



Drug dilemmas

Wayne Ricketts of VCNZ answers questions about prescribing and dispensing.

“Marijuana, when mixed with hay, causes death to the horses that eat it.”

– *New York Times*, 1934

No, this is not a commentary on the perils of cannabis in horses, but the quote above is an interesting lead-in to our article on drugs. We regularly receive questions about veterinary medicines, and our article this month is a potpourri of some of the questions and responses.

What's the difference between an authorisation (prescription) and a veterinary operating instruction?

Veterinarians can only sell or use restricted veterinary medicines (RVMs) under an authorisation (prescription) or a veterinary operating instruction (VOI). Veterinarians will be familiar with authorisation as the usual process they follow every day when they sell or use RVMs for their clients' animals following consultations.

A VOI, on the other hand, is issued by a veterinarian so that a non-veterinarian can use an RVM on an animal that may belong to a person who is not a client of the veterinarian, and when there hasn't been a consultation by the veterinarian. It is illegal to use VOIs to authorise the use of controlled drugs.

VOIs will probably never be used by most veterinarians as they are only appropriate in limited circumstances. They are not appropriate in any situation where a veterinary diagnosis or veterinary judgement is necessary in order to decide whether an RVM should be used – eg they should not be issued for antibiotics.

A VOI is only an option when the decision to use an RVM can be made by the authorised person on a purely technical basis, for example:

- » trained staff being able to vaccinate healthy puppies and kittens in a shelter organisation that doesn't employ a veterinarian
- » a contractor using local anaesthetic when disbudding calves.

As an interesting aside, some veterinarians are using the VOI model to document their involvement with and control of RVMs with clients following consultations in order to demonstrate more robust product stewardship.

For further information go to section 4 of Veterinary Medicines in the *Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinarians* at www.vetcouncil.org.nz/CPC/index.php.

Do I have to write a prescription? Can I charge for it?

You're obliged to write a prescription when a client requests one, but *only* if you intended to authorise and dispense the product yourself. There is no obligation to write a prescription if the client requests a product you wouldn't recommend or dispense yourself.

You're entitled to charge a reasonable fee for writing the prescription. As a guide, VCNZ suggests the fee charged should be comparable to what doctors charge patients for repeat prescriptions, or the prescription fee you charge when dispensing an RVM from your clinic.

What is an approved RVM seller?

MPI decides who can sell RVMs. Veterinarians are automatically recognised by MPI as approved (Group 1)

RVM sellers, but only for the clients of their practices. Some exceptions are allowed. For example, you may dispense on a one-off basis to a prescription from:

- » a neighbouring practice that has temporarily run out of an RVM
- » another veterinarian whose client and animals are away and need urgent access to repeat medication.

However, if the practice is routinely dispensing to other veterinarians' prescriptions it must have specific MPI approval. This means having an MPI-approved operating plan to operate as an approved Group 2 seller.

Other MPI-approved Group 2 sellers include RVM wholesalers and online veterinary 'pharmacies'.

For more information on approved RVM sellers and operating plans go to www.foodsafety.govt.nz/elibrary/industry/approved-restricted-veterinary-rvm-sellers.

How long should a prescription/authorisation be issued for?

Human prescription medicines (prescribed by a veterinarian) can only legally be prescribed for periods of up to three months. There is no legal limit on the period of supply for RVMs. The NZVA *Guide to Veterinary Authorising (Prescribing) and Dispensing* (endorsed by VCNZ) recommends a maximum limit of six months for individual animals, and six to 12 months for future supply for production animals.

However, veterinarians must use their professional judgement and be able to justify the decisions they make on the volumes and time periods for supply.

You need to take into account the type of product being prescribed, the condition/s being treated and the owner's ability to comply with the instructions for safe use.

Further information can be found in the NZVA *Guide to Veterinary Authorising (Prescribing) and Dispensing* in the Veterinary Medicines sections of both the code and www.foodsafety.govt.nz/industry/acvm.

We are also very happy to answer any questions at the VCNZ office. ^{vs}