



College of Veterinarians of British Columbia

Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)

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This College publication describes a mandatory standard of practice. The *Veterinarians Act* in section 52 provides that a failure to comply with a standard may be investigated.

This practice standard should be read together with “Professional Practice Standard: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)”.

Introduction

The College’s *Professional Practice Standard: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)* establishes the expectations that are fundamental for establishing and maintaining a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR). The VCPR is one of the foundations of effective veterinary care and service when dealing with an animal or group of animals¹. The criteria for establishing and maintaining a legitimate VCPR are detailed in the Professional Practice Standard. Using a question-and-answer format, this Guide to the Professional Practice Standard addresses questions and offers suggestions on how to apply the Professional Practice Standard in situations that arise in veterinary practice.

A. Frequently Asked Questions about Establishing and Maintaining a VCPR

1. How should a veterinarian establish a VCPR with a client?

Establishing a VCPR involves a conversation where the client retains the services of the veterinarian, the veterinarian and client reach an agreement as to the scope of the services to be provided by the veterinarian, and the veterinarian advises the client that services will only be provided in accordance with the standards of practice of the profession.

2. One of the requirements for a veterinarian to continue to provide treatment or services within an established VCPR (i.e. to maintain a legitimate VCPR) is to have recent and sufficient knowledge of an animal or group of animals. How can a veterinarian determine what constitutes “recent and sufficient knowledge”?

What constitutes recent and sufficient knowledge of an animal or group of animals will depend on all of the circumstances of a particular case. Each case will be different and will

¹ Please note that, in this context, “group of animals” refers to more than one animal of any species, under the care of a single client entity

depend on the veterinarian's professional judgment and the presenting circumstances of the animal or group of animals.

There are certain factors, however, that may assist a veterinarian in considering whether he or she has "recent and sufficient" knowledge of an animal or group of animals, and whether an examination and/or other assessment is warranted prior to recommending and/or providing treatment (including prescribing, dispensing, or administering drugs). These factors may include, but are not limited to:

- The animal's age;
- The species of the animal;
- The animal's health status, including any current medical condition(s);
- The animal's medical history as recorded in the medical record, including immunization history;
- The animal's nutrition;
- The animal's environment;
- The animal's hygiene;
- The type of treatment plan being considered, including type(s) of medication(s); and
- Whether there are any industry standards or profession-based guidelines setting out best practices related to how often a veterinarian should see and assess an animal or group of animals of a particular species

A veterinarian should document his or her clinical reasoning process for reaching a decision as to whether or not he or she has "sufficient and recent" knowledge of an animal or group of animals.

Scenario

Dr. X is asked to refill a prescription for a patient. Based on the Professional Practice Standard: VCPR and considering the above factors, Dr. X uses her professional judgment to determine if she will refill the prescription. Depending on her recent knowledge of the individual patient, the purpose of the medication, and the risks and benefits to the patient, she will determine what information she needs to fill the prescription, which may or may not include a physical examination. The appropriate time between examinations can vary depending on the factors enumerated above, each individual assessment of an animal, and the circumstances.

3. In addition to the usual questions regarding the history of an animal or group of animals, what else should a veterinarian ask a client when establishing or renewing a VCPR to ensure continuity of care?

Additional questions that assure continuity of care include asking a new or existing client whether he or she has seen another veterinarian recently. If so, the veterinarian should inform the client that he or she will obtain the animal's (animals') medical records from the previous veterinarian (with the client's permission).

4. In a multi-veterinarian practice facility, does each veterinarian need to establish a VCPR with a particular client?

A veterinarian should explain to the client that, although the VCPR has been established with a particular veterinarian, any of the veterinarians in that same practice are able to provide care to their animal or group of animals, in order to ensure continuity of care, if the client agrees.

5. If a veterinarian leaves a practice and starts to work at a new practice, would he or she have to establish a new VCPR with a client that that veterinarian previously had a VCPR with at his/her previous practice?

Yes. A VCPR does not “travel” with the veterinarian. It is established with a veterinary facility. When a veterinarian leaves a veterinary facility and a former client wishes for him/her to treat an animal, a new VCPR will have to be established at that veterinarian’s new facility.

6. Is a VCPR required for selling or dispensing *any* product?

A VCPR must be in place before a veterinarian provides veterinary services, including recommending a treatment or providing advice in respect of an animal or group of animals. This includes:

- Making a recommendation for the use of a particular product
- Dispensing any prescription drug (marked with a “Pr” on the packaging)
- Dispensing any product for ‘off-label’ use (any product that is not specifically labelled “Veterinary Use Only” or “Agriculture Use Only” that is sold for use in an animal is off-label (this includes products identified as “Natural Health Products”); anything being dispensed for use in a species or for a purpose or at a dose not specifically noted on the packaging/product information sheet is off-label)
- Selling any non-prescription product not in its original packaging

B. Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Client Issues

1. How should a veterinarian establish whether a person has decision-making authority with respect to an animal or group of animals?

It is best practice to establish, in writing, all owners and agents that have decision-making authority at the outset of a VCPR. The names of all owners and agents that have decision-making authority should be included in the client information. Where an individual who is not a known owner presents him/herself as an agent and appears to be acting in the best interest of the animal or group of animals, a veterinarian may, where reasonable, assume that the person in question is a designated agent of the owner and has decision-making authority, unless the veterinarian has reason to believe otherwise.

2. What should a veterinarian do when he or she knows or believes that a client is seeking services from multiple veterinarians?

In cases where a client has established VCPRs with multiple practices, a veterinarian may wish to explain the importance and benefits of continuity of care to the client and the challenges and potential dangers that may result to an animal’s or group of animals’ health when there is a lack of continuity of care and where a veterinarian is not aware of an animal’s full medical history. In situations where a veterinarian is not comfortable with a

client whom he/she believes has established a VCPR with multiple veterinarians, resulting in a lack of continuity of care or a substandard level of care, he/she may wish to discuss withdrawal of his/her services and a potential termination of the VCPR.

C. Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Termination of a VCPR

1. Is there a certain period of time (since a veterinarian has last seen a client and patient) after which the VCPR will automatically expire or lapse?

No. The College recognizes that the specific circumstances of the individual VCPR (see the list in A.2) should guide the veterinarian's assessment of whether the knowledge he/she has of that patient is current and sufficient enough in order to be able to make sound medical decisions and treatment recommendations. The maximum acceptable length of time between physical exams &/or site visits may vary case-to-case and it is not in the best interest of the patient or the client for the College to set an arbitrary requirement. The ethical duty of the veterinarian to the patient (to use his or her knowledge and skill to improve the health, safety and well-being of patients, and to strive to use the level of care, skill and knowledge expected of a competent practitioner) should at all times be the guiding principle in this determination.

In situations where a client has not been in contact in an extended period of time or has requested records to be forwarded to another facility, the veterinarian may wish to contact the client to clarify whether the client wants the veterinarian to continue to provide veterinary services to the animal or group of animals. The veterinarian may then want to recommend that the client schedule a veterinary visit to re-validate the VCPR (update the veterinarian's knowledge of the animal or group of animals so that it is once again "sufficient and recent").

When either the veterinarian or the client wishes to terminate the VCPR, this should be confirmed by the veterinarian, in writing if necessary, and noted in the medical record.

2. When and how should a veterinarian terminate a VCPR?

The College recognizes that, in certain situations, a VCPR may need to be terminate, despite attempts to address concerns or problems. In the interests of optimal animal care and treatment, termination of the VCPR may be the most productive option for both parties to address on-going and unresolved issues.

Potential legitimate reasons for terminating relationships are many and can include:

- A client's persistent non-adherence to proper treatment plans, resulting in potential threats to the welfare of the animal;
- A difference in philosophy as to the approach taken for diagnosing and treating animals;
- Verbal abuse and/or threatening behaviour of a client towards the practitioner and/or hospital staff;
- Unreasonable demands for unnecessary medications and services, or for illegal or unethical actions (e.g. asking the veterinarian to alter a medical record); and
- Non-payment of fees owed for services rendered.

While the College generally does not expect a veterinarian to continue a relationship that has broken down, the College also expects that registrants will not terminate a relationship for an unprofessional reason (e.g. discrimination under the BC Human Rights Code).

After determining that the VCPR should not continue, the termination process should commence. The client must be provided with proper notice of the termination and allowed a reasonable opportunity to arrange for care with another practitioner. In order to ensure the best interests of all parties involved, the College offers the following tips:

- A VCPR must not be terminated by the veterinarian at a time when the animal(s)' condition is unstable. A registrant has a responsibility to fulfill the terms of the VCPR as it pertains to a current issue for which the animal is receiving veterinary care, if the client does not wish to seek care elsewhere, until the current crisis is resolved or the animal's condition has stabilized.
- The client should be provided with a written notice, delivered by courier, registered mail or by hand, confirming the end of the relationship. Electronic communications may be used as long as the veterinarian receives confirmation from the client that the client has received and acknowledged the message. The reasons for the termination need not be clearly specified.
- A reasonable opportunity to secure a new veterinarian should be provided to the client. How much time is "reasonable" will vary with the circumstances (eg. reasons for the termination, available alternatives for veterinary service, or whether assistance is provided in locating other services), and may be dependent upon the geographic location of the veterinary facility. In rural or remote areas, the time required to obtain a new practitioner would likely be longer than in an urban area. Where the reason for termination is abusive behaviour towards a veterinarian or staff, or where genuine safety concerns exist, the reasonable opportunity might be brief.
- Registrants should designate a period of time for which they will provide prescription refills and emergency services only, and specify a date after which no further services will be provided. Both should be clearly stated to the client in the termination letter.
- The practitioner must also ensure the appropriate transfer of medical records and other relevant information. The termination letter should ensure that the client is aware that all relevant information will be promptly forwarded when a new veterinarian's services are secured or, alternatively, a copy of the animal's complete medical records may be included with the termination letter provided to the client.

Scenario

A veterinarian has been dealing with a client who has often exhibited problematic and difficult behaviour. The client has been verbally abusive towards the veterinarian and clinic staff, and threatened a technician. The veterinarian decides to terminate the VCPR. He sends a letter to the client that day by courier, which indicates that only emergency services will be provided until the end of the week, at which point no further services will be provided.

Sample Termination Letter

[Date]

[Address Line]

Dear [Client Name]:

This letter will advise you that as of [Date], neither I nor the staff at our office will be able to provide further general care to your animal(s). We suggest that you seek an alternative veterinary facility to provide care for your animal(s) from this point forward. We would like to suggest that you refer to the “Online Registry” section of the College of Veterinarians of British Columbia’s website to locate other practices in your area. In order to give you time to access alternative veterinary services, we are able to provide emergency services for your animal(s) until [Date].

Once you have made alternative arrangements, please have the facility contact us and we will forward all medical records and relevant information immediately. (*Alternatively, state “Please find enclosed a copy of your animal’s medical records, which you should provide to whomever you select as your veterinarian.”*)

We wish you and your animal(s) all the best in the future.

Sincerely,

Dr. [your name], DVM

Legislative Authority

Veterinarians Act, SBC 2010, Duty and Objects, s. 3(2)(b)

References

This document supports the “*Professional Practice Standard: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)*” approved by Council on [DATE] and published on the CVBC website at www.cvbc.ca

Acknowledgement

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