



# GUIDELINES OF THE VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS REGISTRATION BOARD OF VICTORIA

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## INTRODUCTION

The veterinary profession plays an important role in protecting both public and animal health and ensuring good welfare outcomes for Victorian animals. It plays a crucial role in detecting and managing critical animal diseases, research and teaching, and services the animal health and welfare needs of pet and recreational animal owners. It provides an important contribution to Victoria's reputation for clean and safe agricultural produce, good standards of animal welfare and maintaining the integrity of Victoria's biosecurity and food security arrangements.

The Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria ('the Board') is a regulatory body whose primary remit under the *Veterinary Practice Act 1997* ('the Act') is to protect the public by ensuring veterinary practitioners are registered, appropriately qualified and maintain appropriate standards of veterinary practice. It has a responsibility to investigate the professional conduct and fitness to practise of registered practitioners, including in response to complaints from the public.

## APPROPRIATE STANDARDS OF VETERINARY PRACTICE

Guidelines about appropriate standards of veterinary practice and veterinary facilities are issued by the Board under section 62(1)(e) of the Act.

The primary purpose of the Guidelines is to:

1. set out the minimum standard expected by the Board from registered veterinary practitioners exercising reasonable skill and care while practising as a veterinary practitioner, and
2. to formally notify veterinary practitioners what the Board's views are as to what would constitute unprofessional conduct in various circumstances.

While the Act allows the Board to rely on the Guidelines as evidence of what constitutes unprofessional conduct, the Guidelines are not the only consideration of what constitutes unprofessional conduct. Unprofessional conduct includes any professional conduct which is of a lesser standard than that which the public or a veterinary practitioner's peers might reasonably expect of a registered veterinary practitioner.

## PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES

These Guidelines seek to assist and support veterinary practitioners to deliver appropriate, effective services within an ethical framework. Veterinary practitioners have a professional responsibility to be familiar with these Guidelines and to apply the guidance they contain.

These Guidelines will be used:

- to support individual practitioners in the challenging task of providing a good standard of veterinary care and fulfilling their professional roles, and to provide a framework to guide professional judgement
- to assist the Board in their role of protecting the public by setting and maintaining minimum standards of practice. These Guidelines will be used when evaluating the professional conduct of practitioners. If professional conduct varies significantly from these Guidelines, practitioners should be prepared to explain and justify their decisions and actions. Serious or repeated failure to meet these Guidelines may lead to a finding of unprofessional conduct
- by veterinary practitioners who have followed the Guidelines to defend against an allegation of unprofessional conduct, and
- as a guide to the public and consumers of veterinary services about what is good veterinary practice and the standard of behaviour they should expect from veterinary practitioners.

## APPLICATION OF THESE GUIDELINES

These Guidelines are not exhaustive and do not cover the complete range of veterinary practice. It is accepted that there is not necessarily one right decision in every set of circumstances and that the Guidelines cannot define how every situation must be managed. Veterinary practitioners need to evaluate situations (whether in relation to a clinical matter or not), apply the principles of these Guidelines and make competent and reasonable decisions about the most appropriate course of action taking into account the individual circumstances and the potential outcomes of each course of action.

Acting in contravention of a guideline does not of itself necessarily constitute unprofessional conduct, however any veterinary practitioner not following the Guidelines must have very compelling reasons and evidence as to why they were not followed.

The work of veterinary practitioners can take many forms. Their roles and responsibilities, whether in clinical or non-clinical practice, extend beyond individual patients and clients to include, amongst other things, food safety, public health and biosecurity. The principles of these Guidelines extend to expectations of veterinary practitioners in any area of veterinary practice.

Veterinary practitioners must comply with the Guidelines irrespective of whether they are charging fees for the services provided.

A new guideline may be produced when the Board identifies a need, based on complaints received, particularly where common themes are identified.

The Board welcomes feedback on these Guidelines. Feedback can be emailed to [guidelines@vetboard.vic.gov.au](mailto:guidelines@vetboard.vic.gov.au)

## EXPLANATORY NOTES AND FAQs

As a supplement to these Guidelines, the Board has published a document called **Guidelines of the Veterinary Practitioners Registration Board of Victoria in context: a practical guide to professional conduct**. This context document contains detailed explanatory notes as to how these Guidelines should be applied in practice. The frequently asked questions (FAQs) are based on questions veterinary practitioners commonly ask the Board. The explanatory notes and FAQs do not form part of the Guidelines.

## 1. BASIC PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

- 1.1. The practice and behaviour of veterinary practitioners should be underpinned by basic principles of professional conduct. When assessing a veterinary practitioner's professional conduct, the Board will consider the practitioner's observation of the following eight guiding principles:
1. A primary concern for the welfare of animals.
  2. Honesty and integrity.
  3. Professional accountability and independence.
  4. Maintaining knowledge of and competency in current contemporary standards of practice.
  5. Keeping informed of and abiding by all regulatory obligations.
  6. Always considering the safety of the veterinary practitioner, veterinary staff and the public.
  7. Ensuring the environment, equipment and assistance is appropriate for the veterinary procedures that are undertaken.
  8. Maintaining their own health and wellbeing, and taking steps to modify their practice should issues arise which may adversely affect their judgement or performance.

## 2. PRIMARY CONCERN IS THE ANIMAL'S WELFARE

- 2.1. Veterinary practitioners must at all times consider the welfare of animals when practising veterinary science.
- 2.2. Veterinary practitioners must take appropriate and timely steps to provide relief to animals suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress.
- 2.3. Veterinary practitioners who perform a surgical or invasive non-surgical procedure on an animal must ensure that the animal does not suffer unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress.
- 2.4. Veterinary practitioners who perform a surgical or invasive non-surgical procedure on an animal without appropriate pain management that is effective for an appropriate length of time may be engaging in unprofessional conduct.
- 2.5. Veterinary practitioners must not perform a surgical operation for the correction of an inheritable defect, or provide medical treatment for an inheritable disease, unless the primary purpose of the operation or treatment is to relieve or prevent pain or discomfort to the animal concerned.
- 2.6. Veterinary practitioners must be satisfied that any person under their authority who performs any invasive procedure on an animal is appropriately trained and supervised, and that the animal does not suffer pain or distress.

## 3. OBLIGATION TO PROVIDE TREATMENT

- 3.1. Veterinary practitioners must not refuse to provide relief of pain or suffering to an animal that is in their presence, giving due consideration to the safety of the veterinary practitioner, the veterinary staff and the public.
- 3.2. Veterinary practitioners are not obliged to accept new clients, continue to provide services to existing clients or provide a requested treatment, providing animal welfare and professional standards are met.

## 4. EUTHANASIA OF ANIMALS

- 4.1. Veterinary practitioners have a legal obligation to euthanase animals which, in their professional opinion, are distressed, diseased or disabled to such an extent that their condition cannot be satisfactorily relieved by veterinary care.
- 4.2. A veterinary practitioner must offer euthanasia as a treatment option when appropriate (or offer referral to another practitioner during such a situation where they have a moral objection).

## 5. VETERINARY PRACTITIONER HEALTH

- 5.1. Veterinary practitioners have an obligation to protect patients from risk of being placed at harm posed by their or a colleague's poor physical or mental health.

## 6. OBLIGATION TO REPORT

- 6.1. Where veterinary practitioners reasonably believe that there exists, or potentially exists, a serious risk to the health and safety of the public and/or the health and welfare of an animal, they should report the matter to the relevant authority. This responsibility takes precedence over the obligation to maintain client confidentiality.

## 7. OBLIGATION TO KEEP INFORMED AND ABIDE BY STATUTORY OBLIGATIONS

- 7.1. Veterinary practitioners must be conversant with and abide by all relevant legislation, codes and standards affecting them individually in their various professional roles and take every reasonable step to ensure their observance by others.
- 7.2. Veterinary practitioners must maintain knowledge of and obey any code or rules of an animal sporting organisation when attending that organisation or working within the industry to which it relates (unless the code or rules are contrary to the *Veterinary Practice Act 1997*, its associated Regulations, these Guidelines or any other legislation).
- 7.3. Veterinary practitioners must ensure that they hold the relevant permits and licences necessary for them to deliver veterinary services.
- 7.4. Veterinary practitioners must comply with a 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

## 8. WORKING WITHIN AREAS OF COMPETENCE AND LIMITATIONS

- 8.1. Veterinary practitioners must work within their areas of competence and be mindful of their limitations.
- 8.2. Veterinary practitioners should seek appropriate assistance from within the practice or from other experienced veterinary practitioners.

## 9. CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

- 9.1. Veterinary practitioners must participate in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programs sufficient to maintain competency in their chosen field of veterinary practice.

- 9.2. The minimum requirement is 60 CPD units over a consecutive 3-year cycle. At least 15 units must consist of structured activities, while the remaining 45 units can consist of unstructured and/or structured activities.
- 9.3. Veterinary practitioners must retain documented evidence of CPD for a minimum of three (3) years.
- 9.4. When renewing their registration each year, veterinary practitioners must complete a declaration about CPD having been undertaken during the previous year.
- 9.5. When requested, veterinary practitioners must provide the Board with documented evidence of compliance with CPD requirements.

## 10. EMPLOYING AND SUPERVISING VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS

- 10.1. Employers must ensure employed veterinary practitioners hold current registration that is recognised in Victoria. Registration may be confirmed by online registers or by telephoning the relevant Board's office.
- 10.2. Employers should provide appropriate support, guidance, and assistance to the veterinary practitioners in their employment.
- 10.3. Employers should not employ an inexperienced veterinary practitioner unless the employer has the capacity, and is willing, to provide the required level of support.
- 10.4. Veterinary practitioners should make sure that any veterinary practitioner or student for whose supervision they are responsible receives adequate oversight and feedback.
- 10.5. Employers must not direct veterinary practitioners to undertake procedures / tasks for which they do not have the necessary skills, unless they are provided with adequate supervision/support.

## 11. COMMUNICATION

- 11.1. 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.
- 11.2. Veterinary practitioners must practise in a way that promotes effective communication and trust, meets confidentiality and consent requirements, and recognises clients' right to choose.
- 11.3. 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.
- 11.4. Veterinary practitioners must make reasonable efforts to ensure that the client understands their communications.
- 11.5. Where several treatment options exist, veterinary practitioners must discuss a reasonable range of options for treatment, their associated costs, prognosis, potential complications, and consequences.
- 11.6. 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.
- 11.7. Veterinary practitioners who perform a treatment/surgery must ensure that appropriate information regarding aftercare and what to do in the event of complications is provided to the person responsible for the care of the animal.
- 11.8. 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.

- 11.9. Veterinary practitioners must respect clients' rights to:
- use the services of more than one veterinary practitioner
  - seek a second opinion or referral
  - decline or choose an alternate course of action to the one recommended by the veterinary practitioner, provided the animal's welfare is not compromised.
- 11.10. 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.
- 11.11. When an adverse event occurs, veterinary practitioners have a responsibility to be open and honest in communication with their clients.

## 12. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

- 12.1. Veterinary practitioners must take all reasonable steps to avoid conflicts of interest. Where they cannot be avoided, veterinary practitioners should declare the real or potential conflict of interest to the parties involved.
- 12.2. Veterinary practitioners must consider the best interests of patients when providing or arranging treatment or care and when making referrals.

## 13. INCITEMENT AND INDUCEMENTS TO COMMIT UNPROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

- 13.1. Veterinary practitioners must not allow their professional judgement, integrity, discretion, conduct or ethical standards to be compromised by any other person in any matter requiring the application of professional knowledge or skill.
- 13.2. Veterinary practitioners must not seek and accept inducements that influence their treatment, referral and sales decisions.
- 13.3. Owners and managers of veterinary practices must not pressure veterinary practitioners to offer services or referrals that are not in the best interest of their patient.

## 14. VETERINARY PREMISES, EQUIPMENT AND ASSISTANCE OR SUPPORT USED IN THE PROVISION OF VETERINARY SERVICES

- 14.1. Veterinary practitioners must ensure that the environment, equipment and assistance available is appropriate for the veterinary procedures that they are undertaking. This guideline may not apply in situations where veterinary practitioners are providing emergency care in an adverse environment beyond the veterinary practitioners' ability to control.
- 14.2. The owners of veterinary facilities must be familiar with and abide by the Board's standards for veterinary facilities as set out in this guideline, and they must abide by all other obligations and responsibilities under all other relevant legislation, codes and standards.
- 14.3. Veterinary practitioners must ensure that all persons assisting in the provision of veterinary services to animals in their care have the skills, knowledge and available equipment to enable them to perform their duties according to current standards of the practice of veterinary science, except in the case of an emergency.

- 14.4. Veterinary practitioners must ensure that veterinary facilities in which they consult or perform procedures:
- a) are clean and hygienic at all times
  - b) have on prominent display the name, telephone number, and days and hours of attendance of the veterinary practitioner(s) usually in attendance and arrangements for obtaining after hours emergency services
  - c) have facilities to weigh small animal patients
  - d) have adequate lighting, cooling, heating and ventilation
  - e) have hot and cold running water and appropriate drainage
  - f) have safe, secure and appropriate storage for drugs, which complies with *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substance Act 1981* requirements
  - g) have appropriate facilities for disposal of sharps and clinical waste
  - h) comply with safety standards, local authority by-laws or other regulations applicable to veterinary premises
  - i) the room used for the purpose of surgical procedures (other than minor surgery) is not to be used for the hospitalisation of animals. Minor surgery does not include procedures involving the opening of body cavities or orthopaedic procedures, and
  - j) provide facilities that allow for the prevention of the spread of contagious disease between patients.
- 14.5. Veterinary practitioners must only undertake procedures in a mobile veterinary clinic after a detailed explanation of any increased risks, and with the informed consent of the client.
- 14.6. Veterinary practitioners who undertake consultations, procedures and/or surgery in a mobile clinic must ensure:
- a) the mobile veterinary clinic meets all the Guidelines for veterinary facilities
  - b) that sufficient and appropriate instrumentation and equipment for the services to be performed is present
  - c) where general anaesthetics are administered, facilities for resuscitation of patients are available
  - d) that they have appropriate assistance during any sterile procedure for the purpose of anaesthetic monitoring and to assist in maintaining sterility
  - e) following sedation or anaesthesia, a veterinary practitioner must remain at the location where the procedure was performed and supervise the animal until it is able to stand and walk unaided. (except where injury precludes ambulation), and
  - f) clients are provided with details of how to access assistance in the event of problems or complications after procedures or surgery.
- 14.7. Veterinary practitioners must not carry out procedures involving orthopaedic or thoracic surgery in a mobile veterinary clinic unless there are no other alternatives.
- 14.8. Veterinary practitioners must not carry out abdominal surgery on animals in a mobile veterinary clinic unless strict sterility can be maintained.
- 14.9. Veterinary practitioners must only undertake procedures on a house call visit after a detailed explanation of any increased risks, and with the informed consent of the client.
- 14.10. When conducting house call or on-site visits, veterinary practitioners must ensure that:
- a) only procedures for which there are appropriate facilities and equipment are carried out

- b) the safety of the veterinary practitioner, veterinary staff and others is considered; and appropriate measures are taken to manage any risks identified
- c) safe, secure, and appropriate storage for drugs is used which complies with the requirements of the *Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substance Act 1981*
- d) they have appropriate facilities for disposal of sharps and clinical waste
- e) appropriate biosecurity measures are taken
- f) following sedation or anaesthesia, a veterinary practitioner must remain at the location where the procedure was performed and supervise the animal until it is able to stand and walk unaided (except where injury precludes ambulation), and
- g) clients are provided with details of how to access assistance in the event of problems or complications after procedures or surgery.
- h) a veterinary practitioner must not carry out any procedure that requires an anaesthetic outside of a veterinary facility; except:
  - in the case of an emergency where there is no time to move the animal to a veterinary facility, or
  - it is impractical to move the animal to a veterinary facility because of the size or type of the animal, or
  - it is dangerous to the health of the animal to move it to a veterinary hospital
- i) animals requiring a procedure performed under anaesthesia should be referred or transported to an appropriate veterinary facility.

## 15. BIOSECURITY AND INFECTION CONTROL

- 15.1. Veterinary practitioners must apply good infection control principles when practising, they must assess biosecurity risks and take appropriate measures to minimise those risks.
- 15.2. Veterinary practitioners must take appropriate measures to protect against infection of themselves and other people from zoonotic disease.
- 15.3. Veterinary practitioners must be aware of and comply with requirements and procedures for dealing with suspected or confirmed notifiable diseases and emergency animal diseases

## 16. SUPPLY AND USE OF MEDICATIONS

- 16.1. Veterinary practitioners must exercise sound professional judgement and abide by all legislative requirements and these Guidelines when selling, supplying, prescribing and administering medicines, poisons, chemicals and other substances and when using them on their patients.
- 16.2. Before supplying, prescribing or administering medications, veterinary practitioners must satisfy themselves of the following:
  - a) the client is a bona fide client; or the agent of a bona fide client
  - b) they have taken all reasonable steps to ensure a therapeutic need exists for the drug or medication
  - c) the animal or herd is under the veterinary practitioner's care
  - d) all requirements for storage and handling are followed
  - e) appropriate medical records and documentation are kept
  - f) provision is made for after-care if needed

- g) the client understands instructions for use (and any withholding periods) and will use the drugs or medications appropriately
  - h) the quantity supplied is reasonable
  - i) supply is in the best interests of the animal or herd.
- 16.3. Veterinary practitioners must make true and accurate records of all medications administered or supplied and retain those records for at least seven (7) years.
- 16.4. Veterinary practitioners must maintain a knowledge of current appropriate antimicrobial prescribing guidelines, and they must prescribe antimicrobials appropriately and judiciously to minimise the development of antimicrobial resistance.

## 17. CONTINUING CARE AFTER-HOURS

- 17.1. Veterinary practitioners must, when accepting an animal for diagnosis or treatment: (a) ensure that they are available for the ongoing care of the animal or (b), if they will not be so available, make arrangements for another veterinary practitioner within reasonable proximity to take over the care of the animal.

## 18. AFTER-HOURS HOSPITALISATION OF PATIENTS

- 18.1. Veterinary practitioners are not required to provide after-hours hospitalisation. When 24-hour supervised after-hours hospitalisation is not provided, veterinary practitioners must inform clients of the available options for after-hours supervision, including the advantages, disadvantages and cost estimates of these options.

## 19. EMERGENCY ANIMAL HOSPITALS

- 19.1. Where an emergency centre is advertised, there must be both veterinary and support staff in attendance during the stated business hours.

## 20. VETERINARY MEDICAL RECORDS

- 20.1. Veterinary practitioners must ensure that veterinary records contain sufficient information to clearly identify the animal(s), justify their clinical management and treatment and allow another veterinary practitioner to continue care if needed.
- 20.2. Veterinary practitioners must retain records for at least seven (7) years after the last occasion on which the animal received treatment.
- 20.3. Except as otherwise required by these Guidelines or other legislation, veterinary practitioners must maintain the confidentiality of information obtained in the course of professional practice.

## 21. CERTIFICATION

- 21.1. Veterinary practitioners must only certify things which are within their professional expertise and knowledge and which they can personally ascertain.
- 21.2. Any certification by a veterinary practitioner must contain such detail as is necessary to ensure that it is complete and accurate and that the meaning is clear.

- 21.3. Veterinary practitioners should follow their signature with their unique registration number (for example, V9999) when signing certificates in their capacity as a registered veterinary practitioner.

## 22. REFERRALS, SECOND OPINIONS, REGISTERED SPECIALISTS AND SPECIALIST PRACTICES

- 22.1. Veterinary practitioners must utilise the skills of colleagues, by consultation or referral, where appropriate.
- 22.2. Veterinary practitioners must not refuse a request by a person responsible for the care of an animal for a referral or second opinion.
- 22.3. Veterinary practitioners should ensure it is clear to clients who is and who isn't a specialist.

## 23. PROVIDING VETERINARY SERVICES ACROSS BORDERS AND TO REMOTE CLIENTS

- 23.1. All the standard legal and professional obligations of veterinary practitioners apply to the provision of any veterinary-related service by remote means.
- 23.2. Veterinary practitioners providing veterinary services in any Australian jurisdiction are required to be registered or deemed registered in that jurisdiction.
- 23.3. Veterinary practitioners should only conduct veterinary services using remote electronic means when it can be demonstrated that the animal(s) are under the care of the veterinary practitioner, with the exception of general advice or advice given in an emergency until that patient can be seen by a veterinary practitioner.
- 23.4. Veterinary practitioners in Victoria with primary care of an animal may seek advice and/or services from veterinary practitioners elsewhere, provided that the veterinary practitioner registered in Victoria continues to provide the primary ongoing care for that animal.

Document	Responsible persons	Revision number	Dates
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