

Draft Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses

A CONSULTATION

July 2011

22 July 2011

Dear Colleague

New draft Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) is seeking your views on a draft new Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses.

It is 50 years since the start of the veterinary nursing profession and the changes proposed in the Code reflect the development of our professional role over this period.

The Working Party tasked by the RCVS Advisory Committee with developing a replacement for the current *Guide to Professional Conduct* formed a Subgroup to consider specifically both the format and content of the *Guide* for veterinary nurses.

You will see that we have developed a 'Code' and not a 'Guide': this is a simplified document that focuses on key principles and which will be supported by more detailed guidance. This follows the format of the draft Code for veterinary surgeons, but it is important that we recognise our unique position as veterinary nurses.

The version of the Code in this document was given general approval by VN Council to act as a working draft on which to consult the profession and the public.

We value your feedback and comments on any aspect of the draft which follows. One specific question we are considering is whether the Codes for veterinary nurses and veterinary surgeons should be amalgamated.

Please send responses to Christopher Murdoch, Secretary to the Guides Review Working Party, on c.murdoch@rcvs.org.uk, by Friday 21 October 2011.

Yours faithfully



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VN Guide Review Subgroup

Consultation on a draft Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses

Introduction

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) has a duty to undertake the statutory responsibilities set out in the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (the Act) in its role as regulator of veterinary surgeons in the United Kingdom. This includes regulating the professional conduct of veterinary surgeons and ensuring that only those fit to practise are allowed to do so.

The RCVS also maintains a List of Veterinary Nurses who may carry out any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity) in certain circumstances under the Act. In September 2007, a subset of the List was opened – a non-statutory Register of Veterinary Nurses. Registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) agree to keep their knowledge and skills up to date by means of continuing professional development, follow the *Guide to Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses* and, since 1 April 2011, submit to a formal disciplinary system – very similar to the RCVS statutory disciplinary procedures for veterinary surgeons.

In the performance of its regulatory role, the RCVS provides guidance to members of the veterinary profession to ensure that they continue to be fit to practise and comply with professional responsibilities and standards. This guidance establishes factors that may impair fitness to practise. The failure to adhere to the guidance may result in the RCVS VN Disciplinary Committee judging that a veterinary nurse is guilty of disgraceful conduct in a professional respect, possibly resulting in sanction.

Guidance on the principles governing the conduct of veterinary nurses and their responsibilities is also important in establishing the reasonable expectations of animal owners who entrust the care of animals to veterinary professionals, as well as the expectations of the general public.

Currently, this guidance is provided in the *RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct* and the *RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses (VN Guide)*, together with associated annexes and advice notes.

In June 2010, the RCVS established a Working Party to consider both *Guides* to ensure content, format and presentation meet the current and future foreseeable needs of the veterinary team and the public.

Review of the Guides to Professional Conduct Working Party

The Working Party consists of 12 members and includes veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and members of the public, some of whom are RCVS Council members, under the chairmanship of Mrs Clare Tapsfield-Wright. The Working Party met in September 2010 and January and June 2011, and reported to the RCVS Advisory Committee and Council on its progress.

The Working Party was tasked with giving particular consideration to the following topics:

- The general structure, format and language of the *Guide*, with regard to relevant comparators, including the RCVS Practice Standards Manual;
- Veterinary nursing issues; having regard to veterinary nurse regulation and the issues raised during consideration of the first *Guide* for veterinary nurses in 2006;
- The performance of the current *Guide*, including strengths and weaknesses, as compared with guides from other professions;
- EU Directive 2006/123/EC (in relation to the provision of services) and other relevant influences, including the [CEPLIS statement of common values](#), [FVE Code of Conduct](#) and [Good Veterinary Practice Guides](#);;
- The jurisdiction of the RCVS, with particular reference to legal advice which is being sought on the current RCVS jurisdiction [the legal advice is awaited];
- Whether to amalgamate the *Guides* for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses;
- Guidance for the veterinary team (individual responsibilities) and veterinary practices (management of veterinary businesses);
- Guidance on the treatment and care of an animal or herd by more than one veterinary surgeon or practice;
- Any clinical governance requirements;
- Whether the *Guide* should include information on good clinical practice, noting that the charge of ‘disgraceful conduct in a professional respect’ may be one of ‘inadequate professional care’;
- Guidance on incentive schemes for employees, directors and practices;
- 24-hour emergency cover, noting the recent reviews of the current *Guide* provisions;
- Conflicts of interest issues, including those raised by the RCVS Certification Subcommittee;
- Whether the Core Standards of the Practice Standards Scheme as set out in the [Practice Standards Manual](#) could or should become *Guide* requirements;
- Guidance for veterinary students and student veterinary nurses, as part of the *Guide* or a separate document;
- Views of the Preliminary Investigation Committee (including the Lay Observers) and the Disciplinary Committee;
- The work of the Specialisation Working Party, taking into account changes in the *Guide* with regard to Specialist status;
- The extent and scope of any consultation with the profession or the animal-owning public; and,
- Delivery of the guidance (for example, web-based, electronic or hard copy).

The Working Party has been supported by RCVS Council, VN Council and the Advisory Committee in recommending that the new Codes should:

- Be short, principles-based documents, using the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe’s Code of Conduct as the starting point;
- Include a compulsory continuing professional development (CPD) requirement, the RCVS Health Protocol and more on clinical competence, and give prominence to relevant medicines issues;
- Use consistent language to distinguish between what must be done and what is advised;

- Be supported by additional advice on specific areas of veterinary practice or issues, for example, clinical governance;
- Be available in electronic and hard copy, with links or references to additional RCVS advice; and,
- Apply as appropriate to veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, taking into account the views of the Veterinary Nurses Council.

Reports of the meetings of the Working Party are available from the RCVS, which detail the Working Party's discussions on these issues.

The Working Party subsequently established a VN Guide Review Subgroup to look specifically at the *VN Guide* to ensure it provided necessary guidance while acknowledging the unique position of veterinary nurses. The Subgroup met in April 2011 and a report of the meeting is available from the RCVS.

The resulting draft Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses (the VN Code) is a marked change in style and format from the existing *Guide*. It introduces a declaration for veterinary nurses that underlines the primary importance of animal health and welfare:

"I PROMISE AND SOLEMNLY DECLARE that my constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of animals committed to my care and that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to my clients, the public, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons."

It also includes shorter principles-based sections and a five-point list outlining that the overarching duty of veterinary nurses is to ensure the welfare of animals committed to their care and to fulfil their professional duties by maintaining:

1. Professional competence
2. Honesty and integrity
3. Independence and impartiality
4. Client confidentiality and trust
5. Professional accountability

The draft VN Code sets out 45 responsibilities for veterinary nurses in the six relationship areas of animals, clients, the profession, the veterinary team or business, the RCVS and the public. These responsibilities include most of the responsibilities set out in Part 1 of the current *VN Guide* and, for example, introduce as compulsory clinical governance, self-notification of criminal convictions and, when requested, the provision of CPD records to the RCVS.

The intention behind the draft VN Code has been to streamline the advice provided by the RCVS and to clarify the core responsibilities of veterinary nurses. The additional advice, which is currently available in the *VN Guide*, its annexes and the separate advice notes, will not be lost, but will form supporting guidance for

the VN Code. The intention is to link the supporting guidance to the principles, six relationship areas and individual responsibilities set out in the Code, as appropriate.

The VN Code printed in this document is a working draft generally approved by VN Council for the purposes of this consultation and includes some areas that are subject to separate consideration (in italics), such as the work of the Specialisation Working Party and any performance or competence protocol. As with the Health Protocol, any performance or competence protocol will be agreed by VN Council and will be the subject of a separate consultation. This is the subject of legal advice sought by the RCVS on the extent of its jurisdiction under the Veterinary Surgeons Act.

A separate Code is under development for veterinary surgeons and has been the subject of separate consultation. Responses already received by the RCVS to the consultation on the veterinary surgeons' Code will also be included when the VN Code is finalised. The two Codes share similar underlying principles and specific consideration will be given to amalgamating the Codes following this consultation. However, it is important that the key issues relating to the role of veterinary nurses are sufficiently reflected.

Invitation to comment

Comments are sought from the veterinary nursing profession, veterinary nurse employers and the public on the draft VN Code. All responses to the consultation will be considered by the Working Party. The RCVS Advisory Committee and VN Council will also consider a summary of responses received before the VN Code is given final approval. Particular comment is invited on the proposal to amalgamate the VN Code with the Code for veterinary surgeons. Responses and feedback from organisations such as veterinary nursing course providers would be welcomed, to ensure the VN Code reflects the issues that relate to the role of veterinary nurses.

Consultation responses received may be made publicly available at the end of the consultation period, and the information they contain may also be published in a summary of responses. If you do not consent to this, please make clear that your response is to be treated as confidential. You should also be aware that the RCVS may be required to communicate your information to third parties in response to requests made under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

Comments should be sent by Friday, 21 October 2011, to Christopher Murdoch, at the RCVS Professional Conduct Department, preferably by email, to c.murdoch@rcvs.org.uk, or by post to:

Christopher Murdoch
Professional Conduct Department
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
Belgravia House
62-64 Horseferry Road
London
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Hard copies of this paper can be obtained from the same address (or phone 020 7202 0789).

Draft Code of Professional Conduct

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Introduction and guiding principles

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons regulates the veterinary nursing profession through the Veterinary Surgeons Act, Royal Charter and Veterinary Nursing Rules, and veterinary nurses registered or listed with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons enjoy certain privileges. The RCVS is responsible for overseeing the education of veterinary nursing students, the registration (and, pre-2003, the listing) of veterinary nurses and the fitness to practise of registered veterinary nurses.

The RCVS Code of Professional Conduct specifies the principles and responsibilities that guide veterinary nurses in their professional lives. Veterinary nurses have a variety of legal and professional responsibilities, including those to animals, clients, the veterinary profession in general and each colleague in particular, the veterinary team, the RCVS and the general public.

Privileges and responsibilities go hand in hand. For this reason, on registration with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and in exchange for the privilege to practise veterinary nursing in the United Kingdom, since XXX [date of introduction of new Code] every registered veterinary nurse makes the declaration:

“I PROMISE AND SOLEMNLY DECLARE that my constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of animals committed to my care and that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to my clients, the public, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.”

The overarching duty of veterinary nurses is to ensure the welfare of animals committed to their care and to fulfil their professional duties, by maintaining:

- 1. Professional competence**
- 2. Honesty and integrity**
- 3. Independence and impartiality**
- 4. Client confidentiality and trust**
- 5. Professional accountability**

Veterinary nurses' responsibilities:

Veterinary nurses and animals

1. Veterinary nurses must make animal welfare their first consideration when attending to animals.
2. Veterinary nurses must ensure that animals committed to their care receive appropriate and adequate veterinary care.
3. Veterinary nurses must take steps to provide emergency first aid and pain relief according to their skills and the specific situation; subject to legal restraints.
4. Veterinary nurses must be competent in their performance, or be under the close supervision of veterinary surgeons or veterinary nurses who are competent.
5. Veterinary nurses must ensure appropriate post-operative or inpatient nursing care for animals after the provision of veterinary procedures, treatment or tests.
6. Veterinary nurses must supply and administer medicines responsibly and in the best interests of the animal or herd.
7. Veterinary nurses must ensure that clinical governance (consideration of animal safety, client experience and effective care) forms part of their professional activities, including monitoring and reviewing clinical nursing outcomes with the aim of improving the care they provide.
8. Veterinary nurses must consider reporting to an appropriate authority when there is reasonable concern that animal welfare has been, or is likely to be, compromised.

Veterinary nurses and clients

1. Veterinary nurses must respect the needs and requirements of their clients, provided that they do not conflict with the principles of this Code or relevant legislation.
2. Veterinary nurses must provide impartial, independent and objective advice and inform the client of any conflict of interest.
3. Veterinary nurses must be able to communicate effectively, using the English language in the UK, as appropriate to the audience and context.
4. Veterinary nurses must provide initial and ongoing professional advice, as appropriate.
5. Veterinary nurses must give appropriate information to clients about the:
 - a. provision of care to any patient kept on practice premises, including care outside normal working hours; and,
 - b. provision and likely cost of out-of-hours emergency veterinary care and domiciliary visits;
6. Veterinary nurses must, as far as is reasonably practical, ensure informed consent is obtained from a client before treatments or procedures are carried out.
7. Veterinary nurses must not breach client confidentiality unless there are overriding reasons in the public interest, including animal health or welfare.
8. Veterinary nurses must keep clear, accurate and detailed clinical nursing and client records.
9. Veterinary nurses must respond promptly, fully and courteously to clients' complaints and criticism.
10. Veterinary nurses must ensure that all their professional activities are covered by professional indemnity insurance or equivalent arrangements.

Veterinary nurses and the profession

1. Veterinary nurses must take and, at the request of the RCVS, demonstrate that they have taken, reasonable steps to address adverse physical or mental health (i) that could impair fitness to practise; or (ii) that results in harm, or a risk of harm, to animal health or welfare, public health or the public interest.
2. *Veterinary nurses who are concerned that the health, performance or competence [subject to legal advice on RCVS jurisdiction] of another veterinary nurse or veterinary surgeon is impairing his or her fitness to practise must take steps to ensure that animals are not put at risk and that the interests of the public, including those of the other veterinary nurse or surgeon, are protected.*
3. Registered veterinary nurses who have had a break of five years or more from active practice must undertake a 17-week Period of Supervised Practice (PSP).
4. Veterinary nurses must maintain and develop the knowledge and skills relevant to their professional practice and must undertake a minimum of 45 hours of CPD over any consecutive three-year period and keep an appropriate record of CPD undertaken; a significant proportion of which must be relevant to their area of practice.
5. Veterinary nurses and veterinary surgeons must communicate with each other, as appropriate, to ensure that the interests of the animal or group of animals are protected when care is transferred between them, or when they care for the same animal or group of animals.
6. Veterinary nurses must conduct themselves in a manner that respects professional colleagues and must not maliciously, or unfairly, criticise or attempt to discredit a professional colleague.
7. *Veterinary nurses must not hold themselves out as having expertise they cannot substantiate, or call themselves a 'specialist' where to do so would be misleading or misrepresentative [Subject to discussions by the RCVS Specialisation Working Party].*

Veterinary nurses and the veterinary team or business

1. Veterinary nurses with ownership or control of the veterinary business, or with management or other responsibilities associated with the veterinary team or business, have a greater responsibility to ensure professional colleagues, or staff within the organisation or practice, comply with responsibilities in the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct.
2. Veterinary nurses must ensure that there is appropriate management or supervision of the nursing team and appropriate support and assistance for newly registered veterinary nurses, including those who qualified elsewhere in Europe, or overseas.
3. Veterinary nurses must communicate with professional colleagues and staff within the organisation or practice, to co-ordinate the care of animals and the delivery of veterinary services.
4. Veterinary nurses must only delegate tasks to those with the knowledge and skills and any relevant qualification necessary to undertake that task competently.
5. Veterinary nurses must account for medicines used within the organisation or practice, as appropriate.
6. Veterinary nurses advertising their services must do so in a legal, decent, honest, truthful and professional manner.
7. Veterinary nurses must ensure that all their professional activities and those of relevant staff are covered by professional indemnity insurance or equivalent arrangements.
8. Veterinary nurses must maintain adequate practice standards to a minimum of the Core Standards of the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme, as appropriate.

Veterinary nurses and the RCVS

1. Veterinary nurses must be appropriately registered with the RCVS and comply with the RCVS Code of Conduct for Veterinary Nurses.
2. Veterinary nurses must provide the RCVS with their CPD record when requested to do so.
3. Veterinary nurses must comply with reasonable requests from the RCVS as part of the regulation of veterinary nurses and the profession and comply with any undertakings given to the RCVS.
4. Veterinary nurses must respond promptly and constructively to any request from the RCVS for comments in relation to any allegation or complaint.
5. Veterinary nurses must provide the RCVS with clinical nursing or client records or any other relevant information when requested to do so in writing, or during a visit to practice premises.
6. Veterinary nurses (and those applying to be registered as veterinary nurses) must disclose to the RCVS any caution or conviction (including absolute and conditional discharges and spent convictions), or adverse finding by another regulator, whether in the UK, Europe or overseas.
7. Veterinary nurses must report to the RCVS those veterinary nurses removed from the RCVS Register at the direction of the Veterinary Nurses Disciplinary Committee who undertake veterinary surgery in accordance with Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966.

Veterinary nurses and the public

1. Veterinary nurses must seek to ensure the protection of public health and must consider the impact of their actions on the public and the environment.
2. Veterinary nurses must report facts and nursing opinions honestly and with due care.
3. Veterinary nurses must use their professional status to provide only factual information to the general public about veterinary products and services.
4. Veterinary nurses must ensure they (and their staff, as appropriate) are sufficiently familiar and comply with legislation relevant to the provision of veterinary services.
5. Veterinary nurses must not engage in any activity or behaviour that would be likely to bring the profession into disrepute or undermine public confidence in the profession.

