Using standardized scales to assess fear at veterinary visits – interrater and intrarater reliability

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Behavioral, emotional and physical signs of distress are increasingly recognized in veterinary patients during routine care. Fear and distress are humane and welfare concerns, themselves, but such behavior also may result in deferred veterinary care and less thorough veterinary evaluations. The first step in preventing and treating this fear is to routinely assess it. The aim of this study was to assess the inter-rater reliability of two 5 point, subjective scales evaluating the dog's behavior during entry into the exam room and throughout the exam, and one benchmarked, behavioral scale that evaluated 8 behavioral components for entry into the exam room and for each of 10 steps of a standardized physical exam. We also assessed repeatability/intra-rater reliability for these scales for a subset of dogs studied. Dogs (N=35) were enrolled in a randomized, placebo-controlled, double blind study testing a novel pharmaceutical intervention for fear associated with veterinary exams. Dogs were videotaped at the baseline/no intervention visit and 2 weeks later at the interventional (compound/placebo) visit. All videos were coded and blinded with respect to visit order and treatment. Four people evaluated all videos: 3 early stage residents and an experienced specialist/researcher. As part of a series of studies on this population of dogs, we report on inter-rater reliability for all scores among the residents and comparing the specialist's v. residents' the scoring, and the residents' intra-rater reliability/repeatability. These data suggest that a standardized scale can be used reliability by multiple people and may be an essential component of a valid baseline behavioral database