

Concerns and Experiences of Accessing Veterinary Care During COVID-19



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Background and Aims

COVID-19 pandemic led to a number of restrictions to veterinary healthcare services in the UK and Republic of Ireland. This mixed-methods study aimed to:

- Explore dog owners' concerns and experiences related to accessing veterinary healthcare; and
- Describe owner-reported ability to access veterinary services.

Methods

Data were collected via: Survey 1, Follow-up survey, General public diary and diary feature included within Generation Pup, an ongoing longitudinal study (Fig. 1).

- Qualitative thematic analysis on open-ended survey questions and diaries;
- Chi Square statistics with Fisher's exact test correction, on close-ended survey questions, to compare outcomes of veterinary procedures/ treatments (i.e., 'occurred as planned', 'delayed', 'did not occur').

Table 1. Results from the follow-up survey on the impact of the COVID-19 (C19) pandemic on routine healthcare treatments for dogs for whom a particular procedure/ treatment was due, planned, or required.

Procedures/ treatments...	Neutering (%)	Worming (%)	Vaccination (%)	Nail Trimming (%)
...that did not take place due to C19	17.8	2.6	10.5	2.3
...that did not take place for reasons not related to C19	35.5	3.6	2.7	1.9
...that took place as planned	34.5	89.1	62.6	97.6
...that took place but was delayed due to C19	10.2	4.0	23.7	-
...that took place but was delayed for reasons not related to C19	2.1	0.8	0.6	-
Total for whom the procedure/ treatment was relevant (n*, %)	293/2424 (12.1)	2220/2422 (91.7)	1346/2430 (55.4)	1459/ 2564 (56.9)

* The denominators differ because not all dog owners answered all questions

procedure significantly less likely to take place/ more likely to be delayed compared to other procedures/ treatments

procedure significantly more likely to take place as planned compared to other procedures/ treatments

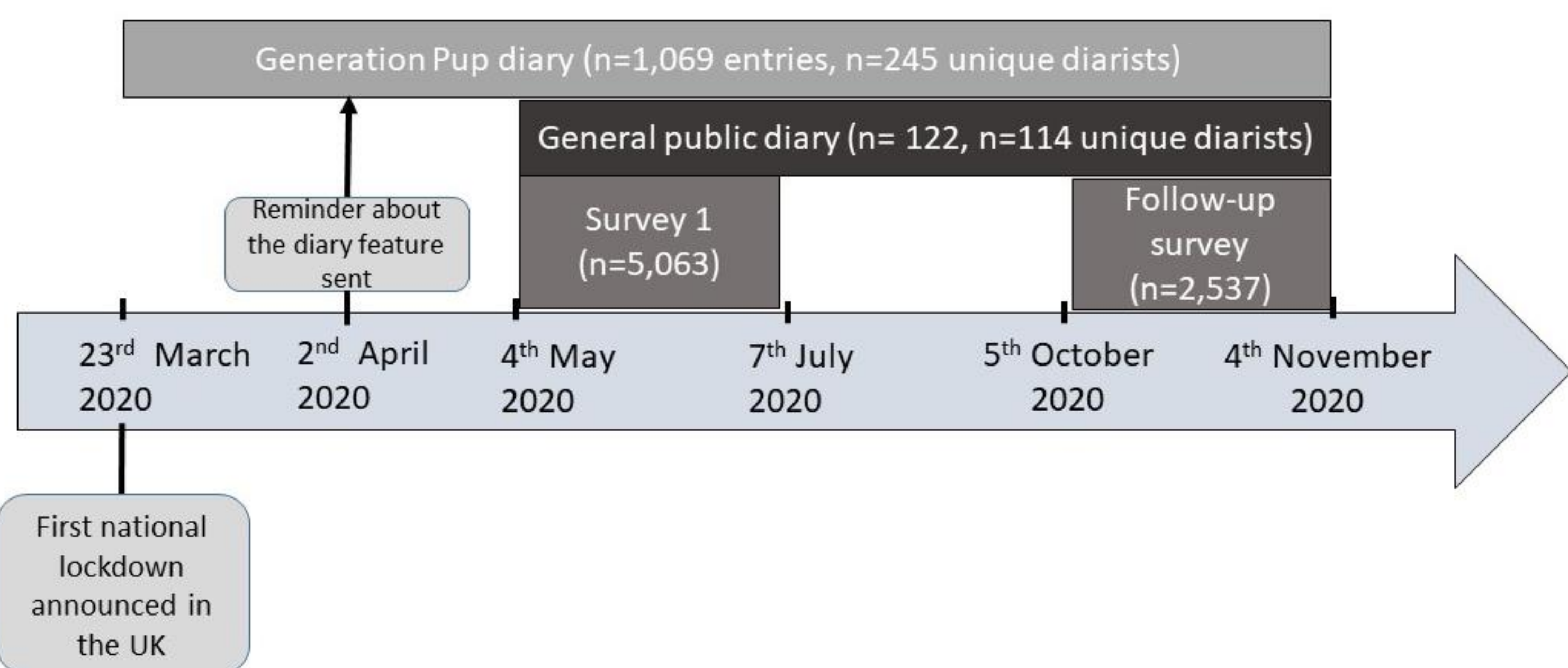


Fig. 1: Number of respondents for survey 1, follow-up survey, general public diary and Generation Pup diary.

Results

- 29.1%** (n=1431/4922) of dog owners who completed Survey 1 were worried about availability of veterinary care since the start of lockdown
- 97.5%** (n=315/323) of dog owners who completed the Follow-up survey and who sought an emergency vet appointment were able to be seen by vet practice
- 100%** (n=40/40) of dog owners who completed the Follow-up survey and who made an emergency visit without an appointment were able to be seen by vet practice
- 22.2%** (n=563/2537) of dog owners who completed the Follow-up survey experienced remote consultations (e.g. via phone, video or email)

Qualitative Findings

Availability of veterinary healthcare

"No problem at all obtaining appointment at usual vets."

"My dog really needed to be seen by a vet earlier. Her follow up appointments were cancelled because of COVID and it turned out she had cancer."

Owners unable to accompany dog inside the practice

"(...) he was collected from my car by the Vet and returned to me afterwards. [Dog] seemed better without me being there!"

"(...) more difficult to ask questions at vets appointment because I couldn't go in with [dog]."

Changes in communication

"Initially during lockdown we only had video access but I was very happy with the service our vets practice provided."

"(...) very impersonal, consultations take place at the car (...), follow up is by telephone and it all feels very rushed with little contact by the vet. Masks make conversations difficult."

Delaying seeking veterinary healthcare

"The fear of [dog] needing to be put to sleep without me (...) has delayed me getting help when she has needed it in the night."

Study Implications

Vet-owner communication is known to play a role in owner satisfaction¹ and compliance². Post-consultation checks of owner's understanding may be especially beneficial during distanced interactions. Owners (and possibly dogs) were distressed when unable to accompany a dog, which highlights the importance of socialisation at/ with vets to set dogs up for future happy vet visits.



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