



What does it mean to be a regulated profession?

“I still feel our profession fears VCNZ, but the more you get in front of veterinarians, the more they will realise you actually want the best for the profession.” VCNZ’s **Wayne Ricketts** explains the council’s role.

IT’S BEEN GREAT meeting veterinarians at the roadshows that the NZVA, MPI and Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ) are sharing to discuss the next tranche of the animal welfare regulations and the revised Veterinary Medicines section of the Code. The roadshows have also given us an opportunity to chew the fat about other issues, such as after-hours, referrals and supporting new graduates. Hopefully, my presence will help dispel the ‘police’ label we are sometimes given, and add to the positive interactions most veterinarians have with VCNZ. The above quote is from veterinarian Todd Field, who attended one of the roadshows. Thanks, Todd.

THE PUBLIC INTEREST

The history of our regulation is linked to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). In 1844, a group of UK veterinarians petitioned Queen Victoria seeking a charter to continue the “advancement of the veterinary art and the respectability of the veterinary practitioners” and to be better “qualified to discharge [their services] with due regard to the interests of the public”.

Regulation of the New Zealand veterinary profession was modelled on the UK system. The purpose of the Veterinarians Act 2005 is to protect the public interest by aiming to ensure that veterinarians are fit and competent to practise. Professional regulation brings with it public trust, because people can be reassured that professionals are held to a high standard.

The responsibility for ensuring this standard is vested in VCNZ via registration, recognition of qualifications, issuing practising certificates, setting standards, monitoring performance, investigating complaints against veterinarians and, if necessary, disciplining veterinarians. The last functions have probably led to the bad rap of being the ‘police’, but most interactions with us are positive. On average, we investigate about 55 complaints annually, with one or two leading to disciplinary action – not bad odds, considering there are 3,000-plus registered veterinarians out there.

WHAT COMES WITH REGULATION?

Members of many occupations call themselves professionals, but a distinction is whether they are in a ‘regulated profession’. For established professions, professional regulation is taken for granted. But what does it mean?

Professional regulation can be thought of as a form of consumer protection. Professional regulation is based on the concept of an occupational group entering into an agreement with government to formally regulate the activities of its members. As a condition of professional regulation, the regulatory body is required to apply such powers in a manner that is guided by the public interest.

One of the main activities of any profession’s regulatory body is to protect the public from incompetent or unethical practitioners, and to ensure the effective provision of and access to professional services; it is not to forward the interests

of the profession (for veterinarians, this is the role of the NZVA). The distinction between a professional association and a regulatory body is not always well understood, but it’s important to understand. Perhaps this is another reason for the ‘police’ characterisation.

The reality is that as a member of a regulated profession there are certain obligations you have to meet – to have a recognised qualification, undertake CPD, meet minimum standards, and comply with codes of conduct. That’s the quid pro quo of being regulated.

It’s a requirement of our code that veterinarians support new graduates. It distresses me that I continue to receive calls from graduates who, frankly, work in appalling situations. From a recent graduate: “VCNZ was a great support and really helped me through a difficult work situation I faced as a new graduate.”

It’s also disturbing how many veterinarians leave their jobs in the first year of employment. VCNZ is developing a graduate professional development programme that will be based on the RCVS programme. This will complement (and not replace) already existing programmes in many veterinary practices – not the police, then, but a safety net.

I look forward to talking with you further at the remaining roadshows. Be sure to drop by our stand at the NZVA conference later this month. Our stand will have a mindfulness focus and will complement the NZVA’s wellness theme. Like the NZVA, we want you to be fit and healthy. We’ll be the ones with the safety helmets – not police helmets 🚓