



# Up to the task

**Wayne Ricketts**, VCNZ, discusses the Council's various approaches to the maintenance of competency standards within our profession.

**WE ALL KNOW** it's important that we stay 'at the top of our game'. Our responsibility as veterinarians is to remain competent for the roles we work in. Inevitably there will be times when mistakes happen – these and the possibility of complaints are facts of professional life. What is important, however, is how we learn from our mistakes and what changes we make.

We are also expected to commit to life-long learning to maintain and enhance our competence and performance. That's pretty simple really, since this is part of being a veterinarian.

But how does VCNZ (the Council) ensure that this is the case and how does it identify poor performers? After all, protecting the public by ensuring that veterinarians are competent and fit to practise is the Council's statutory role under the Veterinarians Act 2005.

It's not a straightforward task and, as in other health professions, a number of approaches are taken. The Council currently uses a mix of setting competency standards, CPD audits, targeted competency assessments, and early interventions and reviews following concerns or complaints raised.

What exactly is competence though? The Council defines competence as "the application of knowledge, skills, attitudes, communication and judgement to the delivery of appropriate veterinary services in accordance with a veterinarian's field of practice".

The Council takes a broad and predominantly educational and proactive

approach – a 'prevention is better than cure' attitude – and currently promotes high performance and competence in a number of ways:

- » **Setting minimum standards for practising, including competence** – the Council has set competencies (Competency Standards and Performance Indicators for Veterinarians) and minimum practising standards. We are expected to comply with these standards, relevant to our field of practice, at all stages of our careers.
- » **Setting requirements for CPD** – the Council expects all veterinarians to engage in relevant CPD and has set minimum times to be spent in three broad areas: continuing veterinary education, collegial learning and self-directed learning. These areas are within the context of a veterinarian's field of work so are very flexible and the requirements are not enforced in a black-and-white manner. There is a strong and increasing focus on reflective and collegial learning. Compliance is monitored through the Annual Practising Certificate declarations and random and targeted audits of a small percentage of veterinarians.
- » **Competence reviews** – the Council may carry out a competence assessment of a veterinarian on its own initiative or as the result of a complaint investigation. The Council considers a number of trigger points for a Council-activated assessment

eg health, professional isolation and poor standards of care or performance. These assessments are intended to be educational and rehabilitative. Increasingly the Council is using preliminary competency inquiry visits following complaints or concerns. The format is an on-site visit by a veterinary interviewer who reviews a number of aspects, such as CPD, professional support, possible stressors and practice systems. To date none of these have resulted in a full competency assessment; rather, voluntary undertakings around upskilling and peer support have been the norm.

- » **Placing conditions on practice** – the Council can place conditions on practice, limiting practice to certain areas – for example, areas of science such as pathology or laboratory diagnosis – for reasons of health or non-recency of practice. This protects the public by ensuring the veterinarian is competent and fit to practise in particular areas.
- » **Responding to complaints and annual recertification requirements** – for brevity these won't be discussed further here, but will be the topic of a future column.

Assessing competence and performance is a dynamic playing field and the Council continues to look at new approaches. It is also looking to move away from the current input-based CPD model to one that is more reflective and tailored to individual veterinarians' specific learning needs.

The Council is currently evaluating how to better support newly registered veterinarians. The New Zealand Medical Council operates a very supportive programme for newly registered doctors, which, anecdotally, appears to be an ambulance at the top of the cliff – it boosts competency and performance.

In our case, this approach may also have positive flow-on effects such as veterinarian retention and the prevention of health issues. <sup>29</sup>