

# How can you approach concerns about veterinary services?

For members of the public



Regulatory Veterinary Boards and Councils across Australia and NZ set and uphold veterinary professional standards. This factsheet discusses options if you have concerns about a veterinarian's work, including information about making an official complaint to your Veterinary Board.

## Why do concerns and complaints occur?

The provision of veterinary services is complex and requires effective communication and teamwork between veterinary professionals and owners. Every situation is unique and often highly emotional. Veterinary Boards are commonly contacted when:

- Owners do not feel their feelings and concerns have been acknowledged
- An unexpected or unwanted outcome prompts an owner to seek more information, to better understand what happened and why it occurred
- Complainants want to help prevent recurrence or risks to others



## Where can you get help?

### Health and wellbeing support

Veterinary Boards recognise that grief, anxiety and other emotions are common. We encourage you to speak with your family, friends, your doctor, employee assistance provider, a grief counsellor, Beyond Blue or Lifeline. Your Veterinary Board website may list additional resources.

### The veterinarian, and/or their practice

In most cases, discussing your questions, concerns and needs directly with the veterinarian or practice involved is an efficient and effective way of resolving things promptly. They have firsthand knowledge of what happened so can often answer your questions and make any necessary improvements to their ways of working. An empathetic apology from the veterinarian or practice is not necessarily seen as an admission of professional negligence, unprofessional conduct or liability.

### Other regulators, tribunals, organisations and courts

Some aspects of veterinary practice fall under the jurisdiction of other bodies, such as:

- fees and pricing (eg consumer affairs tribunal office, small claims)
- prescription, storage and supply of medicines and poisons (eg Medicines, Poisons and Controlled Substances regulators)
- animal welfare (eg RSPCA)
- employment conditions (eg FairWork, WorkSafe, Departments of Health and Human Services)

You can directly notify the relevant authority of your concern. Where necessary Veterinary Boards liaise with other regulators.

## Your Veterinary Board or VetCouncil

Visit your Veterinary Board's website for relevant veterinary professional standards, complaint handling processes and official forms, support resources and other authorities. You can phone or email Veterinary Board staff if you need further assistance.

## What can Veterinary Boards do?

Veterinary Boards can consider concerns about a registered veterinary professional's:

### Professional Conduct

Unprofessional conduct can include:

- behaviour falling short of the standard reasonably expected by their professional veterinary peers or the public, including a breach of Guidelines or Code of Conduct
- breaching conditions on their vet registration
- being found guilty of an indictable offence or
- breaching an Act or law relating to veterinary work

### Health

This includes a physical or mental impairment that detrimentally affects their ability to practice, or a severe substance dependence.

## Veterinary Boards cannot:

- Investigate complaints purely about fees charged for veterinary services
- Investigate complaints about a veterinary practice or unnamed individuals
- Investigate complaints about people who are not veterinary professionals (except if holding themselves out as one)
- Award compensation or demand a refund from a veterinarian or practice
- Give veterinary advice about an animal's condition or treatment

## What's helpful?

Write your concerns clearly, concisely and completely to help us understand what happened and what next steps may be appropriate:

- ✓ Describe the events, including any communications, in the order they occurred
- ✓ Avoid inflammatory or insulting words
- ✓ Explain what you've done to try to address your concerns
- ✓ Tell us what you hope to achieve by notifying the Veterinary Board
- ✓ Attach all relevant documentation (clinical records, letters, forms, handouts, communications, receipts etc)
- ✓ Summarise your main concerns



## What happens next?

Veterinary Boards must collect and analyse information following legislated processes which are fair to both parties. This means it may take many months to reach an outcome. Your Veterinary Board will provide regular updates about your matter and you can find more information about the complaints process on the website.

If you have further questions you are welcome to contact your Veterinary Board staff.

## How can you help?

You can learn more about reasonable expectations of veterinary professionals from your region's Veterinary Board Guidelines or Code of Conduct on their website.

You can also help to prevent complaints by communicating respectfully and honestly with your vet about your needs, preferences and limitations.

If you need more information, don't understand something or have concerns, ask your vet to discuss things further with you.

## Still have questions?

You can find more information and resources on your Veterinary Board's website including other AVBC factsheets and videos in this series. You can also phone or email your helpful Veterinary Board or Vet Council staff.