



Policy Guideline on the Veterinary Council (VCNZ) framework for Professional Standards

1.0 Introduction

VCNZ's primary purpose is to protect the public interest by ensuring that veterinarians are fit and competent to practise. One of the ways the Council achieves this purpose is by setting and monitoring the professional standards veterinarians must meet.

This document sets out how professional standards are developed and explains the status and purpose of the various VCNZ publications in this area.

1.1 Interpretation

Minimum standards are prescribed by VCNZ in the *NZ Gazette* and as such have regulatory status. They set out the current standards of expertise, performance, behaviour, integrity and accountability expected of veterinarians. The word 'must' is used in descriptions of minimum standards. In the event of concerns or complaints being raised, whether or not formal action is taken will depend on the relevant facts and circumstances of the individual case.

Recommended practice means –

The standard of practice veterinarians are encouraged to aspire to. The term 'should' is generally used in descriptions of recommended practice.

Minimum standards and recommended practice are not static. To ensure there is no lag, they are regularly reviewed and updated.

1.2 Legislation

1.2.1 The Veterinarians Act

Section 3(c) (iii) of the Veterinarians Act (Purpose) provides for the Veterinary Council to:

- (i) *register people qualified to practise as veterinarians; and*
- (ii) *issue practising certificates to specialists and people qualified to practise as veterinarians; and*
- (iii) *set and implement standards for veterinary performance; and*
- (iv) *monitor performance and, if necessary, discipline veterinarians and certain other people*

Section 75(c) of the Veterinarians Act requires the Council:

to promote and encourage high standards of professional education and conduct among veterinarians.

Section 75(i) of the Veterinarians Act 2005 provides for the Veterinary Council: *to prescribe the minimum standards for practising as a veterinarian, including standards relating to either or both of the following:*

- (i) *a person's fitness to practise as a veterinarian;*
- (ii) *the maintenance, examination, or improvement of the overall competence of a veterinarian to practise.*

1.2.2 Prescription

The Council exercises its statutory powers to prescribe minimum standards by publishing these in the *NZ Gazette*. Under s89 of the Act any matter required to be published in the Gazette is presented to Parliament and is subject to the scrutiny of the Parliamentary Regulations Review Committee. These prescribed standards meet the definition of regulations under section 29 of the Interpretation Act 1999.

1.2.3 Legal status of standards documents

- a) the Code of Professional Conduct (the “Code”) and other VCNZ statements on minimum standards are prescribed under s75 (i)(i) of the Act, and therefore have regulatory status.
- b) Guidance on recommended practice is not prescribed. This advice is provided to guide veterinarians as to how they can:
 - (i) best meet the prescribed standards
 - (ii) achieve recommended practice standards. Recommendations on practice standards are made by VCNZ from time to time for educational and information purposes, in line with s75(c) of the Act
- c) VCNZ’s interpretative policy guidelines on how it implements the Veterinarians Act are not prescribed.

1.2.4 Current prescribed standards

The Council has prescribed minimum standards in relation to:

- a) fitness to practise
- b) competency – including recency of practise
- c) continuing professional development
- d) professional conduct requirements (the Code of Professional Conduct).

2.0 Professional Standards Documents and Their Use

2.1 The Code of Professional Conduct sets out the professional and ethical standards which veterinarians are expected to meet and may be measured against. The Code is structured around seven fundamental principles that form the basis of the professional behaviour expected of veterinarians. Supporting each principle is a series of statements which set out the specific expectations. More detail on the expectations and how veterinarians can comply with them, is provided in comprehensive explanatory notes which are embedded in the online version of the Code at www.vetcouncil.org.nz

2.1.1 The Code is VCNZ’s primary vehicle for outlining the professional and ethical standards to be observed by veterinarians

2.1.2 The Code is used by VCNZ and its Committees in evaluating whether a veterinarian’s behaviour meets the required standard.

2.1.2 As part of applying for a practising certificate veterinarians are asked to formally declare that they are aware of and comply with Council’s expectations of veterinarians as set out in the Code.

2.2 VCNZ statements on minimum standards clarify and expand on principles and standard statements set out in the Code of Professional Conduct. For example: VCNZ statements on Dry Cow Therapy; Induction of Calving in Cattle; Compounding of Veterinary Medicines; and Competency Standards and Performance Indicators for Veterinarians.

2.3 VCNZ Guidance on professional standards

VCNZ may also endorse or develop guidance on:

- a) recommended practice in a particular standard area,
- b) how veterinarians can best meet minimum standards.

For example: The Explanatory Notes to the Code; the VCNZ/NZVA Social Media Guide; and the NZVA Guide to Veterinary Authorising (Prescribing) and Dispensing.

2.4 VCNZ Policy Guidelines

These set out how the Council administers and interprets the Veterinarians Act. For example: this Policy Guideline and the VCNZ Policy on Registration.

2.6 In the absence of a defined VCNZ statement the Council looks to the codes and practice guidelines developed by the NZVA and other relevant organisations or government agencies.

3.0 Development Processes for Professional Standards documents

The following processes are followed in developing professional standards.

3.1 Co-operation and consultation

3.1.1 The Code of Professional Conduct is developed and reviewed by VCNZ in consultation with veterinarians, veterinary representative organisations, the public and relevant Government organisations. The profession is a key contributor to veterinary professional standards. As such VCNZ maintains close co-operation with the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) in the development of the Code.

3.1.2 VCNZ statements on minimum standards may be developed by the Council or proposed by another organisation such as NZVA. In both circumstances VCNZ consults with the profession and with relevant parties, before finalising the statement.

3.1.3 NZVA Practice Guidelines

NZVA produces practice guidelines which may be accepted by VCNZ as minimum standards (either in the Code itself, or in Council standard statements) or alternatively endorsed as guidance for recommended and/or best practice. The Council may also request that NZVA look to develop standards or guidelines in areas, which it considers require it.

3.1.4 Other Regulators

Where VCNZ sets a standard that may affect a standard set by another regulator, it consults with the other organisation with the aim of achieving consistency. VCNZ also expects to be consulted when other regulators, such as the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI), are setting or reviewing standards that directly impact upon the professional behaviour or performance of veterinarians.

Where a standard set by another regulator differs from a VCNZ standard, veterinarians are expected to comply with both standards.

3.1.5 VCNZ may develop a standard in cooperation with like bodies (for example Australasian veterinary registration authorities). In such situations, VCNZ consults with relevant New Zealand organisations and authorities before finalising it.

3.2 Development, Review and Changes to VCNZ Code of Professional Conduct, Standards Documents, Guidelines and Policy Documents

3.2.1 Code of Professional Conduct and VCNZ statements on minimum standards

The Code and Minimum Standards statements are reviewed on a rolling basis. The Council's Professional Standards Committee oversees their review and makes recommendations to VCNZ on amendments.

Before making any significant changes to the Code or its statements VCNZ consults with the profession, the public; and with other interested parties.

VCNZ may also ask experts to assist and/or advise on the development of standards.

The Code and VCNZ Minimum Standards statements are published on the VCNZ website.

3.2.1 VCNZ guidance on professional standards

From time to time VCNZ may endorse guidelines (developed by the NZVA or by another organisation) on a professional standards matter. These guidelines may describe how to best meet current standards and/or recommend a higher standard of practice. This is in keeping with the requirement, set out in Section 75(c) of the Veterinarians Act that the Council promote and encourage high standards of conduct.

There will normally be an opportunity for comment before the guideline is endorsed. There may also be a need for consultation if matters in the guideline cross regulatory boundaries of other organisations.

Guidelines on professional standards are published on the VCNZ website.

3.2.4 VCNZ policy guidelines

From time to time, VCNZ needs to make interpretations of the Act. It does this by issuing guidelines on how it administers and interprets a particular section of the Veterinarians Act.

Depending on the subject of the policy guideline there may be a period of notice to allow comment before it is finalised. VCNZ has the ultimate responsibility for the development of its own policy guidelines but will consider all comments during the process.

VCNZ's policy guidelines are reviewed on a rolling basis.

The majority of VCNZ policy guidelines are published on the VCNZ website.

4.0 Documentation

The Code, statements and policies are documented in a standard way. They each have dates of issue and are reviewed on a rolling basis (normally at least once every three - four years). Printed versions may not always be available but can be downloaded from the website or obtained by contacting the VCNZ office.