



VETERINARY COUNCIL
OF NEW ZEALAND
Te Kaunihera Rata Kararehe o Aotearoa

VCNZ Update

Alteration of clinical records

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A recent case in the human health sector regarding allegations of altering clinical records should serve as a warning to all professionals that such cases will be treated seriously and could lead to a finding of professional misconduct.

Background

A child was administered 10 times the dose of a pre-anaesthetic (codeine syrup). The patient chart written by the anaesthetist was not clear and the nurse in charge read the dose as 85mg, not 8.5mg. The nurse had recently started employment at the hospital and was not experienced in paediatric care. She checked the dose with a senior nurse who also read the chart as 85mg. Although both nurses thought the dose was high, neither clarified the dose with the anaesthetist.

The nurse subsequently realised the error when she checked the next patient's dose (which was 8mg) and immediately alerted the anaesthetist. The child's stomach was pumped and the child did not suffer any adverse effects from the error.

An Incident/Complaints and Investigation Form was completed by the senior nurse. During the investigation, it was discovered that the patient chart had been retrospectively altered with the decimal point bolded to clearly read 8.5mg. The Health and Disability Commissioner engaged the services of the Police Document Examination team to verify that the record had been altered.



Expectations under the Code of Professional Conduct (COPC) for veterinarians in regard to alteration of clinical records

The following extracts from the COPC are relevant to this case.

Professional integrity

Veterinarians must display high standards of integrity and accountability and must not engage in fraud, misrepresentation or deception.

Veterinary services

Veterinarians must maintain clear and accurate records.

The records must ...

not be altered retrospectively unless the changes are marked chronologically on the records and the additions are dated and noted as being added retrospectively.

Veterinary Council approach

Unless there are significant or continuing breaches of professional standards, the Veterinary Council of New Zealand's (VCNZ's) normal approach (in situations where a basis for the concerns is raised) focuses, in the first instance, on the causes of adverse events and preventing recurrences through education and other non-disciplinary means.

If a complaints process discovers there has been retrospective alteration of a clinical record, VCNZ will consider any mitigating circumstances. However, if VCNZ believes the alteration is an attempt to deceive, then this will be viewed seriously and could lead to disciplinary processes.

Lessons

1. Always ensure you carefully update the clinical record at the time. If you do make additions, clearly indicate on the record when these were made and give explanations. This applies in particular to unfolding medical situations where ongoing information, such as laboratory test results, often leads to refinement of diagnoses and treatment plans.
2. If others are involved in updating the same clinical record, make sure their identity is clear.
3. Always be truthful with VCNZ. Admit mistakes.
4. If an error happens, don't try to cover it up. Record the events in chronological order. Any additions or deletions made later must be done with clear reference to the date and time that the changes were made and who made them.
5. Think carefully about not only what you do, but how it could be perceived. If you have a niggling feeling that all is not right, listen to your gut instinct and reflect. Always act with integrity.
6. Foster a culture of transparency, respect and trust among all team members. Foster a culture of safe questioning: staff and clients should be empowered to raise concerns and ask questions. Take time to communicate well with clients. Be remorseful when mistakes occur. Use mistakes as a means of learning and improvement.
7. Know your COPC. Get used to going through sections of the COPC. Discuss at team meetings. Brainstorm ways that processes in your clinic can be tightened up. ■