



Veterinary Practice Board of Western Australia



GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT - VETERINARIANS

SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION

The *Veterinary Practice Act 2021 (Act)* does not provide for enforceable codes of professional conduct. Nonetheless these Guidelines could be used as a basis of determining whether a veterinarian's conduct is appropriate, and a veterinarian could be required to provide an explanation for a standard of practice substantially below those described in these Guidelines. It should be noted that some items within the Guidelines are covered by the Act and in relation to those specific matters, lack of compliance could amount to a breach of the Act.

Persons registered with the Veterinary Practice Board of Western Australia (Board) are expected to abide by the following basic principles when carrying out their professional duties.

- The primary concern of the profession is for the welfare of animals.
- At no time does the responsibility of a veterinarian to relieve animals of suffering and provide for the health and welfare of animals relieve the veterinarian of the overriding requirement to comply with the legislation governing the practice of veterinary medicine.
- All work performed by veterinarians is to a standard of competence acceptable to their peers.
- Veterinarians, individually, act to promote cohesion within the profession and the trust of the profession by the general public.
- No personal advantage is sought to the detriment of a professional colleague.

SECTION 2 GUIDELINES FOR PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

- 1** Veterinarians have a special duty towards animal welfare and to alleviate animal suffering. They must be conversant with the provisions of the *Animal Welfare Act 2002* and its Regulations and any codes of animal welfare relevant to their fields of endeavour.
- 2** Veterinarians must communicate effectively and treat all with whom they come into contact, with respect, consideration, courtesy and openness.
- 3** Veterinarians must conduct themselves in a manner that will maintain or enhance the reputation of the profession.
- 4** Veterinarians should not show disrespect for colleagues. They should uphold a working environment in which colleagues can freely exchange information to the benefit of patients, and society in general.
- 5** Attend to their own health and well being in order to provide care of the highest standard and support colleagues to do the same.
- 6** Veterinarians must be conversant with and abide by all statutory requirements affecting them individually in their various professional roles and take every reasonable step to ensure their observance by others.
- 7** Veterinarians must keep abreast of knowledge and skills in their field of endeavour and accept the obligation to continue their education and so further their professional knowledge and competence.
- 8** Except in an emergency where immediate relief of suffering is paramount, veterinarians have a duty to operate only in fields in which they are competent to do so unless supervised by a colleague with competence in the field.

- 9 Notwithstanding the above, a veterinarian is not obliged to treat an animal if there is a risk to the safety of staff or the veterinarian in treating that animal.
- 10 Unprofessional conduct and professional misconduct
If an individual becomes aware or concerned regarding alleged unprofessional conduct or professional misconduct by a veterinarian or veterinary nurse, the appropriate steps include;
 1. Wherever appropriate and possible, addressing any concerns first with the relevant individual.
 2. For more serious matters contact the Board office to discuss the alleged conduct with a Board inspector

SECTION 3 GENERAL GUIDELINES

1. General Practice

- a. A veterinarian must not practise veterinary medicine in a manner that would be likely to bring the veterinary profession into disrepute.
- b. A veterinarian must not assume a name or description that would be taken by a reasonable person as meaning that the veterinarian holds a qualification, or has experience in, veterinary science, surgery or medicine unless the veterinarian actually holds that qualification or has that experience.
- c. A veterinarian who gives a public speech relating to the practice of veterinary medicine or publishes by newspaper, radio or television or social media, a report or notice relating to the practice of veterinary medicine or advertisement must ensure that the speech, report, notice or advertisement in any medium:
 - i. is not false or misleading;
 - ii. does not compare the competence of any veterinarian with that of any other;
 - iii. is not vulgar or sensational;
 - iv. would not tend to bring the practice of veterinary medicine into disrepute.In this context 'newspaper' includes magazine, journal or any other written publication.
- d. A registered veterinarian shall not carry on practice in any place, whether at his main practice or a branch thereof, unless he or some other veterinarian duly registered under the provisions of the Act is in charge of that place and gives substantial attendance thereat during the advertised hours of his practice at that place.
- e. A veterinarian must not practise veterinary medicine in a name other than the person's own name or a name approved by the Board.

2. Animal welfare

- a. A veterinarian must at all times consider the welfare of animals when practising veterinary medicine.

Any animal having an invasive procedure performed should be administered an appropriate level of pain relief, that is effective for a reasonable length of time, as part of routine practice.

3. Correction of genetic defects

- a. It is unethical for a veterinarian to perform a surgical operation on, or to provide medical treatment for an animal if the primary purpose of the operation or treatment is to conceal the animal's true genetic status so as to enhance its value for sale, breeding or showing in competition.

- b. A veterinarian who becomes aware that an animal belonging to a client is suffering from a defect or disease that is known to be inheritable must inform the client of the defect or disease and its implications for breeding programs.
- c. It is not unethical for a veterinarian to perform a surgical operation for the correction of an inheritable defect or to provide medical treatment for an inheritable disease, if the primary purpose of the operation or treatment is to relieve or prevent pain or discomfort to the animal. The owner should be counselled on the advisability or otherwise of sterilising the animal to restrict the perpetuation of the inheritable defect.

4. Procedures which should only be performed for therapeutic reasons

The following procedures may only be carried out by registered veterinarians for genuine therapeutic purposes and records must substantiate this:

- a. declawing of cats;
- b. tail docking of dogs and horses;
- c. ear cropping of dogs.

Bark reduction should only be carried out for therapeutic or prophylactic reasons, or as an alternative to euthanasia for a dog that barks persistently. It should not be carried out as a substitute for the proper management and training of a dog. Veterinarians requested to perform bark reduction should be convinced that all reasonable attempts have been made by the owner to modify the dog's behaviour by alternative and humane means.

5. Professional practice

A veterinarian should, at all times, diligently maintain knowledge of current standards of veterinary medicine.

Professional procedures should always be carried out in accordance with current standards of veterinary medicine.

Informed decisions

Except in the case of an emergency, a veterinarian should not undertake any veterinary procedure on an animal without ensuring that the owner or person in charge of the animal is made aware of the likely extent and outcome of the procedure and of its probable cost and any ongoing costs. An example of an emergency is a circumstance in which there is an immediate threat to the life of the animal concerned.

Confidentiality

A veterinarian must keep confidential, and refrain from divulging, any information relating to clients or their animals acquired during the course of their practice of veterinary medicine unless the disclosure is required by law or with the consent of the owner.

Referrals

- a. A veterinarian should refer a client to an appropriately qualified veterinarian whenever a second opinion or a referral is desirable.
- b. A veterinarian should not refuse a request by a client for a referral or second opinion.
- c. A veterinarian to whom a client of another veterinarian is referred or who is asked to provide a second opinion for such a client should act in the best interests of that client and the animal concerned.
- d. A veterinarian who has previously treated an animal must, when asked by another veterinarian to whom the animal has been referred, provide all relevant details of clinical history directly to the other veterinarian.
- e. A veterinarian to whom another veterinarian has referred an animal for treatment or a second opinion should return all documents and other articles provided by the other veterinarian when the animal is finally discharged or is referred back to the other veterinarian if requested.

Vicarious liability

A veterinarian responsible for the professional supervision of lay staff must ensure that the staff carries out their duties effectively and in compliance with relevant legislation.

A veterinarian should ensure that:

- a. support staff treat as confidential, and refrain from divulging, any information relating to clients or their animals acquired during the course of their employment unless the disclosure is required by law or the owner has given consent;
- b. support staff, having in an emergency given first aid to an animal for the purpose of saving life or relieving pain, report and hand over the case to the veterinarian or another veterinarian at the earliest opportunity; and
- c. information relating to a client or a client's animal obtained in the course of examining or treating the animal is not divulged, except when referring the animal to another veterinarian for treatment or a second opinion or with the consent of the client.

Certification

When a veterinarian provides a certificate, it must be prepared with care and accuracy, and be legible, bear the date of examination or procedure carried out, what the certificate actually attests to, the date of issue of the certificate, and the name, address and signature of the issuing veterinarian.

A veterinarian should not sign a certificate relating to the performance of a veterinary service unless:

- a. the certificate is accurately completed to the best of the veterinarian's knowledge; and
- b. the veterinarian has personally performed or supervised the performance of the service.

Record keeping

Veterinarians must maintain adequate records of treatment carried out. As soon as practicable after treating an animal or consulting with a client, a veterinarian should ensure that a detailed record of the treatment or consultation is made. This record should include the description of the problem, differential diagnoses, treatment carried out and any diagnostic images relating to the treatment of an animal. The veterinarian should ensure that the record is kept in safe custody for at least 7 years after the relevant treatment or consultation.

Records of any case should be of such detail that any veterinarian could take over management of the case at any time. Records should be sufficient to stand alone to justify treatment and procedure. It is expected that clinical records will be in an electronic form or failing that handwritten records must be legible.

If artificial intelligence (AI) is used to assist with the generation of clinical records, they must be checked by the veterinarian to ensure accuracy. This includes the AI interpretation of diagnostic images.

Veterinary clinical records belong to both the practice and the veterinarian who created them. If a veterinarian leaves a practice, their records stay with the practice.

Veterinarians or practices are not required to give copies of records directly to pet owners.

When a client moves to a new practice, it is expected that the veterinarian or practice transfers the records or provides a summary upon request of the client, ensuring the new practice has enough information to continue care.

Records shared with a new practice still belong to the original veterinarian or practice (if the veterinarian has left) and cannot be given to third parties, including pet owners and insurance companies, without the appropriate consent.

It is the Board's experience, that veterinarians universally accept supplying clinical records or a summary of the animal's treatment to pet insurance companies is generally in the best interests of their clients and their animals.

Consent Forms

The use of consent forms is strongly recommended.

6. Medications, antibiotics and other chemical or biological substances

- a. A veterinarian must ensure that conditions imposed by other legislation (such as the Medicines and *Poisons Act* 2014) relating to dispensing, handling or storing of restricted or dangerous medications are strictly complied with.
- b. A veterinarian is responsible for ensuring that clients are aware of the need to comply with the withholding periods recommended for the administration of antibiotic and other medications to food producing animals or to animals used in a sport that has rules about the use of chemical substances.
- c. A veterinarian may only dispense controlled substances to a bona fide client, that is, the animal/herd owned by the client must be under their care; the animal/herd must have been seen for the purposes of diagnosis, or the premises on which the animal/herd is kept, visited recently enough to have an accurate picture sufficient to enable accurate diagnosis, and the treatment must be recorded, or the veterinarian must have discussed the health of the animals with the owner within the previous 7 days and have reasonable grounds to believe that an examination of the animals is not practicable.
- d. The veterinarian must be satisfied that the owner is competent and has any equipment and facilities necessary to safely and effectively handle, store, transport and administer the medications.
- e. A veterinarian must not supply or prescribe more of the restricted medication than is reasonably required to treat the animal.
- f. A clinical record of the supply or prescription of scheduled medications must be made and include:
 - (a) the name and address of the owner of the animal; and
 - (b) sufficient details to identify the animal; and
 - (c) the clinical history of the animal including the results of any examination of, or diagnostic tests carried out on the animal; and
 - (d) the name of the poison; and
 - (e) the quantity and dose of the poison supplied or prescribed.

7. Legislative responsibilities

To ensure that a veterinarian is able to practise veterinary medicine in a safe and competent manner, the veterinarian must acquire and maintain a sufficient knowledge of all laws that affect the practice of veterinary medicine, including:

- a. legislation regulating the supply, dispensing and storage of poisons and therapeutic substances;
- b. legislation regulating and controlling the use, keeping and disposal of radioactive substances and radioactive apparatus for therapeutic purposes;
- c. legislation regulating the use of radiographic equipment or any other equipment used in their premises that may pose a health or safety risk to staff or the general public; and
- d. legislation relating to animal welfare laws.

8. Special interest areas

Before undertaking practice in a special interest area of veterinary medicine with which the veterinarian is not familiar, a veterinarian should ensure that he or she has the knowledge and competence necessary to practise in that area.

DISCLAIMER

These Guidelines (printed, electronic or any other medium) do not constitute legal advice.

Readers are encouraged to seek their own professional advice to determine their obligations under the Act, subsidiary legislation made under the Act and other applicable laws. It is the responsibility of those persons regulated by the Act to determine their obligations. The authors, the Practice Board of Western Australia (**Board**), the members of the Board and the staff of the Board accept no liability for losses caused by reliance on any of the material in these Guidelines.