



I am
Sorry

The importance of saying sorry

A well timed and authentic apology can nip complaints in the bud, argues VCNZ's Wayne Ricketts.

“SORRY SEEMS TO be the hardest word.”

So sang Elton John in 1976. In a recent complaint case the owner commented that the veterinarian had never said sorry, adding that an apology would have gone a long way to gaining closure.

How good are you at saying sorry? According to Marie Bismark, writing in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* in 2009, health practitioners, particularly doctors, have difficulty apologising. Have things changed in 2016? Our experience is that many owners still tell us they just wanted an apology.

The number of complaints that have been avoided because veterinarians have acknowledged mistakes and apologised is unknown, but according to the UK NHS Litigation Authority (NHSLA), poor communication may increase the likelihood of a patient pursuing a complaint.

Internationally, it's been shown that where an adverse event occurs, further action usually only occurs when one or more of the following factors are present: miscommunication, no communication, inattentiveness, apathy, delay and rudeness.

The NHSLA recommends not delaying apologising for any reason, even if there is a formal complaint or claim.

In the New Zealand context, the Health and Disability Commissioner has commented that “the way a practitioner handles the situation at the outset can influence a patient’s decision about what further action to take, and an appropriate apology may prevent the problem escalating into a complaint to HDC”.

Bismark¹ says that those who deal with adverse events on a regular basis have long believed that “patients primarily want two things when things go wrong: first, an apology; second, reassurance (to the extent possible) that steps have been taken to reduce the likelihood of a repeat of the event”.

WHY IS IT HARD TO APOLOGISE?

There can be a number of reasons:

- » Embarrassment and shame about letting the client down.
- » Guilt about not meeting expectations.
- » Apologies being seen as a sign of weakness or failure.
- » Fear of recrimination and damage to professional reputation.
- » Fear of admitting liability.
- » Anger about what happened and loss of confidence in abilities.
- » It's a difficult conversation to have.

Owners want to hear ‘I’m sorry’ when things go wrong, and an honest explanation. A ‘deny and defend’ approach is not helpful and often leads to the issue being escalated. Not acknowledging and discussing mistakes also means not learning from them.

Before making an apology, it's worthwhile taking some time to reflect. This prevents jumping to the wrong conclusions and allows the veterinarian to explain to the client what happened and why. It can be helpful to discuss the case with colleagues, senior veterinarians, peer groups, the NZVA, the VPIS (if the practice is insured through the society you need to check with them) or a council staff member.

An apology needs to be authentic. There's no value in making a ‘non-apology’

that doesn't show humility or compassion or a commitment to learning from what has happened. There should be no attempt to deflect responsibility; for example, “I am sorry Fluffy has died but if you had brought her in sooner we could have saved her life”. This might be true, but it won't help a grieving owner. An apology should not be made on behalf of, or by, someone else, or used to blame another staff member. Non-apologies also risk issues being escalated.


WHAT'S AN AUTHENTIC APOLOGY?

Bismark says that an authentic apology is likely to include:

- 1 recognition of the event that caused harm (“I am really sorry that this has happened”)
- 2 an expression of regret and sympathy (partial apology, as in “I acknowledge how upset you must be feeling”)
- 3 an acknowledgement of responsibility – where appropriate – once the facts are fully understood (full apology, as in “We are going to review what happened and we'll get back to you as soon as we can”)
- 4 effective reparation
- 5 one or more opportunities to meet again after a period of reflection.

We've not been able to give this topic the space it deserves. Much of the information and quotes come from Bismark's article, which we recommend reading. You can also read a longer article, ‘Harnessing the Power of Apology’, by Vince Peterson in *VetScript*, March 2010, which is also based on Bismark's article.

To quote another song, Justin Bieber's *Sorry*: ‘Is it too late to say sorry now?’

Answer: No, it's not. 

REFERENCE:

1. **Bismark M.** The power of apology. *New Zealand Medical Journal* 122, 1304, 2009.