



VETERINARY COUNCIL
OF NEW ZEALAND
Te Kaunihera Rata Kararehe o Aotearoa

VCNZ Update

Informed consent: Providing clients with adequate information to make informed choices

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Many of the complaints made to the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ) are about the lack of proper communication between the veterinarian–veterinary clinic and client. Central to this communication is the concept of informed consent. VCNZ is reviewing the Client Relationship section of the Code of Professional Conduct. Once the review is completed, veterinarians will be consulted.

What is informed consent?

Informed consent is:

... effective communication of sufficient, relevant information to allow a client to make an informed choice as to the treatment options for his or her animal(s).

Adapted from Ron Patterson, Health and Disability Commissioner, 2001

Informed consent requires the veterinarian to ask themselves the following questions.

- Has my communication been effective?
- Has my client been supplied with all the relevant information about the proposed treatment appropriate to their circumstances?
- Is my client competent to understand the information and make an informed choice? Does my client have the authority to provide consent? If not, is there another person who could make the decision or am I able to make the decision in the best welfare interests of the animal(s)?
- Have I adequately documented the process?

Informed consent is a process

Informed consent is more than getting a client to sign a consent form. It is an interactive process that underpins decision making throughout all stages of a treatment or procedure.

The signed consent form is an acknowledgement that a process has taken place that has allowed the client to make an informed choice and given consent to the agreed course of action.

The veterinarian should explain which option they recommend and why, and this process should be documented in

the clinical records. The client should be supported to make an informed choice. The client has a right to reject the veterinarian's recommendation as long as animal welfare concerns are satisfied.

What is relevant information?

Veterinarians should present information to clients in a form they can understand and support them to make an informed choice. The following information should be provided:

- the condition (likely diagnosis as known at the time) of their animal(s)
- treatment options, including expected outcomes, risks, side effects, complications, costs (can be a range of likely costs)
- your experience and skill to undertake the treatment, where appropriate
- referral options, where appropriate
- post-treatment requirements and likely costs.

How much information is required?

Do your best to help your client understand the information provided by tailoring it to the situation. The treatment options in a dystocia case will require less explanation to an experienced breeder than to a first-time breeder. The language used should be appropriate, to enable the client to understand the information. Use simple English rather than technical jargon. Providing appropriate written material, using a white board, or using anatomical atlases to visually explain a proposed treatment option can all be employed to help the client understand the information.

Your clients have the right to ask for

additional information to help them make an informed choice on treatment options. They may ask you about unusual therapies or alternative options that you do not know about. In this case, you need to be truthful about the extent of your knowledge, explain the commonly accepted treatment options and, where appropriate, give information on colleagues who may have the knowledge or skills to help the client.

There is no obligation to disclose minor risks in common procedures where such procedures seldom result in serious ill effects or where the procedure is simple and commonly understood by members of the public. However, you are advised to provide information on common side effects, such as swelling at vaccination injection sites, if appropriate.

Documenting the informed consent process

The medical record should contain information given to clients and decisions made during the informed consent process.

- Signed consent forms tailored to the particular circumstances are recommended. Circumstances that may increase risk need to be noted in the medical record.
- Consent may be provided verbally and recorded in the medical record.
- The client should be given time to consider the information, particularly in complex situations, unless the situation requires emergency management.
- In risky or unproven procedures, thorough documentation of the informed consent process is vital.

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Informed consent in emergency situations

In emergency situations, there may not be time to explain the situation to the client before instituting treatment. Use your professional judgement, taking into account the welfare of the patient, when deciding what procedures or treatments are needed. The owner or client might not be present to participate in the process, for example, when an animal is hit by a car and injured and brought to the clinic by the driver. In other cases, an emergency might arise involving an in-patient and the owner is not be able to be contacted promptly.

As soon as possible, the client should be given the opportunity to participate in the informed consent process.

Summary

Informed consent is a process that involves more than obtaining a signature on a consent form. Apart from emergency situations, consent is required before any treatment is given to an animal. The onus is on the veterinarian in charge of the case to be able to demonstrate that all reasonable steps were taken to provide adequate information relevant to the particular circumstances. ■

Bibliography

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