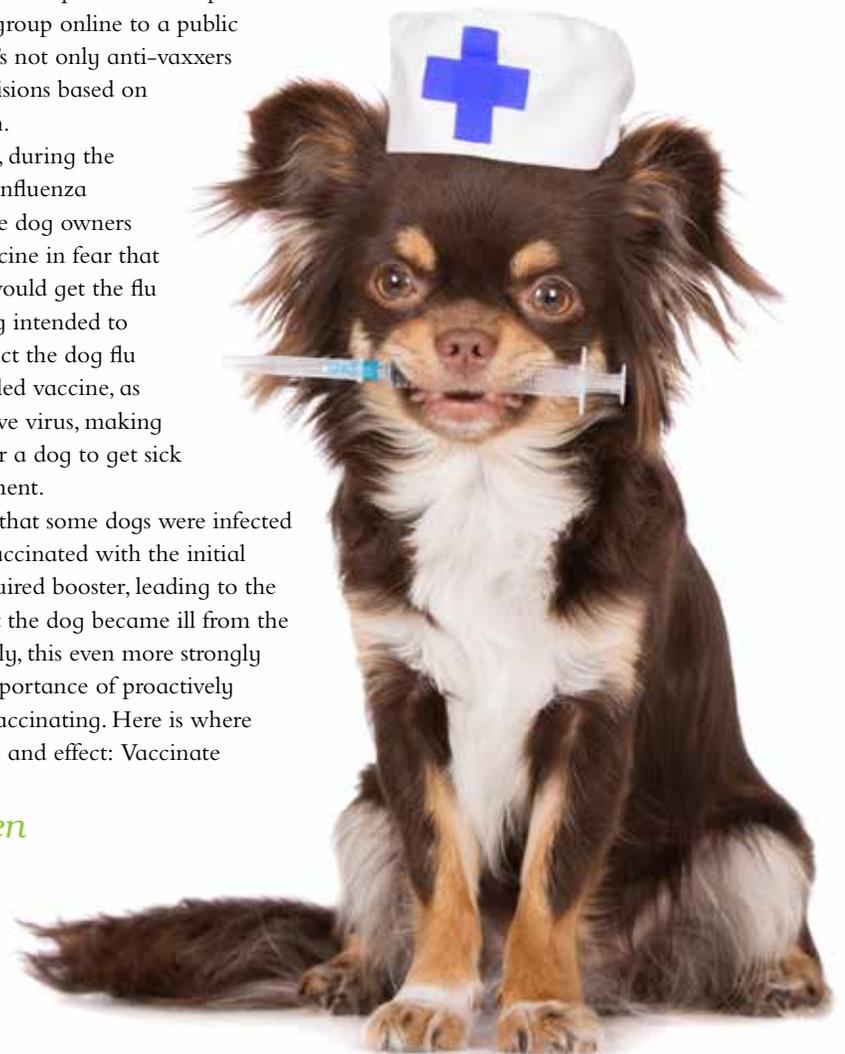
One common complaint regarding vaccines is “the vaccination will make my pet sick.” This is an example of how misinformation can spread from a spark begun by one group online to a public wildfire. And it's not only anti-vaxxers who make decisions based on misinformation.

For example, during the H3N2 canine influenza outbreaks, some dog owners refused the vaccine in fear that their best pal would get the flu from something intended to prevent it. In fact the dog flu vaccine is a killed vaccine, as opposed to a live virus, making it impossible for a dog to get sick from the treatment.

It is possible that some dogs were infected before being vaccinated with the initial shot or the required booster, leading to the impression that the dog became ill from the vaccine. Actually, this even more strongly suggests the importance of proactively preemptively vaccinating. Here is where there is a cause and effect: Vaccinate

enough dogs, and there is no dog flu outbreak in the first place. Even veterinary professionals have been known to say, “Well, I don't see it here in my area.” And then it happens there—and it's too late.

As veterinary technicians/nurses, the good news is that you're on the front lines, and are able to dispel myths. But the reality is, that's not always easy to do. Some people are so entrenched in their beliefs that it's difficult to sway them with facts.



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Clients often say, “We don’t see distemper or rabies anymore, so why should I vaccinate?” At least for rabies, the vaccine is required by law almost everywhere. You can describe to clients what life would be like in the U.S. if there were a rabies epidemic in dogs. The government would likely cull dogs. Who knows what would happen? This may be an extreme example to use with clients; a better one may be leptospirosis.

Explain to clients just how sick their dog can get from leptospirosis and how they conceivably may even die. Explain that leptospirosis is zoonotic, and if that client happens to have a toddler it can be spread to them or other family members, which is all the more reason to vaccinate.

Some clients are skeptical and want proof that you’re not just trying to sell vaccines. In these cases, send them to the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) online Lifestyle-Based Vaccine Calculator that addresses this issue for dogs. You might even go through it with them, checking the boxes that describe the dog’s lifestyle, and the algorithm recommends the most important vaccines.

For concerned clients, and also in conjunction with guidelines, one solution is to have clients return for vaccines over two visits.

Sometimes it’s not the “you’re over-vaccinating my pet” issue—but hesitancy solely because the pet “hates” being given a shot. The human-animal bond is very

strong. For example, some pet parents become anxious about thunderstorms solely because they know their dog is about to respond negatively. The same can be true for veterinary exams and any associated needle phobias. You might want to remove the term “shots” from your practice vocabulary. That’s where Cat Friendly Veterinary Practices, Fear Free certified practices, and certified veterinary nurses/technicians and veterinarians come in. We can easily provide enough distractions and rewards that the pet (and their parents) isn’t traumatized by the process of getting those stingy vaccines.

Still, increasingly we’re faced with some clients wanting near-zero vaccines protocols as their goal. In two states, anti-vax activists have sought to go the legislative route. The first such effort, a Connecticut House Bill, was filed in the state legislature in 2017, which would have permitted veterinarians not to administer rabies booster shots if an animal’s titers were above a certain threshold. The bill would have also allowed vets to adjust vaccines, by administering



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smaller doses to smaller dogs, though there is no science to demonstrate the validity of that practice. The bill failed, as did a similar proposal in New Hampshire. But more proposed legislation is on the way, which would chip away at the authority of veterinary professionals to make decisions based on science.

The anti-vaxxers suggest they are contemporary thinkers, pushing medicine forward to do what’s “natural.” However, there’s nothing natural about withholding vaccines that could save animal lives and protect the community. **J**

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ABOUT STEVE DALE

Steve Dale, CABC (certified animal behavior consultant) is co-editor of *Decoding Your Dog* (authored by members of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists) and is a contributor to many veterinary books including *The Cat: Clinical Medicine and Management* (edited Dr. Susan Little) and *Treatment and Care of the Geriatric Veterinary Patient* (edited Dr. Mary Gardner and Dr. Dani McVety). He’s a columnist for *Veterinary Practice News* and *Pet Vet Magazine*, and a contributing editor at *CATSTER*. He is host of two national radio shows, and is heard on WGN radio, Chicago. He serves on the Board of Directors of the Winn Feline Foundation and Human Animal Bond Association. And he speaks at conferences around the world. Among his many honors the AVMA Humane Award and he’s in the Dog Writer’s Association Hall of Fame. And is a frequent speaker at conferences around the world. His blog is www.stevedale.tv.

