

For veterinary professionals



In each Australian state and territory and in NZ, a Veterinary Board or Council investigates formal complaints made about registered veterinary practitioners. This AVBC factsheet provides information to veterinary professionals about the Veterinary Boards' approach when notified about a vet's professional conduct.

What will your Veterinary Board consider?

- state, territory or New Zealand veterinary and other legislation (Acts)
- whether conduct meets the reasonable expectations of a vet's peers and the public, as outlined in your Veterinary Board's Guidelines, Standards or Code of Conduct
- the context in which the conduct occurred;
 Veterinary Boards recognise a spectrum of good care from appropriate professional judgement
- Veterinary Boards can also consider whether veterinary professional's standard of practice may have been impaired by a health issue. Health impairments are considered through a separate process to professional conduct issues.

Complaints process

All state and territory boards manage complaints slightly differently depending on their legislative requirements. A general overview of the process appears on the next page of this Factsheet. Check your Board or Vet Council's website for more specific information

Timing and privacy

Thorough, fair and accurate investigation into complex matters can take many months to complete. Veterinary Board staff will give you regular updates about the progress of your complaint.

The entire process is treated sensitively and only discloses information necessary to fulfill your Veterinary Board's regulatory functions.

Justice and fairness

All regulators are impartial, and bound by the principles of natural justice and procedural fairness. This means:

- You will be provided with information about the complaint and any other material being considered, and invited to provide your account of the situation.
- You will be given sufficient notice of what and when actions and information are required from you
- You will be provided with written notice of outcome and reasons
- You can appeal decisions through your state or territory Civil and Administrative Tribunal.

Possible outcomes

Investigations and hearings are considered a valuable learning opportunity, providing independent review and feedback to both you and the complainant. Veterinary Boards do not approach complaints and hearings with a punitive mindset.

Veterinary Boards aim for complaint outcomes that are consistent, proportionate, transparent and where possible, constructive in strengthening your future practice. Options open to Veterinary Boards vary according to the seriousness of the conduct and the guiding legislation, and can include:

- no further action
- counselling to guide improvement
- relevant further education
- conditions on registration
- · caution or reprimand
- fine
- payment of proceedings costs
- suspension or cancellation of registration

Most complaints submitted to Veterinary Boards do not ultimately progress to hearings or findings of unprofessional conduct. The most common outcomes from those that do find unprofessional conduct are a requirement to complete, reflect on and implement relevant further education. Only a very small percentage of professional conduct issues that pose serious and ongoing risk may attract a suspension or cancellation of registration.



Triage

Boards encourage owners to contact the vet to seek direct resolution if possible before making a formal complaint, unless a serious or high risk behaviour is involved

Veterinary Boards must investigate a written complaint, unless it is:

- about fees charged for veterinary services, or outside jurisdiction in other ways
- · vexatious or malicious
- lacking in substance in relation to professional standards

If a complaint includes the veterinary clinical records, your Veterinary Board may be better informed in deciding whether any of these criteria apply.

If the Board feel there is a serious and ongoing risk to the public or animals, the Board can suspend a registration whilst further investigation occurs.

Investigation

Investigation processes gather information to make an impartial decision about whether further action is needed. Veterinary Boards:

- inform you of your complaint and the issues it raises
- request a written response from you and all relevant clinical records
- provide your response to the complainant for consideration (in some jurisdictions)
- focus on the evidence and facts
- seek additional necessary information such as clinical records from another practice
- consider the relevant professional standards
- consider any reflection and actions subsequently undertaken by you and your workplace to strengthen future practice.
- consider the future risk posed by your behaviour

No Further Action/Educative letter

If your Veterinary Board do not believe the threshold of unprofessional conduct has been breached, no further action will be taken

If you could nevertheless strengthen your practice or have done so appropriately in response to the event, you may receive correspondence outlining this.



Meetings or Hearings

If evidence suggests you may have breached professional standards, Formal or Informal meetings or hearings occur to examine the information further before a finding of unprofessional conduct can be made. You will have the opportunity to explain your perspective in relation to any allegations and will be advised by your Veterinary Board about what support and/or legal representation is allowed under your legislation.

Further information

If you're unsure of what's required, or have questions at any stage, you're welcome to contact your Veterinary Board/Council staff. Additional information about veterinary regulation, related resources and contact details can be found on your state, territory Veterinary Board or NZ Vet Council website.