



Playing the game fairly: **Professional interactions**

Wayne Ricketts, VCNZ, summarises the recent review of the professional relationships section of the *Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinarians*.

IN THIS ARTICLE I want to tease out some of the areas covered in the professional relationships section of the *Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinarians*. The key expectation here is that “veterinarians interact with colleagues honestly, with respect, and in a way that fosters good relationships and communication”. The general principle to remember is that veterinarians must communicate with each other in a professional manner – or ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you’.

I have an issue about another veterinarian – how do I deal with it?

Public criticism of another colleague is a no-no. It’s unprofessional and it threatens the profession’s reputation. Yet it’s surprising how many veterinarians complain to us about being criticised by other veterinarians. If you have a beef with a colleague, take it up with them directly, not with the client or on social media. Discuss your concerns with them, or contact the NZVA or VCNZ for advice on how to handle it. While the Code only applies to veterinarians, staff should also act professionally and be encouraged to do so.

How do I deal with referrals and second opinions?

Clients have the right to:

- » ask for a referral or second opinion
- » transfer to another veterinarian
- » have more than one veterinarian providing services.

We must recognise these rights. You’re also expected to know when to refer a case or when a second opinion may be appropriate. In such circumstances, veterinarians must, with the client’s consent, provide each other with relevant information about the case within a reasonable timeframe. You must not prevent or delay the transfer of relevant clinical records to a managing or treating veterinarian. Ineffective or delayed communication undermines the public’s trust in the profession and can compromise animal health and welfare.

When should I disclose records?

Animal health records are owned by the practice. However, the information is considered to be the personal information of the owner and therefore is subject to the Privacy Act 1993. Veterinarians need to be aware of their obligations under the Act. Situations where animal records should be disclosed include when a client:

- » transfers to another practice
 - » seeks a second opinion
 - » is referred to another veterinarian
 - » is using the services of more than one veterinarian
- and those that occur:
- » at the client’s request; clients have the right under the Privacy Act to obtain copies of their records during an emergency situation
 - » when an external agency such as the Police, Animal Control or the SPCA requests information about a client’s animal in order to uphold the law.

Generally speaking, clients must give consent for copies of their records to be given to third parties. Consent should be in writing (preferably) or verbal. If verbal, do record it.

However, there are exceptions:

- » During an emergency situation.
- » When an external agency requests information about a client’s animal(s) in order to uphold the law. They need to provide you with the reason – it can’t be a fishing expedition.

What do I do if a client doesn’t want their records transferred?

If a client doesn’t consent to your obtaining clinical records from their previous veterinarian, you need to carefully consider whether to provide them with services. It might be that the animal’s welfare is compromised by the absence of important clinical information.

When deciding whether to proceed in such circumstances you need to balance the Code’s expectations with the best interests of the animal. The welfare and safety of the patient are paramount.

The release of records can be a minefield. You can find useful information about it in the Code, from VCNZ, the NZVA and www.privacy.org.nz, or by seeking legal advice.

Do I have a responsibility for newly registered or inexperienced veterinarians?

All of us have a responsibility to take care of new registrants. This section of the Code also deals with the need to support new registrants to fully develop their skills and confidence.

We are looking at recommendations of the VCNZ-convened working party on the Needs of Newly Registered Veterinarians on ways to ensure that new Massey and international graduates and those returning to the workforce are supported.

As Tim Parkinson, convenor, says, “The first practice experience is critical, a make-or-break time for which assistance, encouragement and support is needed.” ^{vs}