

GUIDELINE 7

EMPLOYER / EMPLOYEE RELATIONS – THE EMPLOYMENT OF INEXPERIENCED REGISTERED VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS

Registered veterinary practitioners should ensure they are familiar with the contents of this Guideline. The Board considers this Guideline to be the minimum standard expected from a registered veterinary practitioner exercising reasonable skill and care in the course of providing treatment to animals.

Practitioners should read this Guideline in conjunction with the Definitions listed in the introductory pages.

7.1 PREAMBLE

The increasing expectations of the clients of veterinary practice, with respect to the standards of registered veterinary practitioners, requires a regular review by the employer of the support provided to employed associate veterinarians.

7.2 RECENT GRADUATES AND INEXPERIENCED PRACTITIONERS DEALING WITH CLIENTS

Practice Principals/Employers should be aware that recent veterinary graduates and practitioners who are inexperienced in their current field of practice employment may not have sufficient surgical, medical or even communication skills demanded by the employer's clients.

7.3 CLIENT EXPECTATIONS

7.3.1 The increasing number of complaints from the clients of veterinary practices received by the Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria are a measure of the rising expectations of clients about the standard of veterinary services. It is also a reflection of the modern trend for clients to complain if their expectations are not met, and to pursue the complaint through the appropriate channels in order to achieve some measure of satisfaction. In many cases the complainant claims that this is to prevent somebody else being exposed to the same perceived inadequacies.

7.3.2 New veterinary graduates and inexperienced registered veterinary practitioners may be involved in a specific category of complaints which the Board considers could often be addressed and prevented by the senior (employing) registered veterinary practitioner. These complaints relate to a real or perceived lack of skill, experience or communication ability. The emphasis here is on prevention of the events which lead to the complaint.

7.4 EDUCATION

Veterinary graduates are provided with core veterinary skills and an increasingly sophisticated knowledge base. However, it is unrealistic for the employer to expect the new graduate to be competent in all veterinary skills, procedures and techniques upon graduation; despite the expectations of the clients. Knowing how to apply the knowledge base takes time and experience. Until the new graduate is competent in a particular field of practice it is reasonable for the practice's clients to expect that the new graduate will have support from the principal or senior registered veterinary practitioners in the practice. The new graduate has this expectation and so does the Board.

7.5 EMPLOYERS

7.5.1 Registration status of New Employees
Practice Principals/Employers intending to employ a veterinary practitioner in their practice should check that the prospective new employees' registration is current.

7.5.2 Employers must comply with ALL statutory obligations in relation to the employment of all staff engaged to work in the practice.

7.5.3 Employers have an obligation to supervise the inexperienced veterinarian at all times until competency is achieved, i.e. until they have demonstrated a level of skill equivalent to that expected of a reasonably skilled and experienced registered veterinary practitioner by the public and their peers. This includes the employer being available for direct assistance or by call-back, or by the provision of access to alternate back-up, such as a neighbouring practice, a registered veterinary specialist, referral centre, out-of-hours veterinary clinic, etc.

7.5.4 Mistakes and errors of judgement should be pointed out to the associate in a non-threatening manner. These problems should never be discussed in front of other staff or in front of the clients and under no circumstances should any employer belittle the efforts of an employed veterinarian.

7.6 EMPLOYEES

Employed veterinarians should recognise that they are not competent in all aspects of veterinary medicine and surgery and that an "on the job" learning curve exists. They are encouraged to seek assistance within the practice in the first instance, whenever they find themselves out of their depth or at the limit of their own experience and knowledge.

7.7 COMMUNICATIONS

7.7.1 All registered veterinary practitioners should be aware of the importance of good communications and interpersonal skills in veterinary practice. The employer has an obligation to ensure that the systems of communications used between all staff members and with clients are highly effective. New employees, and especially inexperienced veterinarians, should be well instructed in communicating effectively.

7.7.2 Employers should support inexperienced veterinarians in their communications with clients, as well as in a professional sense. Employers should encourage formal and informal discussions on clinical cases and client expectations. Practice meetings, practice seminars, regular performance feedback/review meetings and formal induction of the new graduates into the practice all assist in successful adoption of the practice culture, professional standards and business ethics.

7.8 **CONCLUSION**

7.8.1 Employers should recognise that they have an obligation to employed veterinarians to provide support, guidance and assistance. The long-term result for the practice will be the maintenance of high standards of veterinary service, a healthy interaction with employed veterinarians, better client relations and an appropriate professional image for the practice as perceived by clients.

7.8.2 Employers should not employ an inexperienced veterinarian unless they are both capable and willing to provide the level of support detailed above. Employers of new graduates are encouraged to participate in the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) New Graduate Friendly Practice scheme.