

# VETERINARIANS' HEALTH

## **Voluntary agreements or conditions on practice**

A typical programme for managing an unwell veterinarian might include some or all of the following:

- limiting the veterinarian's practice to certain procedures, locations, times
- requiring the veterinarian's practice to be supervised
- requiring the veterinarian to inform work colleagues about the relevant health issues
- requiring the veterinarian to undergo treatment, counselling or other therapy
- carrying out random urine, hair and blood testing to check for the presence of drugs or alcohol
- requiring the veterinarian to arrange with their general practitioner to provide regular supervision
- imposing prescribing restrictions
- requiring the veterinarian to attend peer support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous
- appointing a senior veterinarian as a mentor

## **Confidentiality**

The aim is for the process to be confidential between the veterinarian, his or her health care providers and the Council. However, where there are situations of drug or alcohol misuse or inappropriate behaviour, it is preferable that the employer is informed of any agreement. If statutory conditions on the veterinarian's practice are required there are notification requirements under the Veterinarian's Act.

## **How do I contact the Council?**

If you are worried about your own health, or about the health of another veterinarian contact the Council's Registrar.

The Registrar's contact details are:  
Address: PO Box 10-563, Wellington  
Ph: 04 473 9600  
Email: registrar@vetcouncil.org.nz

## **Other help available**

### Veterinary Wellness Programme

The Council and the New Zealand Veterinary Association maintain a contract with Vitae for the provision of support services for veterinarians facing work and life pressures. This programme includes a 24-hour freephone access (0508 664 981) to counsellors and psychologists providing confidential and professional offsite counselling.

### New Zealand Veterinary Association

For veterinarians who are members of the New Zealand Veterinary Association, or whose employers have VPIS insurance, help may be available in the form of personal, legal or (limited) financial support.

## **VETERINARY COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND**

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**VETERINARY COUNCIL  
OF NEW ZEALAND**

Te Kaunihera Rata Kararehe o Aotearoa

### **Veterinarians' health**

The Veterinary Council of New Zealand is responsible for protecting the public interest. Under the Veterinarians Act the Council may respond to situations where a veterinarian's health may be impairing his or her fitness to practise.

A veterinarian may be unfit to practise if he or she:

- is unable to make safe judgements
- is unable to demonstrate the level of skill and knowledge required for safe practice
- behaves inappropriately
- risks infecting patients or clients with whom he or she comes into contact and where adequate steps have not been taken to eliminate the risk
- acts or omits to act in ways that impact adversely on the safety of patients, clients, colleagues or staff.

This pamphlet explains how the Council responds to such situations.

### **What causes health problems?**

Veterinarians, like everyone else, are constantly exposed to stresses and hazards that can impair performance. Stresses can include the demands of work and personal relationships, as well as financial problems. Hazards include infectious diseases, accidents or injury as a result of working with animals, exposure to radiation, drugs and noxious chemicals. In addition, veterinarians are vulnerable to the same physical and psychological disorders and addictions as the rest of the community.

It is to be expected that a small number of veterinarians in actual practice will be working under some degree of impairment.

If professional help is not sought it is often just a matter of time before serious problems occur. General experience is that early intervention usually enables veterinarians with a treatable condition to keep practising while receiving treatment.

However where this is not the case, it is vital, in the public interest, that the veterinarian is closely monitored if that is appropriate and safe, or discontinues work if necessary.

### **Who advises the Council about problems with a veterinarian's health?**

Veterinarians are required to advise the Council of any health conditions with the potential to affect their fitness to practise. They must do this when they renew their practising certificate, but it is strongly recommended that they notify at the time the issue arises. Most of these notifications result in no further action or advice given on how to continue to practise safely.

Any other person can also contact the Council if they have concerns about a veterinarian's health.

There is guidance for veterinarians on notifying concerns about colleagues in Section 10 of the Professional Integrity part of the Code of Professional Conduct.

### **How does the Council assess and monitor the situation?**

Health notifications are managed in consultation with the Council's Health Advisor.

The Council uses established assessment, monitoring and rehabilitation processes.

### **Rehabilitative not punitive**

The Council's assessment and monitoring process is designed to separate health issues from those of conduct and discipline.

The Council's focus is on rehabilitation, and the intention is that with treatment the veterinarian should be able to remain in work safely or return to work as quickly as possible.

### **The assessment process**

Initially the veterinarian will be contacted to seek their comment about a health notification, and supporting medical information may be asked for. This will be assessed to determine whether the veterinarian needs to be monitored in some way. If necessary the veterinarian may be asked to undergo a medical assessment, by an independent medical practitioner.

The Council always seeks the veterinarian's voluntary agreement to undergoing a medical assessment and to any other conditions which may be required. The statutory provisions are only invoked if the veterinarian is non-cooperative.

If a medical assessment is undertaken the veterinarian has the right to make submissions on the assessor's report.

### **Outcomes of a medical assessment**

Taking into consideration the veterinarian's submissions, one or more of the following outcomes may be decided:

- that no further action is needed
- that a voluntary agreement between the Council and the veterinarian should be put in place - aimed at supporting and monitoring the veterinarian's rehabilitation
- that conditions be imposed on the veterinarian's practice
- that a period of suspension is required so that treatment can occur
- that the person's registration or practising certificate is cancelled. This could happen if attempts at rehabilitation were unsuccessful.