



VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS BOARD
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

Communications policy

- 1. Veterinary practitioners must practise in a way that promotes effective communication and trust, meets confidentiality and consent requirements, and recognises clients' right to choose.**

Communicating with clients

Many of the complaints received by the Board arise because of a breakdown in communication. Often the outcome of a particular treatment provided for an animal was different from the owner's expectations. Some complainants have claimed to the Board that they were not given clear information about the available options for, cost of, or prognosis and potential complications of treatment for their animal. Ensuring that a client is aware of such aspects of treatment is a vital part of obtaining informed consent.

Written estimates for procedures are an adequate way in which to ensure the client is understanding of the costs associated with a treatment option.

Some complainants have expressed concern at an apparent lack of compassionate communication and empathy on the part of some veterinary practitioners. Veterinary practitioners should be aware of the importance of effective communication and application of interpersonal skills in veterinary practice, including empathy, verbal and non-verbal cues, and the need to stay curious without judgement when interacting with clients.

A veterinary practitioner should be able to interact with clients both in person and in writing in a way that promotes effective communication and trust. This includes:

- treating all clients with respect, consideration, courtesy and openness;
- listening to clients, respecting their views, and responding to their concerns and preferences in a non-judgemental manner;
- not exploiting a client's lack of veterinary knowledge;
- providing clear and accurate explanations of findings, treatment options and likely outcomes in easily understood language;
- an understanding of verbal and non-verbal means of communication;
- an awareness of the cultural needs and contexts of all clients. Having a respect for and sensitivity towards the cultural needs and background of the clients the veterinary practitioners serves, including those of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Australians and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds;
- ensuring that the veterinary practitioner's personal views do not adversely affect an animal's care, and
- develop and practice effective and compassionate complaint and conflict management techniques.

Ensure clinical notes are written to a standard that can reproduce the consultation discussion, recommendations and agreements between the practitioner and client.

Veterinary practitioners also have a right to expect courtesy and respect in return from their clients. Veterinary practitioners should not feel obliged to continue any conversation, or continue to engage with a client, if they feel abused or threatened in any way.

Communication between veterinary practitioners

Good veterinary practice relies on effective communication between veterinary practitioners.

Veterinary practitioners should uphold a working environment in which colleagues can freely exchange information to the benefit of patients, and society in general. An employer of veterinary practitioners should ensure that the system of communication used between all staff members and with clients is highly effective.

Veterinary practitioners should treat colleagues with professionalism and respect, not making malicious or unfounded criticisms of colleagues that may undermine the public's trust and bring discredit to the profession.

Veterinary practitioners must always communicate sufficient information about the patient and the treatment needed to enable the continuing care of the patient. They should take reasonable steps to ensure that the person to whom they hand over the case has the experience, knowledge and skills to provide the care required.

The veterinary practitioner who has taken over the case must use their professional judgement in the continuing treatment of the patient, rather than just following the previous treating veterinary practitioner's plan. If a change in treatment is significant, then this should be communicated to the owner and their consent to the change should be obtained.

If more than one veterinary practitioner is treating a herd, there should be ongoing communication between each of the veterinary practitioners to ensure that herd health, and the treatment knowledge of the veterinary practitioner who is usually responsible, are not compromised.

2. Veterinary practitioners must take reasonable steps to establish that the person presenting the animal has the authority to consent to a procedure or treatment or course of action.

Establishing if the person presenting an animal has the authority to consent to treatment

It is necessary for the veterinary practitioner to establish that the person presenting the animal has the authority to consent to a procedure or treatment. Veterinary practitioners should take care to establish the authority of the person presenting the animal to make decisions. Such authority can be presumed to exist when the veterinary practitioner has taken reasonable steps to establish the identity of the animal and that the person presenting the animal is:

- a) an established client associated with that animal;
- b) the owner of the animal;
- c) the authorised agent of the owner of the animal; or
- d) a person with the day-to-day responsibility for the care of that animal at the time.

Reasonable steps would include the veterinary practitioner directly enquiring of the person, that they fit at least one category of (a) to (d) above and be associated with the use of a consent form on which, the person declares that they are the owner or acting with the authority of the

owner. The identity of the animal can be reasonably established by reference to existing records or other information (for example, brands, microchip and tattoos).

3. Veterinary practitioners must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the client understands their communications.

Ensuring the client understands

Veterinary practitioners must provide clients with information to the extent and in a way that they are satisfied that the client is able to understand and give consent to the proposed treatment or course of action. Interpreter services should be used when necessary to avoid potential misunderstandings.

A client's experience and knowledge can influence the degree of detail in information they need to make an informed choice. Veterinary practitioners should not pre-judge clients' ability to take in the information conveyed/treatment recommendations and should use appropriate questions to check understanding.

Veterinary practitioners should consider how to best communicate information to the client. It can be helpful to support verbal explanations with written information such as client handouts, use of white boards, anatomical atlas to illustrate procedures etc. This is especially important for post-operative home care information, which ideally should be supplied in written form as a set of clear instructions (in addition to the instructions written on any medication labels).

The need to remember that each person may receive and process information differently is key to ensuring your client is well informed. Using techniques such as active listening, open ended and clarifying questions and asking the client to repeat understanding are all techniques successfully utilised.

4. Where several treatment options exist, veterinary practitioners must discuss a reasonable range of options for treatment, their associated costs, prognosis, potential complications, and consequences.

The need to discuss options for treatment with the client

Veterinary practitioners must act in the best interest of their client and patient when formulating a list of options. This includes considering prognosis, animal welfare, financial circumstances, ethical considerations, the appropriateness of referral, conservative treatment, second opinions, and euthanasia. When discussing alternative treatment options, veterinary practitioners must not tailor the discussion because of their evaluation of the client's financial status, e.g. failing to inform clients of reasonable medical alternatives such as referral. All options should be presented in a manner that the client can make an informed decision for their animal.

Procedures that would normally be performed in veterinary premises (e.g. small animal surgery) may incur additional risks when undertaken in a mobile clinic or on a house visit. A veterinary practitioner must only undertake such procedures after a detailed explanation of those risks to the client and the informed consent of the client.

- 5. Veterinary practitioners must, where it is practicable to do so, obtain the informed consent of the person responsible for the care of an animal before providing veterinary services to the animal.**

Obtaining informed consent

See [Obtaining informed consent policy](#).

Consent forms

While there is an onus on animal owners to thoroughly read any form provided to them for signature, it cannot always be assumed that a signature on a form is evidence of informed consent. The veterinary practitioner should ensure that before an owner signs a consent form, they are fully informed of details of the recommended treatment, prognosis, foreseeable risks and complications, and associated costs.

- 6. Veterinary practitioners who perform a treatment/surgery must ensure that appropriate information about aftercare and what to do in the event of complications is provided to the person responsible for the care of the animal.**
- 7. Veterinary practitioners must, where it is practicable to do so, before providing veterinary services, inform the person responsible for the care of the animal of the likely extent and outcome of the veterinary services, and the estimated cost of those services.**

Informed financial consent

Informed financial consent requires that clients receive an indication of costs prior to treatment being undertaken. The estimate of costs should include an estimate of any ongoing expenses arising from the procedure.

If it becomes clear during the procedure or course of treatment that the costs will be significantly greater due to unforeseen complications, the veterinary practitioners must make every reasonable attempt to contact the owner and seek approval for the additional treatment.

If an animal is hospitalised overnight or longer, veterinary practitioners should make arrangements regarding communication about ongoing costs and progress as part of the informed consent process.

8. Respecting clients' rights

Clients' right to choose

Veterinary practitioners must respect clients' rights to:

- use the services of more than one veterinary practitioner;
- seek a second opinion or referral, and
- decline or choose an alternate course of action to the one recommended by the veterinary practitioner.

Clients are entitled to use the services of more than one veterinary practitioner or to seek a

second opinion or referral. Clients may also choose to use multiple veterinary practitioners to provide different and particular skills in order to meet their specific veterinary needs. For example, reproductive services, nutrition, and herd health consultancy.

When clients decline a recommended course of action or choose a different course of action from the one recommended, a veterinary practitioner must be satisfied that basic animal welfare requirements are met.

9. Unexplained/unexpected death of an animal

Discussing necropsy when unexplained or unexpected death of an animal occurs under veterinary care

In the event of an unexplained/unexpected death of an animal while under the care of a veterinary practitioner, the practitioner must advise the owner that a necropsy can be performed. It should also be advised that whilst a necropsy can be carried out it may not guarantee clarity of why the animal died unexpectedly.

The Board acknowledges the stressful circumstances in which veterinary practitioners are placed when unexpected deaths occur in practice where it is difficult to tactfully and discretely recommend that a post-mortem examination be conducted. The offer of a post-mortem should however always be given when there has been an unexplained death.

Options for performing the necropsy must be provided to the owner, and the fees for these services discussed.

Where an owner has given permission for a necropsy to be performed on an animal, this must be performed without undue delay. If storage is necessary, every effort must be made to ensure the body is stored in a way that reduces deterioration of tissues before the necropsy is conducted.

To prevent potential conflict of interest, where possible/practical an independent veterinary practitioner should carry out the necropsy.

10. Adverse events

Communication with client when an adverse event occurs

When adverse events occur, veterinary practitioners have a responsibility to be open and honest in communication with their clients, to review what has occurred and to report appropriately if medication is involved.

When something goes wrong, good practice involves:

- a) acknowledging what has happened;
- b) acting immediately to rectify the problem, if possible, including seeking any necessary help and advice;
- c) explaining to clients as promptly and fully as possible what has happened and the anticipated short-term and long-term consequences;
- d) reviewing adverse events and implementing changes to reduce the risk of recurrence
- e) reporting drug adverse events to the relevant authority as required; and
- f) co-operating with any Board investigation if the client decides to lodge a complaint.

Responding to client's complaints about veterinary services

When a complaint is made to the practice or a formal notification is received by a Board, professional practice involves:

- a) acknowledging the person's right to complain;
- b) working with the person to resolve the issue where possible;
- c) providing a prompt, open and constructive response including an explanation and, if appropriate, an apology and self-reflection and clinic reflection on how this situation will be managed differently in the future;
- d) complying with relevant complaints legislation, policies and procedures, and
- e) complying with any request of the Board to see all pertinent records as part of a complaint investigation. Veterinary practitioners must respond in a timely and substantive manner to all formal requests for information from the Board.

Communication in a multi-veterinary practitioner practice

There is a higher risk of a client becoming disaffected when their animal is examined or treated by a different veterinary practitioner on each visit to a veterinary clinic or hospital. Good record keeping is essential to demonstrate the history and coordination of treatment during the course of a case.

Uncollected animals

All possible options should be taken and documented to locate the owner of uncollected animals (telephone, visit to last known address, enquiries of neighbours, friends, relatives). If contacted, instructions should be gained, in writing if possible, for the future of animal, e.g. collection by owner, adoption, transfer to local government refuge, euthanasia.

If the owner cannot be located and the veterinary practitioner is confident the owner is not going to collect the animal, a letter should be forwarded by registered post to the last known address of the owner advising that if the animal is not collected by a specified date, the animal will be regarded as abandoned.

This type of situation could be avoided by the practice insisting that clients sign an appropriately worded 'admission form' prescribing the rights of the parties in the event of non-collection and entitling the practitioner to regard the animal as being abandoned in a certain time after non-collection.

11. Veterinary practitioners must not mislead, deceive or behave in such a way as to have an adverse effect on the standing of the veterinary profession.

Communicating with the wider public

A veterinary practitioner who communicates information relating to veterinary practice (e.g. via a public speech in person, on the radio or on television; or via publication in a newspaper, magazine, journal, or other written publication; or in a report or notice) must ensure that the speech, publication, report or notice:

- is not false or misleading
- does not compare the competence of any veterinary practitioner with that of any other
- is not vulgar or sensational, and
- does not bring the practice of veterinary medicine or the wider profession into

disrepute.

Advertising, including advertising emergency, after hours and 24-hour services

Advertisements for services can be useful in providing information for clients. All advertisements must conform to relevant consumer protection legislation.

When veterinary practitioners advertise their services, including after-hours and emergency services, in any medium, they must ensure that the statements made or implied in their advertising are true and accurate for the advertised business conducted.

Veterinary practices should only advertise 24-hour services where there is a veterinary practitioner from the practice, outside of usual working hours, to attend to after-hours calls or hospitalised animals within the context of the practice (not be re-directing after-hours calls to an alternate practice).

Veterinary practices should be clear on staffing arrangements outside normal business hours. If patients stay in hospital outside normal staffed hours it should be communicated to clients that the patients will be unattended for the unstaffed period of time.

When a practice is advertised as an emergency centre there must be both veterinary and support staff in attendance during the stated business hours.

Social Media

The use of social media is expanding rapidly. Veterinary practitioners and veterinary practices are embracing user-generated content, such as social networking, personal websites, discussion forums, message boards, and blogs. When used effectively, social media can be a useful platform to educate and market to the public.

Whether an online activity is able to be viewed by the public or is limited to a specific group of people, veterinary practitioners need to maintain professional standards and be aware of the implications of their actions, as in all professional circumstances. Veterinary practitioners need to be aware that information circulated on social media may end up in the public domain, and remain there, irrespective of the intent at the time of posting. As such, practitioners should be aware of their ethical and regulatory responsibilities when they are interacting online, just as when they interact in person.

Veterinary practitioners must be aware of their obligations in relation to privacy and confidentiality of patient information, including when using social media. For example, the posting of unauthorised photographs of patients may be a breach of privacy and confidentiality obligations.

Curriculum vitae (personal resume)

When providing a curriculum vitae (personal resume) to an employer (or other recipient, including the Board), a veterinary practitioner should:

- a) provide accurate, truthful and verifiable information about the veterinary practitioner's experience and qualifications
- b) not misrepresent by misstatement or omission a veterinary practitioner's experience, qualifications or position
- c) advise if there are any relevant conditions on their practice currently imposed by the

Board (or another registration authority).