



VCNZ Update

VETERINARY COUNCIL
OF NEW ZEALAND
Te Kaunihera Rata Kararehe o Aotearoa

Veterinarians' health and the Veterinary Council of New Zealand

by Helen Beban, Professional Adviser, Veterinary Council of New Zealand

Under the Veterinarians Act 2005, a person is not entitled to be registered or to continue to practise if they cannot practise safely because of a mental or physical condition. VCNZ takes a preventative and rehabilitative approach to health issues, the aim being to identify these early and support vets in continuing to practise safely.

Notifying your own health concerns

You must declare any health conditions with the potential to affect your fitness to practise, in your annual practising certificate (APC) application. However, we strongly recommend that you notify us about health issues at the time they arise rather than waiting until the APC round. Early notification and, if necessary early intervention, results in better outcomes.

Examples of health conditions that may affect ability to practise:

- alcohol or drug abuse or dependence
- mental health issues, including depressive disorders
- stress-related impairment
- declining competence due to loss of motor skills or the early stages of dementia
- physical deterioration due to injury, disease or degeneration
- other illnesses and injuries.

Our approach is non-judgemental, rehabilitative and confidential. Health issues are managed by the Registrar and Deputy Registrar with the input and advice of the VCNZ Medical Adviser, Professional Adviser and one council member. The full council does not receive information on individual cases except in extremely rare situations where the veterinarian refuses to cooperate, the public interest is threatened and statutory action is needed.

If you are unsure whether you should notify VCNZ about a health concern, phone and talk to the VCNZ Registrar Janet Eden or Deputy Registrar Despina Arathimos. You need to ask yourself: "Could the condition affect my ability to practise safely?"

We respond to health notifications on a case-by-case basis and, in the first instance, we may ask for information from your treating health practitioner.

Notifying the VCNZ Registrar of a colleague's health issue

The Code of Professional Conduct (Professional Integrity section 10) states: *Veterinarians must use their professional judgement in deciding whether to notify VCNZ where they have reason to believe that the health, conduct or competence of a colleague is adversely affecting patient care or undermining the public's trust in the profession.*

Without help and support, a veterinarian who has a health condition with the potential to adversely affect their practice risks putting patients, the profession and their reputation in jeopardy. Ideally, you should discuss your concerns with the veterinarian first and, if appropriate, encourage them to notify VCNZ. Measures may be able to be put in place locally to ensure that your colleague is able to continue to practise safely. If your concerns are not alleviated or if the veterinarian refuses to engage, you need to notify VCNZ. Unfortunately, sometimes people are not aware of a gradual decline in health that is starting to affect their practice.

You should notify the VCNZ Registrar where:

- direct approaches and/or local interventions have not worked
- the veterinarian is not aware they have problems and/or resists offers of support or help
- the veterinarian has resisted recommendations to report their health concerns to VCNZ
- the illness or condition is affecting the veterinarian's practice to the extent that they pose a risk of harm to their patients, to the public interest or themselves.

Notifications about a fellow veterinarian need to be in writing to the Registrar and include your name and contact details.

This letter will normally be disclosed to the veterinarian in question. We recommend that, before referring a colleague to VCNZ because of a health issue, you phone the Registrar to discuss your concerns and find out what information may be required.

How does VCNZ assess a health notification?

We work with the veterinarian and their treating health practitioner(s) to decide what, if any, action is required. Where the issues are significant, we may ask the veterinarian to undergo a medical assessment by an independent medical practitioner.

If the veterinarian's health practitioner or independent medical assessor confirms that the health issues are adversely affecting the veterinarian's ability to practise safely, the usual outcome is a negotiated agreement with the veterinarian (a voluntary undertaking) to set in place, and monitor, steps to ensure rehabilitation and safe practice. This could involve regular medical examinations, perhaps drug testing and so on, depending on the individual situation.

Breaches of a voluntary undertaking can result in referral to the full council and statutory conditions being imposed on the veterinarian's practice.

In serious cases, where the veterinarian fails to engage with VCNZ, or where rehabilitation is not possible or unsuccessful, suspension or cancellation may be required. In such cases, the full council is involved and the veterinarian has the right to make written and/or oral submissions. Such cases are extremely rare.

Voluntary agreements

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

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- treatment, counselling or other therapy, usually with reporting requirements
- random drug screening
- general practitioner oversight and reporting
- prescribing restrictions
- restrictions on access to controlled drugs and other abusable medicines
- attending support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous
- limiting practice to certain procedures, locations or times
- supervision and/or mentoring
- disclosure requirements to employers and/or colleagues.

Objective of VCNZ health monitoring programmes

The objective is to help veterinarians' rehabilitation while ensuring that they remain fit to practise. Fronting up to the issues, talking to VCNZ staff and getting a programme in place to help can be a huge relief for veterinarians who are struggling to cope. They are no longer alone and, maybe at last, they can see "light at the end of a dark tunnel".

The Deputy Registrar Despina Arathimos can provide information about health-related issues including counselling options.

Veterinarians can also access the independent and confidential 24-hour help line, Vitae (0508 664 981), funded by NZVA and VCNZ.

NZVA members can contact NZVA for assistance and advice. Sometimes just talking to another veterinarian who understands the pressures you are under is comforting.

If you are concerned, please come to us early and allow us to help you work through your concerns. You have worked hard to become a veterinarian; if possible, we want to help you remain in practice. You are not alone. ■