

If Your Vet Shames You Like This, High-Tail It Out of There

They're pulling out new stops with name-calling, shaming and belittling you. Don't put up with this kind of arrogance implying you're a freaking idiot. In so many ways, you're more knowledgeable than your accuser. As a bonus, here's how to turn the tables on shaming vets.

Analysis by [Dr. Karen Shaw Becker](#)

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Pet owners are asking the right questions about vaccines — they are the questions veterinarians should be asking, but aren't
- As more pet parents question the wisdom of repetitive and unnecessary vaccines, some conventional veterinarians are labeling these clients "anti-vaxxers" and digging in their heels
- If your vet is more casual than cautious about vaccines, or can't adequately address your concerns about over-vaccination, it's up to you to advocate for your dog or cat
- The conventional veterinary community would be wise to reevaluate its position on repetitive vaccinations and make antibody titer tests available and affordable
- In the meantime, it will continue to be up to pet parents to explain the difference between responsibly vaccinating and an "anti-vaxxer" to their veterinarians, and insure their animal companions aren't receiving unnecessary noncore vaccines, or boosters against diseases to which they're already immune

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More and more pet parents are questioning conventional vaccine "wisdom" with regard to dogs and cats. They're asking questions like, "Does my pet really need all those vaccines," and "Why do we automatically revaccinate pets all their lives, but not people," and "What if my pet gets sick after a vaccine?"

This is actually an encouraging trend, because pet owners are asking the very questions veterinarians should be asking themselves, but aren't. In fact, many conventional vets call concerned pet owners "anti-vaxxers," suggesting these clients are conspiracy theorists who are against all vaccines in every situation.

There's a monumental difference between responsibly vaccinating your pet and being an "anti-vaxxer." Vets who presume they're the same are only further demonstrating their ignorance on the subject.

From my perspective as an extremely cautious vaccinator and titer test advocate, if veterinarians were more concerned about what type and how many vaccines they're injecting into their patients, clients could relax and be less anxious about the likelihood their pet is receiving potentially unnecessary and harmful vaccines.

Vet Laments the Increasing Number of 'Anti-Vaxxer' Clients in Her Practice

I'm hesitant to quote from an article on anti-vaxxers I ran across recently, written by a conventional vet (Dr. Sarah J. Wooten) for a conventional veterinary journal, because it's really quite condescending and offensive. Unfortunately, I suspect it's a fairly accurate illustration of the way many vets erroneously view pet owners who are concerned about vaccines.

The purpose of the article is to warn other veterinarians that the anti-vaccination movement has spread to pets. Wooten writes "... some of your clients may firmly believe that vaccines cause autism in their pets and may refuse lifesaving inoculations."¹

I'm not sure how many pet owners worried about autism Wooten has encountered in her practice, but I doubt it's very many. I think she's using the autism example (a diagnosis that currently doesn't exist in veterinary medicine) to illustrate just how supposedly misinformed, misguided and perhaps downright crazy anti-vaxxer pet parents are.

Do People Who Refuse to Allow Their Pets To Be Over-Vaccinated Deserve the 'Anti-Vaxxer' Label?

"How can you promote the health and safety of your patients when their owners' decisions to refuse vaccines threaten herd health," Wooten ponders. "And how do you reason with clients who insist on the harmful effects of vaccines against overwhelming evidence to the contrary?"

Seriously? Why would she need to "reason with" perfectly reasonable pet parents who have very legitimate concerns about the potential for adverse reactions to vaccines? Note she doesn't mention whether she's trying to sell initial vaccines (**puppy and kitten shots**), revaccinations (boosters) or noncore vaccines (e.g., bordetella) to hesitant pet parents. This is a hugely important distinction many casual vaccinators refuse to acknowledge when they complain about anti-vaxxers.

The term anti-vaxxer generally indicates someone who's against any and all vaccines. It should never be used to describe someone who refuses to over-vaccinate an animal companion, but I believe that's how many veterinarians choose to use it.

In my experience, most pet owners understand very well the importance of the initial series of core vaccines given to pups and kittens. In fact, many very young pets are kept completely isolated by owners fearful they'll be exposed to a life-threatening disease before they're fully immunized. My guess is Wooten is primarily trying to administer revaccinations and noncore vaccines, and she's getting some reasonable pushback from vaccine-savvy clients.

Again, there's a huge difference between too many vaccinations and protective vaccinations. Those of us (pet parents and vets) who are cautious vaccinators are not advocating never vaccinating under any circumstances. We're advocating the smart use of minimal vaccines to create immunity against disease in puppies and kittens, with follow-up titers for the lifetime of the pet.

Interestingly, upon admission to veterinary school students must all be vaccinated for rabies. My guess is Dr. Wooten does not boost herself annually or every three years with the rabies vaccine, so she too could be considered an "anti-vaxxer." Why aren't veterinarians continually boosted for rabies throughout their careers? Because we know this is

unnecessary (via titer testing) and could lead to other health consequences long term (for people, but not for pets, according to Wooten).

There's a big difference between creating protective immunity in a pet and creating vaccine toxicosis. Some veterinary vaccines are substantially more toxic than others. It's your job as your pet's advocate to know enough about the subject to make the best decisions for your animal companion. As my friend and colleague Dr. John Robb puts it:

"The job of veterinarians is to vaccinate to produce immunity with the smallest volume and the smallest number of vaccines to produce that immunity. Once the pet is immune, we're done."

Vet-to-Vet Suggestions for Managing Disobedient Pet Parents

Wooten offers tips to fellow veterinarians when they run up against anti-vaxxer clients who are "driven by fear." My comments follow her tips.

- **Tip: Don't debate about core vaccines. They are required** — The only core vaccine required by law is the rabies vaccine. If your puppy or kitten received the **full series of the other core vaccines** (e.g., distemper, parvo and adenovirus for dogs), my recommendation is to titer every three to five years to monitor ongoing immunity.

The truth is that many pets retain immunity throughout their lives after receiving their puppy or kitten shots. Revaccinating a pet who is already immune doesn't "boost" his immunity, but it does increase his risk for adverse reactions.

- **Tip: Don't assume that clients understand how vaccines work** — Apparently vets don't understand how they work, either, because if they did, they wouldn't revaccinate pets who are already immune. Instead, they would offer antibody titer testing to determine immunity, and for those pets who need boosters, they would give single agent (versus combo) vaccines against only the diseases with low titers.
- **Tip: Draw parallels to human health where applicable — for example, the recent whooping cough and measles outbreaks due to the rise in people not vaccinating their children. Educate, don't scare** — My advice: Ignore any vet who attempts to draw parallels between human and veterinary vaccines. There are problems with both, but they're simply not comparable. Any vet who brings up disease outbreaks in children as a way of convincing you to accept additional pet vaccines is most definitely using scare tactics.
- **Tip: Going hardcore? Drawing a line in the sand? Practice what you preach by firing anti-vaxxer clients** — Interestingly, I always recommend that pet owners fire any veterinarian who's a "hardcore" or casual vaccinator. You are ultimately responsible for and in charge of your pet's health. If your veterinarian has no respect for your role in your pet's life or your legitimate concerns about too many vaccines, it's time to find a new vet.
- **Tip: Don't take it personally. Even though it feels like personal rejection of your role as wise counselor when clients refuse to follow your vaccine recommendations, it's really not about you** — Time to check that bloated ego at the door! If a veterinarian genuinely wants to be a wise counselor to her clients regarding vaccines, she needs to become a subject matter expert. At a minimum she needs to be able to explain why repeated revaccinations are preferable to titer tests (hint: they aren't). To be a wise vaccine counselor, your vet must be at least as concerned about over-vaccination as you are.
- **Tip: Above all, remember that the client wants to be heard, wishes to be respected, seeks credible information, desires informed consent and wants to be involved in decisions about their pet's**

healthcare — Great tip!

And I have a few additional tips for my fellow veterinarians. Pet owners who are concerned about vaccines don't want or deserve to be called anti-vaxxers. They don't want to be disrespected for refusing unnecessary or questionable vaccines. They don't consider "Because I said so" or "Because that's what I learned in vet school" to be credible guidance or an argument for informed consent.

Bottom line: Pet parents most definitely want to be involved in decisions about their dog's or cat's healthcare. And from my experience, what they want most of all is to feel they can trust their veterinarian to do what's best for their furry family member.

Questions to Ask About Every Vaccine Your Vet Recommends

- Is your dog or cat healthy? If he has allergies, endocrine issues, organ dysfunction, cancer (or is a cancer survivor) or another medical issue he's not a candidate to receive vaccines.
- Is the vaccine is for a life-threatening disease (this eliminates most noncores immediately)?
- Does your pet have the opportunity to be exposed to the disease?
- Is the vaccine considered both effective and safe (most aren't, especially the bacterins).
- Has your pet ever had an **adverse reaction to a vaccine**? Do not vaccinate a pet that has had a previous vaccine reaction of any kind.

Understand that several noncore vaccines are only available in combination with other vaccines, some of which are core. I recommend you check with your vet to insure none of the noncore vaccines are being piggybacked on core vaccines your pet receives. Unfortunately, most traditional vets do not carry single vaccines, so it's a good idea to ask to see the vaccine vial before assuming your pet is only receiving one agent at a time.

Sources and References

¹ [dvm360 October 3, 2017](#)
