

Relationship Between Ownership and Enrichment in Dogs With and Without Separation Anxiety or Noise Phobia

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Introduction

It is estimated that 17% of dogs demonstrate signs of separation anxiety (SA), and 40% demonstrate signs of noise phobia (NP), negatively affecting their welfare^{5,7}. Veterinary practitioners can use questions to quickly predict whether or not a dog is predisposed to either of these problems, and identify problems before they escalate, and identify ways to help the client decrease the severity of or even prevent these problems during annual visits. If practitioners have a few questions they can incorporate into every visit, it could give them a rapid method of determining whether or not they need to look further into potential behavioral problems of their patients. Often veterinarians refer dogs with problem behaviors to trainers, who are ill-equipped to handle dogs with emotional problems, and legally cannot prescribe medications to alleviate anxiety.

The effects of SA and NP on the health and welfare of the dogs can manifest themselves both physically and psychologically^{2,6}. It has been shown that many owners of dogs with SA and/or NP are not likely to seek out professional veterinary help to address their problems, so by incorporating specific questions into annual checkups, the large number of owners who were not going to speak to a veterinarian about their dog's behavioral issues might get the help they need^{1,4,5,8}.

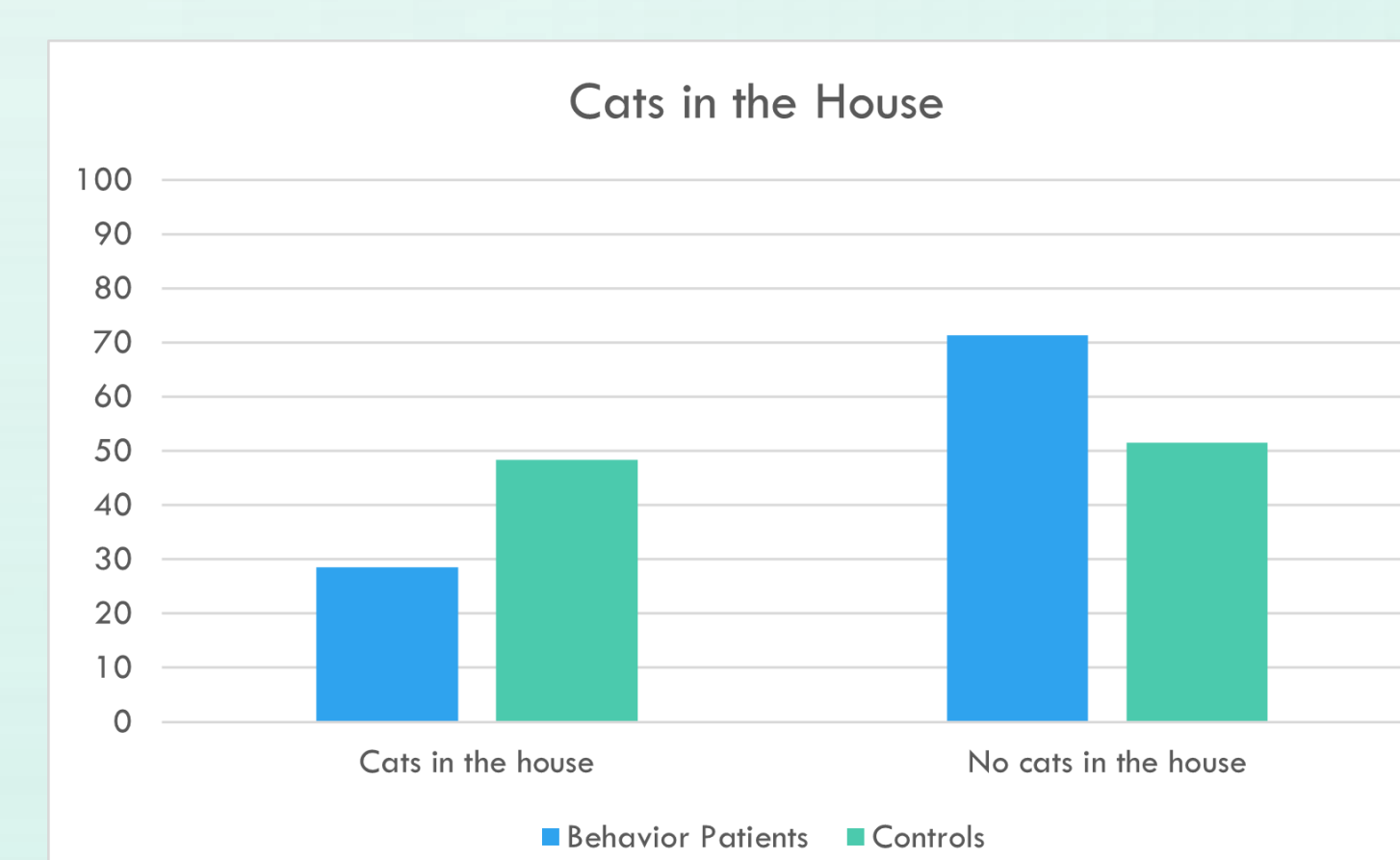
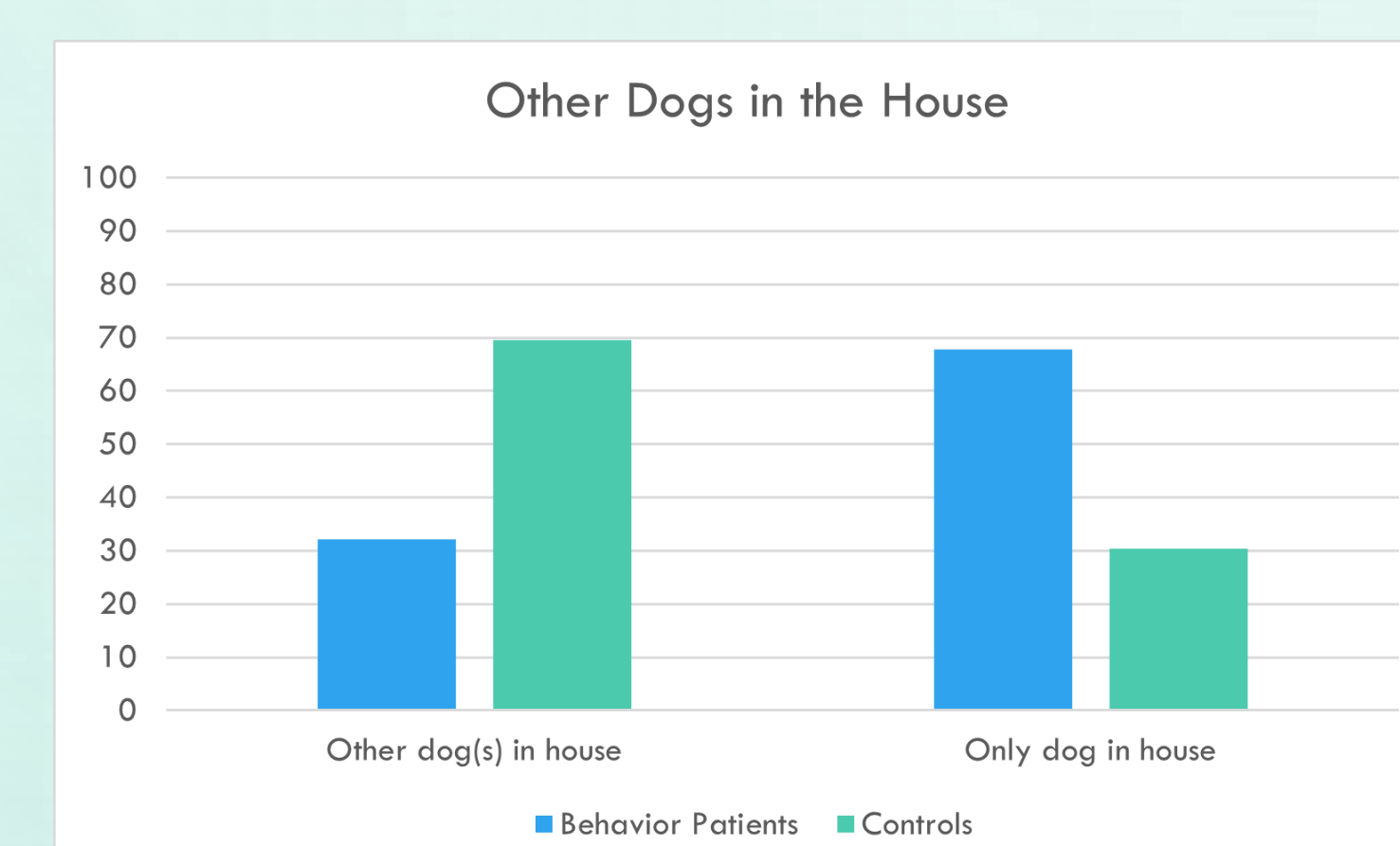
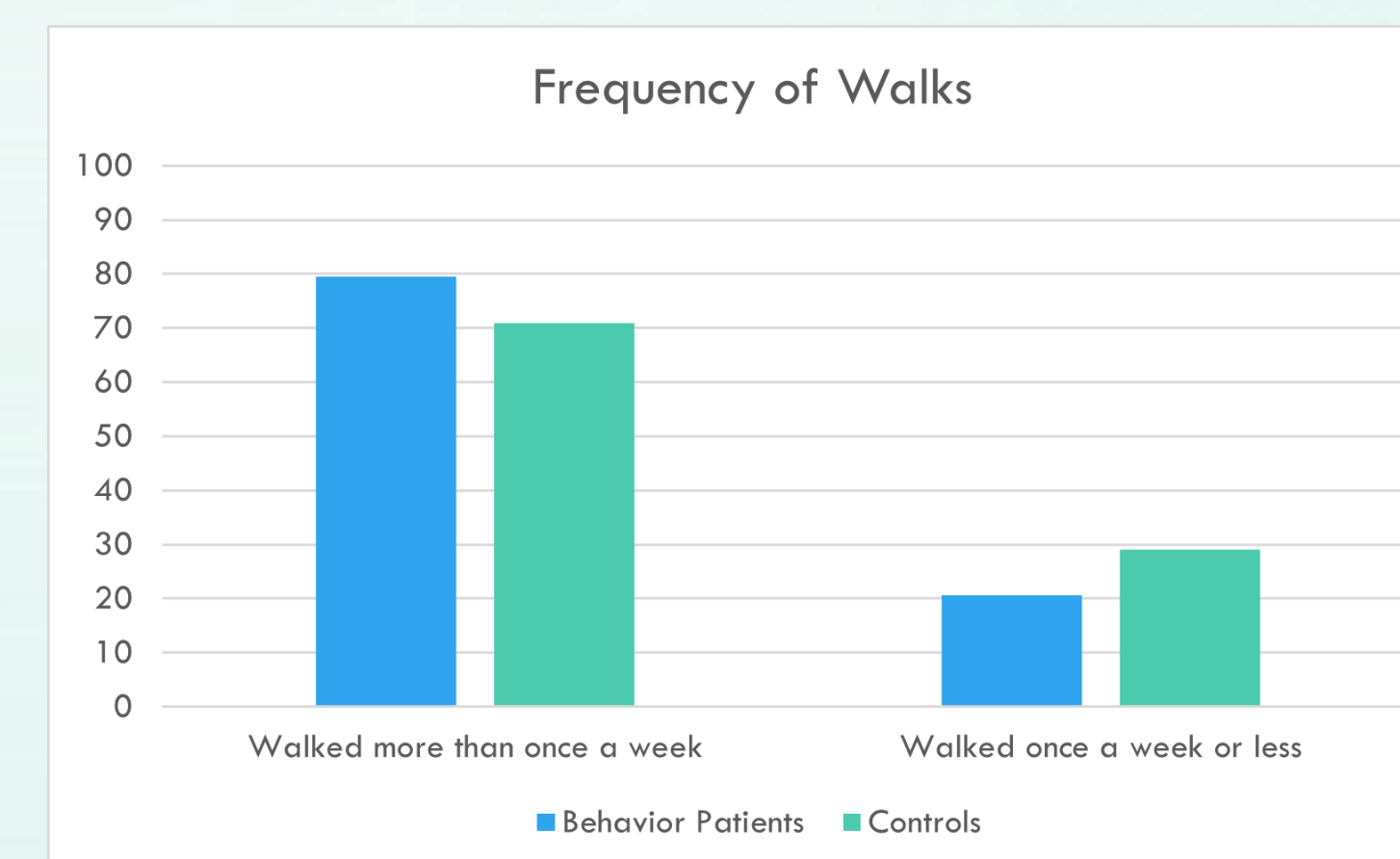
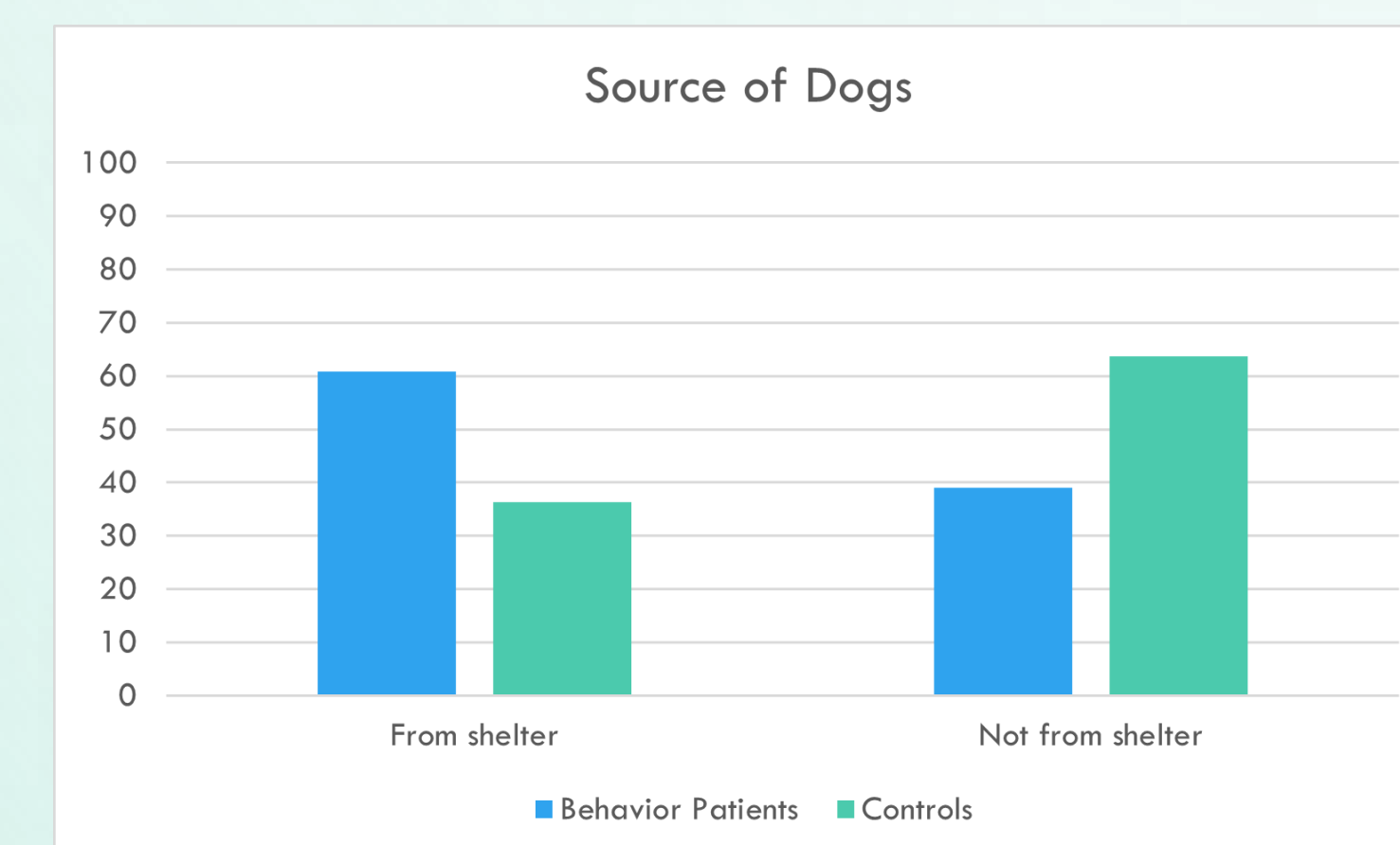
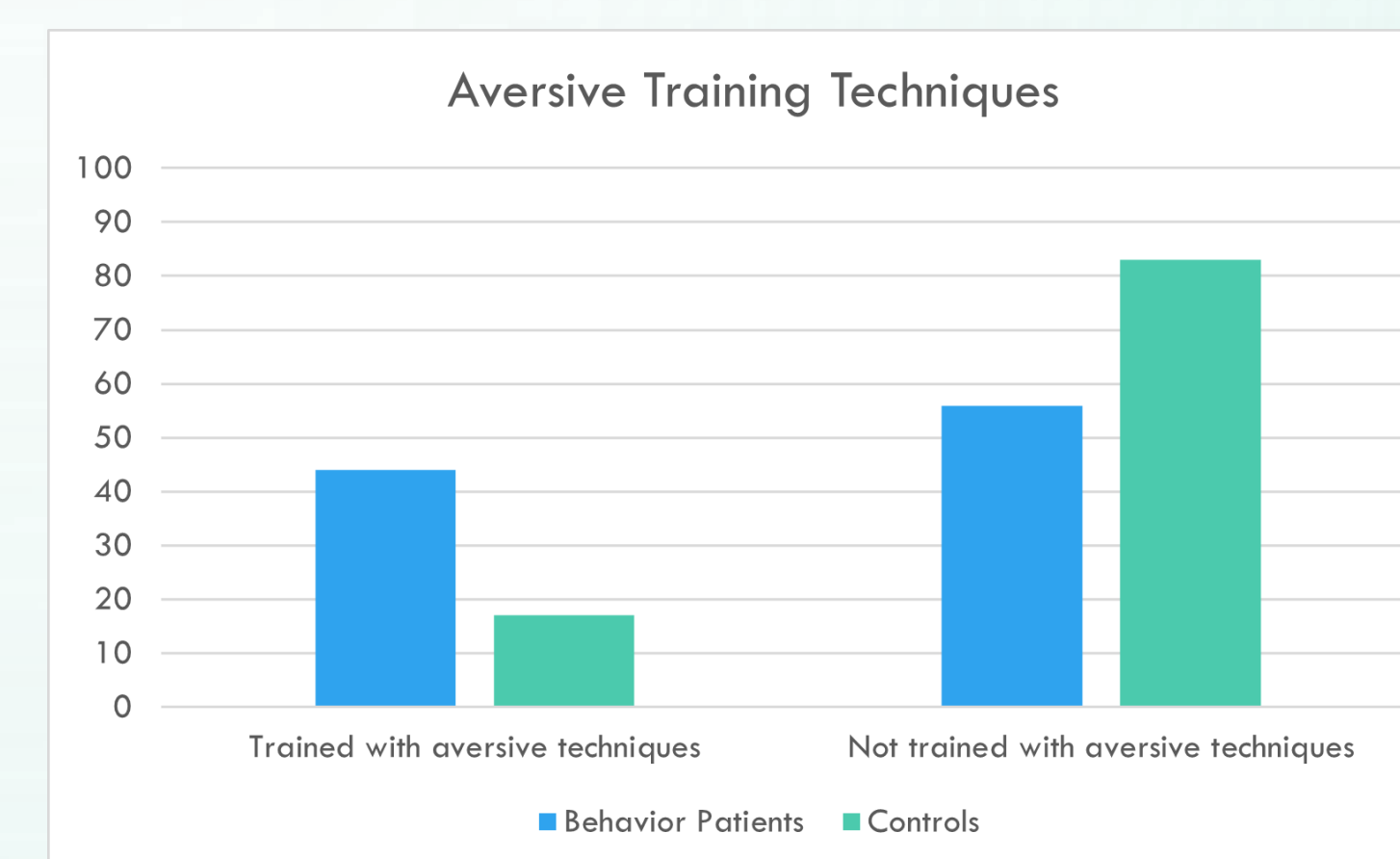
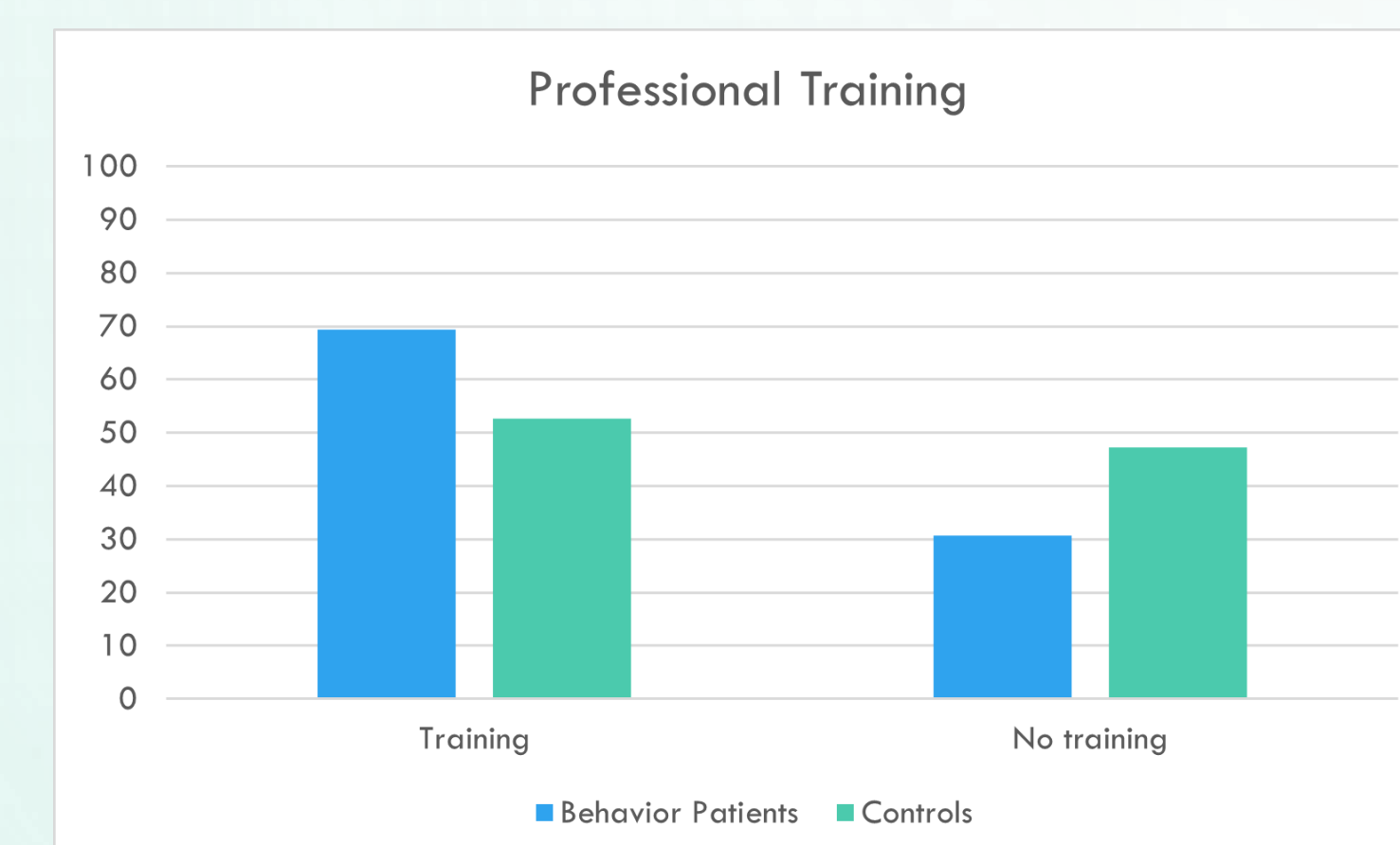
Hypotheses

Dogs diagnosed with separation anxiety and/or noise phobia will be more likely than dogs not diagnosed...

- To have attended a dog training class
- To have been trained using aversive techniques
- To have been adopted from a shelter
- To have been exercised significantly less

Materials & Methods

- IRB proposal
- Retrospective data collection from VMACS for Behavior Service canine patients ages 1-10 diagnosed with SA and/or NP from 1/1/17-5/31/2021
- Selected control group of healthy dogs from Community Practice ages 1-10 that visited between those same dates and did not have a diagnosis of SA or NP in VMACS
- Survey sent to owners of Community Practice patients
 - Behavior via modified C-BARQ[®] (validated survey); other questions
 - Demographics
- Data collection, coding, and analyses
 - χ^2 and Fisher's exact for categorical data
 - Pearson's correlation for ordinal data
 - Significance set at $p < 0.05$



Exclusions

- Behavior Service patients:
 - 187 SA and 79 NP downloaded from VMACS
 - 95 SA and 4 NP excluded for not meeting diagnoses criteria
 - 30 SA and 17 NP excluding for missing questionnaires
 - *Final data was used from 62 SA and 58 NP patients (8 had both=112 dogs total)*
- Community practice patients
 - 1158 downloaded from VMACS
 - 93 excluded for not meeting diagnoses criteria, 169 excluded due to multiple patients in household, 14 excluded for lack of contact information, 882 emails sent
 - 237 survey responses (27% response rate), 62 had too high CBARQ, 24 reported behavior problems, 7 unhealthy, 12 died, 37 too old, 34 incomplete, 5 did not agree to continue the survey
 - *56 patients used in control data*

Acknowledgments

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Results

Statistically significant ($P < 0.5$) results include that dogs with SA and/or NP are:

- More likely to have been professionally trained
- More likely to have been trained using aversive techniques
- More likely to have been adopted from a shelter
- Less likely to live in a house with other dogs
- Less likely to live in a house with cats

The difference in frequency of walks between dogs with SA and/or NP and dogs without was not statistically significant.

Discussion

It is possible that frustration from having a dog with SA or NP could result in increased likelihood to use aversive training when non-aversive training is not effective. It could also explain why dogs are more likely to have been taken to professional training. However, both diagnoses are emotional problems, where training is ineffective. The relationship between adoption from shelters and dogs with separation anxiety has already been recognized in previous research¹. This information is something veterinarians could use when meeting a new client in order to help predict if the dog is likely to have or develop SA or NP. Frequency of walks was not significantly different between the two groups, so it might not be something that should be suggested to clients as a way to treat a dog's behavior problem. One potential suggestion that could be made is getting another dog or a cat; this may potentially alleviate the emotional issues these dogs are facing. However, this correlation has not been seen before^{3,5}.

Conclusions

It is important to address behavior problems in pets directly, not refer to trainers for emotional problems, and for owners to potentially consider adding another pet. There may be a heightened urgency to address behavior problems in dogs adopted from shelters. Further research is warranted.

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