

VETERINARY SURGEONS  
BOARD OF QUEENSLAND



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# CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

APRIL 2023



## Introduction

Veterinarians play a critical role as trusted professionals in the community, ensuring the health and welfare of animals and providing biosecurity, public health, and food safety services. This Code sets out the professional standards the public, the profession at large and the Veterinary Surgeons Board of Queensland (VSBQ) expects veterinarians to meet and against which they are measured. Applying the principles and guidance in the Code will support veterinarians to deliver quality professional services and to maintain public trust in the profession.

The veterinary profession encompasses a wide range of circumstances and settings including clinical, government, academic and research to name just a few. Furthermore, contemporary practice models continue to evolve and give rise to diverse modes of service delivery and veterinarians in Queensland work in many contexts from highly urbanised areas to very remote locations, in single and multi-veterinarian practices, as locums and as mobile practitioners. The principles of this Code are intended to include the breadth of the profession and the current operating environment.

In Queensland, the *Veterinary Surgeons Act 1936 (Act)* restricts the provision of acts of veterinary science for fee or reward to those who are appropriately qualified and registered.

The VSBQ regulates Queensland veterinarians in accordance with the *Act* to protect the public interest and to safeguard animal health and welfare.

The Code should be read in conjunction with the [Veterinary Surgeons Act 1936](#), the [Veterinary Surgeons Regulation 2016](#), and the [VSBQ policies and guidelines and related legislation](#)

Definitions can be found at the end of this document.

## Principles of professional conduct

The principles of professional conduct for a veterinarian are:

- a. ensuring the health and welfare of animals in their care
- b. acting with integrity, impartiality, and accountability
- c. maintaining professional competence and contemporary standards of veterinary services expected by:
  - i. other veterinarians
  - ii. clients
  - iii. the public.

## Professional responsibilities

When providing veterinary services, veterinarians have professional and legal responsibilities in the following areas:

### 1. Animal health and welfare

Veterinarians are to:



- 1.1. prioritise animal health and welfare as their first consideration when attending to animals, unless there is an unacceptable and unmanageable risk to their or others personal safety
- 1.2. provide veterinary services within their area of competence and offer referral in cases beyond this level of competence
- 1.3. provide veterinary services that are current, appropriate and adequate
- 1.4. take steps to provide 24-hour emergency first aid and pain relief to animals according to their skills and the specific situation and when off duty, or when otherwise unable to provide the service, direct clients to another appropriate service or option
- 1.5. prescribe, supply, and administer medicines responsibly
- 1.6. communicate with each other to ensure the continuity of care for animals (at an individual and at a herd or group level)
- 1.7. ensure clinical governance and where relevant general governance forms part of their veterinary services
- 1.8. assess clinical signs of discomfort and make a professional judgement with respect to the need to administer first aid, provide analgesia to alleviate pain and suffering, provide a referral or euthanasia as appropriate/warranted.

## 2. Clients

Veterinarians are to:

- 2.1. be open and honest with clients and respect their reasonable needs and requirements
- 2.2. recognise it is the owner's right to request management options for their animal, including euthanasia
- 2.3. advise clients in a non-judgemental manner if they have a personal objection to perform a requested service on animal health and welfare grounds
- 2.4. provide independent and impartial advice and inform a client of any conflict of interest
- 2.5. provide appropriate information to clients about the practice including:
  - 2.5.1. opening hours, including provision of afterhours services (inhouse or external)
  - 2.5.2. names of veterinarians on duty and the treating veterinarian
  - 2.5.3. estimated costs of services and medicines.
- 2.6. communicate effectively with clients, orally and/or in writing to ensure informed consent is obtained before treatment or procedures are conducted
- 2.7. maintain the confidentiality of information about a client or the client's animal, unless the client gives permission to share or where animal welfare, continuity of care or the public interest may be compromised or is required by law (e.g., *Biosecurity Act 2014*)
- 2.8. notify suspicion or detection of notifiable/reportable diseases under the *Biosecurity Act 2014*
- 2.9. ensure veterinary services are offered based on sound professional judgement and not unduly influenced by financial reasons
- 2.10. respond promptly and courteously to clients' complaints

## 3. The Profession





Veterinarians are to:

- 3.1 take responsibility for their own fitness to provide professional services
- 3.2 take all reasonable steps to address any adverse physical or mental impairment, disability, or disorder that could compromise their ability to practise their profession
- 3.3 take steps to reduce the risk to animals and staff and protect the interests of the public where they are concerned about a colleague's fitness to practise as required under relevant legislation (<https://www.vsb.qld.gov.au/resources/legislation>)
- 3.4 maintain and develop the knowledge and skills to ensure competency in their area of professional practice and comply with VSBQ requirements on continuing professional development (CPD)
- 3.5 ensure that all professional activities are covered by professional indemnity insurance or equivalent arrangement
- 3.6 provide or purport to provide specialist services only if registered or deemed to be registered as a specialist in Queensland
- 3.7 show proven expertise, by virtue of achievement of postgraduate study in an area of practice.
- 3.8 ensure that tasks are delegated only to those, who have the appropriate competence and registration.

### Records

Veterinarians are to:

- 3.9 keep accurate and concise veterinary records for animals under their care, including records of client consent, as prescribed in the *Act and Veterinary Surgeons Regulation 2016*, and as defined by the VSBQ in policies and guidelines
- 3.10 provide a copy of all relevant patient records when requested by another veterinarian or specialist referral service (including diagnostic services) with the consent of the person responsible for the care of the animal

### Informed consent

Veterinarians are to:

- 3.11 obtain the informed consent of the person responsible for the care of an animal before providing veterinary services to the animal unless an emergency situation requires immediate intervention
- 3.12 when accepting an animal for veterinary care:
  - 3.12.1 ensure they are available for the ongoing care of the animal; or
  - 3.12.2 arrange for another veterinarian to take over the care of the animal; or
  - 3.12.3 direct clients to another appropriate service or option

### Referrals and second opinions

Veterinarians are to:

- 3.13 respect a request by a person responsible for the care of an animal for a referral or second opinion
- 3.14 specialists and referral veterinarians are to communicate details of procedures, findings, treatments, aftercare etc. to the referring veterinarian as soon as practicable or as needed for continued patient care



### Compliance with industry codes or rules of animal sporting organisations

Veterinarians are to:

- 3.15 maintain knowledge of and obey any codes or rules of an animal sporting organisation when attending that organisation or working within the industry to which it relates, unless the codes or rules are contrary to the Act, the Regulation, or any other legislation.

### Management of genetic defects

Veterinarians are **not** to:

- 3.16 perform surgery for the correction of a genetic defect, or provide medical treatment for a genetic disease, unless the primary purpose of the surgery or treatment is to relieve or prevent pain or discomfort to the animal

Veterinarians are to:

- 3.17 advise a person responsible for the care of an animal displaying or diagnosed with a deleterious heritable condition, not to breed from the animal

## 4. Veterinarians and the public

Veterinarians are to:

- 4.1 seek to ensure the protection of public health and animal health and welfare and consider the impact of their actions on the environment
- 4.2 complete certificates and provide opinions honestly and with due care
- 4.3 comply with all [legislation](#) relevant to the provision of veterinary services
- 4.4 avoid engaging in any activity or behaviour in the course of their professional activities, that would be likely to bring the profession into disrepute or undermine public confidence in the profession.

## Definitions

### Clinical governance

Clinical governance includes patient safety, risk management and quality improvement. It refers to the set of relationships and responsibilities established by a healthcare service between its executive, workforce (clinical and non-clinical) and stakeholders (including patients/clients). Major components of clinical governance include:

- education and training
- clinical audit
- clinical effectiveness
- research and development
- openness
- risk management
- information management.

### Informed consent

Informed consent is where permission is granted in full knowledge of the possible consequences and with knowledge of the possible risks and benefits.

It is a process of communication between the animal owner and the veterinarian that leads to agreement or permission for care, treatment, or services. Every owner has the right to receive information and have any reasonable questions answered before procedures and treatments for their animal are undertaken. Every veterinarian has the responsibility to provide relevant information and answer questions relating to the procedures and treatments for the owner's animal.

### Animal welfare

Animal welfare means how an animal is coping with the conditions in which it lives. An animal is in a good state of welfare if (as indicated by scientific evidence) it is healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to express innate behaviour, and if it is not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, and distress. Good animal welfare requires disease prevention and veterinary treatment, appropriate shelter, management, nutrition, humane handling, and humane slaughter/euthanasia. Animal welfare refers to the state of the animal; the treatment that an animal receives is covered by other terms such as animal care, animal husbandry, and humane treatment. Protecting an animal's welfare means providing for its physical and mental needs.

Ensuring animal welfare is a human responsibility that includes consideration for all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, nutrition, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling and, when necessary, humane euthanasia.

### Professional competence

Professional competencies are skills, knowledge and attributes that are specifically valued by professional associations, organisations, and bodies.

Professional competencies include:

- critical thinking - exercise sound reasoning to analyse issues, make decisions and find innovative solutions
- professionalism - demonstrate Integrity through work ethic, personal accountability, professional image and ethical behaviour
- communication
- teamwork.