



Money problems

VCNZ's Seton Butler ponders the delicate issue of veterinary fees.

To carry on from my last column, I think it's worth outlining a few points. VCNZ is responsible for upholding veterinary standards to protect animals and people, including veterinary professionals. VCNZ's position is that "We acknowledge that businesses need to run effectively and sustainably if public needs are going to be met, but have no direct view on the business functions, eg, the setting of fees, to achieve this."

The veterinary standards require veterinary businesses to implement clinical standards through the development and maintenance of skills and the provision of the emergency services and facilities needed to deliver evidence-based medicine at an appropriate level. In addition, the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015 requires them to look after the mental and physical wellbeing of their staff, including when they're providing after-hours and emergency care. One of VCNZ's principles is that animal welfare considerations are very important but staff safety comes first, and this applies equally to physical, emotional and psychological safety.

'Sustainably' in this context refers to businesses planning for and financing facilities and equipment, and envisages a competent and capable healthcare team supported by investments in CPD and career development. It means that businesses must meet (increasing) employment costs to ensure there's sufficient staffing in the short, medium and long term. It means making sure that their business is profitable and able to buffer changing economic landscapes easily, at the very least.

As for fees, I take the standards to mean that VCNZ has no expectations whatsoever of the pricing of our services; the code only mentions the word 'fees' once, and that's in relation to the provision of written authorisations. From VCNZ's perspective fees in the sense of pricing or charges are not and have never been a professional integrity issue.

In effect, VCNZ doesn't get involved in claims or demands for money or any form of compensation. Instead, clients are referred back to the relevant veterinarian to resolve any issues as amicably as possible. Failing that, they may choose to go to the Disputes Tribunal to explore legal pathways for monetary resolutions.

So where does the apparent sensitivity on fee raising come from? I believe that some of the tension arises from the frequent conflict between veterinarians' responsibilities to their clients, their colleagues, the profession and the public and their responsibilities for the care and wellbeing of their clients' animals. It means they're constantly confronted with ethical issues.

Coupled with this, veterinarians must spend a great deal of time making ethical decisions and providing effective and safe treatments – and in a complex and often uncertain environment that comprises more price-conscious clients, more demanding regulatory requirements and the need to minimise potential liability risks

I've been asked a number of ethically challenging questions in my time, including:

- is it necessary to sedate or anaesthetise an animal for a simple X-ray, just to lessen the risk of human exposure? (presumably because they want to reduce the costs)
- is it OK to hospitalise animals overnight without veterinary nurse supervision? (as this will save the costs of paying a veterinary nurse overnight)
- the code says I must see an injured animal if their owner can't reach their own veterinarian, but what if they are unable to pay at the time? (if affordability is an issue, the client is expected to pay for the administration of pain relief and first aid. There's no expectation that it be a free service)
- what do I do if, after learning the cost of treatment, a client elects to euthanase their animal?

Some of these are challenging, especially given the absence of extensive pet insurance in New Zealand. The question – how do we (including veterinary businesses) prepare for these situations, make reasonable decisions on the spot and avoid floundering? Something for a future column.

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