

GUIDELINE 8

COMMUNICATION WITH CLIENTS

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.

8.1 PREAMBLE

Many of the complaints received by the Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria arise because of the breakdown of communications with the client. Often the outcome of a particular treatment on an animal does not meet or is different to the expectations of the owner. Some of the complainants maintain that they were not given a clear understanding of the available options, cost, prognosis and complications that may result from treatment provided for their animal by the attendant veterinary practitioner. Often complainants express concern at the apparent lack of compassionate communication and empathy demonstrated by veterinarians. This is particularly important when procedures may not have gone as planned or the recovery of a sick animal is not as favourable as expected.

8.2 ESTABLISHING AUTHORITY

There are a number of situations arising in veterinary practice when it is particularly important for veterinary practitioners to establish that the person presenting the animal has the authority to consent to a procedure or treatment. Such situations include euthanasia, major surgery, committing to a prolonged and/or expensive course of therapy or treatment, and even decisions to follow a minimalist course of action/choose a minimalist approach option. Veterinary practitioners should take care to establish the authority of the person presenting the animal to make decisions in these situations. Such authority can be presumed to exist when the practitioner has taken reasonable steps to establish that the person presenting the animal is:

- (i) an established client associated with that animal;
- (ii) the owner of the animal;
- (iii) the authorised agent of the owner of the animal;
- (iv) a person with day-to-day responsibility for the care of that animal at the time

'Reasonable steps' in this context would include the practitioner directly enquiring of the person that they fit (i) to (iv) above, and should be associated with the use of a consent form on which the person declares they are the owner or acting with the authority of the owner.

8.3 PERFORMING AUTOPSIES

It is recommended that in the event of an unexplained/unexpected death of an animal whilst under the care of a veterinary practitioner, the practitioner should advise the owner a post-mortem may be performed in order to ascertain the cause of death.

Options for performing the autopsy should be provided to the owner, and the fees for these services negotiated between the owner and the veterinary practitioner.

Where an owner has given permission for a post-mortem to be performed on an animal, this must be performed without undue delay or the body stored in a manner to prevent deterioration of tissues before the autopsy is conducted.

To prevent potential conflict of interest, ideally an independent practitioner should carry out the autopsy.

8.4 DISCUSS OPTIONS

The Board expects that, before undertaking veterinary procedures upon an animal, the attendant veterinary practitioner will fully discuss the available options for treatment, their associated costs, prognosis and complications. The Board recognises that while there are often several satisfactory ways to treat a particular condition, some methods may be more effective than others. It is always prudent to recommend the most appropriate treatments for the animal, make the client aware of the costs and prognosis, and allow them to take part in decisions regarding treatment.

8.5 RECORD INFORMED CONSENT

Where a number of options for treatment are available and discussed with the client, the Board recommends that each option, its associated costs and prognosis be listed on either the consent form or clinical record. The consent of the client or their agent to any particular procedure should be obtained, documented and evidenced by their dated and witnessed signature; this is particularly important when the treatment chosen by the client may be less than optimal or different to that primarily recommended by the veterinary practitioner.

In dental procedures the Board recommends that informed consent be obtained for the extraction of diseased or compromised teeth prior to commencement of the process.

8.6 PRINTED FORMS

The use of printed consent and estimate forms will facilitate the above, and may prevent misunderstandings arising. Consent forms should be printed on the practice letterhead paper, a copy should be given to the owner or agent presenting the patient and should include:

- a) the owner's name, address and telephone number including a contact number for the day of the procedure, where possible;
- b) a description of the patient (name, species, breed, colour, age and sex);
- c) name, address and telephone numbers of the agent if the patient is not

presented by the owner. There should also be a statement for the agent to sign, indicating they are legally authorised to present the patient;

- d) a clear description of the procedure/s to be undertaken;
- e) a statement of the risks involved with the procedure and the owner or agent's consent to perform the stated procedure/s;
- f) the witnessed and dated signature of the owner or agent.

The Board recommends that consent forms also provide an estimate of the cost of the procedure and the expected payment terms.

8.7 CLIENT CHOICE OF TREATMENT OPTION

The client should always be made aware that, even when an optimal method of treatment is used it is both impossible and unethical to guarantee a full recovery. Where a client is either unwilling to accept the optimal treatment for their animal and chooses a less satisfactory method of treatment, it is important to ensure that the client is fully aware of any possible complications and further costs that may be associated with their particular choice of treatment and this is noted on the Consent Form

8.8 REFERRAL

If the attendant veterinary practitioner lacks the necessary skills or equipment to provide the most optimal or preferred treatment for an animal, the owner should be given the option of a referral to another registered veterinary practitioner who possesses such skills or equipment.

8.9 TRANSLATING SERVICES

Telephone translating services are available when necessary to avoid misunderstandings caused by language difficulties.

8.10 PROGRESS REPORTS

If an animal is hospitalised overnight or longer, arrangements should be made for the client to receive regular daily progress reports.

8.11 INFORMATION AT DISCHARGE

On discharge of a patient following treatment (especially surgery), the veterinary practitioner who performed the treatment/surgery should discuss the patient's after care with the owner. If it is not possible to do this then comprehensive written instructions should be provided. The client should also be aware of the options for obtaining further assistance should they be concerned with their pet's progress.

8.12 COMPLICATIONS

If complications or unexpected results arise during or after treatment, the possible causes, further treatment options, costs and prognosis should be discussed fully and openly with the client, preferably in person.