



RAISING THE STANDARD

Flying the flag for
Practice Standards Accreditation
at your practice:
a communications toolkit

Practice Standards

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CONTENTS

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	3
SECTION TWO: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE SCHEME.....	4
SECTION THREE: WRITING ABOUT THE SCHEME.....	9
SECTION FOUR: TIPS FOR PROMOTING YOUR ACCREDITATION.....	12
How is the RCVS promoting the Scheme?	13
What could you do?	13
Advertising.....	13
Signage	14
Find a Vet	14
Website	14
The local media	15
Events	17
Stationery and leaflets	18
Waiting room displays	18
SECTION FIVE: FEEDBACK	19
SECTION SIX: KEY FACTS AND FIGURES	21

SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION

This pack is designed to help you promote your RCVS accreditation as part of your ongoing practice marketing activities.

It includes some questions and answers about the Scheme to help deal with any enquiries you may have from clients or the media.

There is some sample text that you can use to describe your involvement with the Scheme. You can tailor this to the different tier to which you are accredited.

Section four includes some promotional ideas, including a guide to dealing with the local media.

The final section includes some facts and figures that might help you put your accreditation in context or answer further questions from clients, staff or the local media.

Time is always at a premium, but having worked hard to achieve your RCVS accreditation it would be a shame not to promote it.

Do remember these are only guidelines, designed to save you some time and resources in a busy day. We don't want it to feel prescriptive – that's not our role here.

It would be great to hear from you about what you are doing to promote your membership of the Scheme – drop us a line or send us some photos. We could even put some of them on our website.

SECTION TWO: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT THE SCHEME

Curious?



This section contains some questions and answers to help you with enquiries you may get from clients or the media. If you find you are getting asked about issues that aren't covered here and need some guidance, please call the RCVS External Affairs department on 020 7202 0725.

Questions and answers about the Scheme

What is the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons?

The RCVS has a twin function. It is the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons in the UK, which means that it deals with issues of professional misconduct, maintains the register of veterinary surgeons eligible to practise in the UK and assures standards of veterinary undergraduate education.

It also has a 'Royal College' role, which means that it is responsible for post-graduate educational and veterinary nursing qualifications, and acts as an impartial source of information on animal health and welfare issues.

What is the Practice Standards Scheme?

The RCVS Practice Standards Scheme is a voluntary initiative to accredit veterinary practices in the UK. It aims to establish a quality assurance framework to promote and maintain the highest standard of veterinary care, thus offering peace of mind to clients of accredited practices and greater choice to the animal-owning public at large.

The overriding concern of the RCVS is to "Promote and sustain public confidence in veterinary medicine" and the Practice Standards Scheme is vital in meeting this aim. The regulatory function of the RCVS has always meant that users of veterinary services can be assured that their veterinary surgeon is properly qualified and fit to practise but, for the first time, the Scheme offers reassurance that accredited practice premises and those who work there also meet stringent standards.

What is an RCVS accredited practice?

In order to join the Practice Standards Scheme and become accredited, practices volunteer for rigorous inspection every four years. Those which pass the inspection will have met a range of standards. Minimum standards include 24-hour emergency cover, staff training, hygiene, certain types of equipment and cost estimation procedures. Accredited practices also undergo spot-checks.

Do practices have to join the Scheme?

No, the Scheme is currently voluntary but it is hoped that, under a new Veterinary Surgeons Act, it will become mandatory. It is the only accreditation scheme for veterinary practices in the UK.

What is the Veterinary Surgeons Act (VSA)?

The VSA is the legislation to which the RCVS works from a regulatory point of view. It was enacted in 1966 and a lot has changed in 40 years. It is ripe for review and the College is in the process of developing its recommendations for a new Act. However parliamentary time has not yet been allocated for review of this legislation.

Is this the first quality assurance Scheme for vet practices?

No, but this is the first time that the option of seeking accreditation has been open to a broad range of practice types. The Practice Standards Scheme replaces two previous schemes, run by the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) and the RCVS in conjunction with the British Veterinary Hospitals Association (BVHA). The Practice Standards Scheme encompasses practice types previously unable to seek accreditation, for example, farm animal and equine general practices.

Are all Accredited Practices the same?

There are many different types of veterinary practice. Some offer general services, others concentrate on particular species or disciplines. Some, such as veterinary hospitals, offer a very broad range of services, others may just offer vaccinations and worming, or minor surgery.

There is a level of accreditation to fit most practice types, grouped under three headings:

- Core Standards
- General Practice – species / discipline specific ie Small Animals, Farm Animals, Equine Patients or Emergency Service Clinic or a combination of these.
- Veterinary Hospital – either Small Animal or Equine

What standards do practices have to meet to be accredited?

Criteria differ according to accreditation level sought, but include clinical governance, availability of patient care, premises, in-patient and out-patient facilities, diagnostic and laboratory equipment, safety procedures and medicinal products.

How can I find out if a practice is accredited?

You can check if practices are accredited, or search for an accredited practice, via RCVSONline at www.findavet.org.uk

How many practices are in the Scheme?

As of the end of January 2006, there were 1,769 premises falling under the ambit of the Scheme, approximately 50% of the UK total, and 824 practices - 36% of the UK total.

What are the benefits of using an accredited practice?

Using an RCVS accredited practice means assured standards, facilities and practice management, which means peace of mind for you and your animals.

Why is the Scheme being launched now?

The Scheme was launched to the profession in January 2005. We thought it would be most sensible to wait until a good number of practices had signed up so that, when we communicate the Scheme to potential practice users, they can find an accredited practice near them. The geographical location of accredited practices mirrors the general distribution of practices across the UK.

Have there been lots of problems in the past?

No. It isn't a question of launching a Scheme to deal with a lot of bad practices. On the contrary, the standards in the majority of practices in the UK are very high and just because a practice hasn't joined the Scheme doesn't mean it falls below equivalent standards. But accreditation means that the RCVS inspectors have been behind the scenes and are satisfied that the practice comes up to standards agreed by representatives from all of the key veterinary organisations, offering reassurance to the public. Accreditation provides official recognition of the high standards that already exist within UK veterinary practice.

How much does it cost practices to become accredited?

For a practice that has not been part of any previous Scheme, the cost is £400 for the application/joining fee in its first year, which covers the cost of the initial inspection. There are reductions for practices that have been recently inspected under the previous Schemes. There is then an annual fee of £225 for each main practice and £50 per branch practice premises, which emphasises the importance of standards being maintained between inspections.

Will costs go up in accredited practices?

The RCVS does not have any jurisdiction over the fees and charges that a practice makes, unless they are so high as to constitute disgraceful conduct on the part of the veterinary surgeon in question.

However, there is no real reason why RCVS accreditation should result in increased costs to clients. The fees for joining and maintaining membership of the Scheme are not likely to be major, when compared with other practice expenditure.

There may be costs associated with raising and maintaining standards within the practice in order to qualify for accreditation. But at Core level, the criteria that need to be met are not much more than would be required by other mandatory regulations such as Health and Safety. The improvements in efficiency due to the development of procedures and process needed to meet the Scheme requirements may even bring some cost savings to the practice.

What are the benefits of accreditation for veterinary practices?

Having good standard operating procedures and documentation in place, such as contracts and continuing professional development arrangements, should make a practice a more attractive and less stressful place to work. It also clarifies the expectations of new staff and may help in the recruitment process.

Accreditation can also enhance a practice's reputation both within the profession and with the general public. It may be particularly persuasive when people are looking for a new vet in their area.

Furthermore it provides official recognition of the high standards achieved by the practice.

How can I find out more?

Further information about the Scheme is available by visiting www.rcvs.org.uk/practicestandards, emailing practicestandards@rcvs.org.uk or calling 020 7202 0767

SECTION THREE: WRITING ABOUT THE SCHEME

Got something to say?



Many of the accredited practices that we have spoken to say they joined the Scheme for reasons other than to enhance their public profile and market the practice. But if you have gone to the trouble of achieving accreditation, you might as well let people know!

This section contains some text about the Scheme that you can adapt to suit your regular communication channels such as a practice newsletter or website.

Sample text

This practice is proud to be an approved member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Practice Standards Scheme.

As an accredited practice, we have passed an inspection carried out by an experienced veterinary surgeon focusing on a range of areas, including hygiene, health and safety, clinical governance and the facilities we provide, to name just few of the many criteria.

The practice will be reinspected every four years and we will be subject to spot-checks in the meantime, so we have to keep on our toes.

The Practice Standards Scheme is a voluntary initiative – not all practices are part of it yet. RCVS accreditation means that as a client you can rest assured that our practice offers a high quality of care – in those bits of the practice you can see – and those that you can't.

Tier-specific explanations

In addition to making mention of the Scheme in general, you may also wish to highlight the specific tier to which you have been accredited. Here are some suggestions:

*This practice has been accredited to **RCVS Core Standards**. This means that our compliance with legal and health and safety requirements, our employment of staff that are fully and appropriately trained for the work that we carry out and the fact that we have appropriate diagnostic and surgical equipment have all been independently certified. We also provide arrangements for 24-hour emergency cover for patients, meet hygiene standards and have a written policy for client communication.*

*This practice has been accredited as an **RCVS General Practice – Species/Discipline Specific**. This means that, in addition to complying with Core Standards, such as health and safety, hygiene and legal requirements and the provision of 24-hour cover, we also have access to laboratory facilities for diagnostic testing, have a system for monitoring the outcome of treatments and show commitment to the education and training of our staff.*

*This practice has been accredited as an **RCVS Veterinary Hospital**, which means that it meets a high standard of veterinary care. In addition to complying with Core Standards, such as health and safety, hygiene and legal requirements, we also have access to diagnostic facilities, can provide continual nursing and veterinary care for in-patients 24 hours a day, maintain and improve our clinical standards through an ongoing process of monitoring and review, have a range of specialist equipment such as ECG and ultrasound and have met rigorous standards of hygiene throughout the premises.*

SECTION FOUR: TIPS FOR PROMOTING YOUR ACCREDITATION

Getting noticed!



Many of you are displaying your accreditation certificates and plaques already. One of the main focal points of our public communications campaign will be 'look for the logo' so make sure yours is somewhere visible! This section has some hints and tips on other ways to promote your accreditation.

How is the RCVS promoting the Scheme?

Over the next weeks and months we will be sending you various marketing support materials, such as new tier-specific leaflets, window stickers (for you to give to clients or use yourselves) and posters.

We aim for coverage to appear in regional and national press and in those publications read by specific audiences such as *Farmers Weekly*, *Horse and Hound* and the dog and cat press.

We will also be generating coverage on radio (and possibly TV) but that is always difficult to guarantee and depends very much on the news topics of the day.

In addition, we will be producing a simple leaflet about the Scheme, aimed at those who may not yet have a veterinary practice or who are interested at a general level. We will make this available through dog breed associations, rehoming centres, animal owner groups etc.

What could you do?

Our work will mainly be at national and regional level, but we hope you can support us with some local activities. Here are a few suggestions for ways in which you can integrate your accreditation into your marketing and communication activities. You may be doing some of them already...

Advertising

Our research has suggested (and this is backed up by others) that word-of-mouth recommendation is the most powerful influencer when people are seeking a veterinary practice. After this, *Yellow Pages* (or similar local directories) is a favoured source of information. So make sure you include your accredited practice logo in your advert.

From a starting point of zero-awareness, the public won't suddenly be clamouring for an accredited practice the day after the launch, but over time we hope that awareness will build and positive associations will be attached to the accreditation logo.

Accreditation also has positive connotations for potential employees, as it offers reassurance regarding the practice's policies and procedures, the quality of care it is likely to be offering and the standard of its management. For practices accredited above Core Standards it also offers a shorthand for the type of practice you are. So it's worth including the logo in your recruitment ads too.

Signage

If you have large and prominent signs outside your practice, consider including your accreditation logo next time you revamp it. People will – subconsciously – build up a picture of a practice from what they see when they walk or drive past it every day, information which suddenly becomes important the day they acquire a pet and need to find a vet.

Find a Vet

Which brings us on to Find a Vet, the RCVSonline search facility. We will be promoting www.findavet.org.uk as part of the public communications programme, so people can see if their regular vet is accredited or, if they don't have a regular vet, find one that is. So it might pay to check that your Find a Vet practice details are up to date, including links to your website.

You can update your details by filling out a downloadable form from www.findavet.org.uk – see “Amending your Find a Vet entry” on the left-hand side menu bar.

If you are not on Find a Vet yet, you can also fill out a form to add your details.

We update Find a Vet every week and it receives an average of over 18,000 searches per month.

Website

You have the option of adding a website address to your Find a Vet profile. If you want to link back to the RCVS site, so that your website visitors can read more detailed information about the Scheme, you are very welcome to do so. It would be a good idea to put the accredited practice logo on your home page to act as a link.

You could link to the RCVS homepage – www.rcvs.org.uk - or to the specific Practice Standards page – www.rcvs.org.uk/practicestandards. At the moment the latter page contains information which is geared towards practices but some more consumer-friendly info will be available for the public launch towards the end of March.

The local media

We will be inviting national media to our launch event and sending press materials to regional papers but it is difficult for us to reach a local level. Furthermore, such papers are really only keen if there is a local angle so they won't be very interested in what the RCVS has to say. But they should be interested in the fact that local practices are accredited, to tie in with the public communications programme.

The easiest way to target local media is by writing and issuing a press release. Many of you are probably familiar with this, but for those who are not, here is a quick guide.

First, **select your media**. You may have a list already or have a good idea of which publications are likely to be read in your area. If you are not sure, various sources are available. Most libraries will stock *Benn's Media*, a very comprehensive directory that would make a good starting point. There are also some free online directories, such as www.mediauk.com. In addition to local newspapers, there may be some local specialist publications such as farming papers, horse newsletters or dog/cat interest titles. Don't forget local radio too, or even local TV if there are cable stations, they are usually hungry for stories.

In terms of **contacts**, you should either send information to the newsdesk or, if you can see in your local paper that a particular journalist tends to write about animal-related or veterinary matters, focus on them. If it is a small publication there may just be the option of sending things to the editor. This is always a good fallback position anyway.

Writing the release is the next stage. Keep it simple, is the most important message. Ideally it should have a strong news angle. A good starting point would be to focus on the fact that the Practice Standards Scheme is launched to the public at the end of March and that your practice has already joined up, which means that accredited services are available to clients in the area.

Feel free to use the sample text in section 3, but the more personal/local you can make it the better. Perhaps use quotes from practice staff or clients to add some colour.

Don't forget to include the following on the release: date, headline and contact details. You could also include the RCVS website URL under 'notes to editors' for further information.

A **good photograph** often makes the difference between a press release being picked up or not. You could have some staff standing next to your accreditation sign, or a photograph of the person quoted in the release. Animal pictures always make good copy so a client, animal and nurse/vet standing near the Scheme plaque might be a good idea.

Issuing the press release can be done by email or hard copy. Increasingly these days journalists like to receive copy by email so they can use it direct. If you are not sure, ask them which they prefer. If you are sending photos, don't send more than one large file as an attachment - this may be difficult to download. Better to send one picture and say that more are available. Or put a thumbnail of the picture(s) into the release and suggest the journalist contacts you for jpegs. You can also send traditional photos in hard copy.

Timing is important. Our launch event is Monday 27 March. We would prefer that local press activity is not carried out before this date, although of course some of you have already publicised your accreditation. The purpose of the launch event is to provide a reference point for subsequent publicity.

Another thing to bear in mind is copy deadlines for the publications. If it is a daily paper, there may be a time deadline – usually 4pm the day before, but worth checking. If it is a weekly, copy deadlines are generally the Wednesday before issue, but again it is worth checking as variations occur.

Journalists receive huge amounts of press releases, even on local papers, so to get people ringing 'just to check if you received my release' can be a bit annoying. If you want **to check, or remind the journalist**, a good way is to send an email asking if they received your press release and would they like to receive a photo or more information. This is less intrusive and can be ignored if the journalist is rushing to file some copy.

If you already have a **good relationship** with local correspondents then a call to chat through the story with them would be reasonable.

Taking time to build and nurture relationships with local journalists is time well spent. If you can become the practice that they turn to for **advice** on animal-related stories, or who they ask to write a **regular column** or **question and answer page** this can only be good news for your practice branding, providing you have the time of course!

If you are holding an **event** – for National Pet Week or an open day – don't forget to invite local media and if they can't come, send them a short report as soon after the event as you can, with photos.

Other opportunities to use the local media include **features, profiles** on your practice or individuals who work in it or **listing** of your events on the diary page. If your information is interesting enough, this should always be free.

Finally, don't forget to check to see if your story has been used – you could possibly display the **cuttings** in your waiting room.

Events

One of the messages that came through strongly from our pet owner research was the sense that, once they thought about it, clients didn't really have much of a clue about what goes on behind the scenes at their veterinary practice. RCVS accreditation should give clients peace of mind – the RCVS has been behind the scenes to check, so they don't have to.

But another way of setting clients' minds at rest – and satisfying their curiosity – is to hold an open day. You might also want to consider getting involved with local careers days.

Also, remember to include your RCVS accreditation in any events or publicity you may be planning around National Pet Week. This year, National Pet Week is 29 April to 7 May. There is a huge amount of useful information on their website – www.nationalpetweek.org.uk - including tips on holding events and gaining publicity. It is well worth a look.

Stationery and leaflets

Adding your tier-specific RCVS accreditation logo to your most commonly-used stationery items – such as letter heading, business cards or appointment cards - would help to spread the word. If you won't be reprinting your stationery for a while, buying an ink stamp might be something to consider, or simply pasting the logo onto a letter when you type it.

You could also include the logo on invoice stuffers or booster reminder cards. Or why not include one of the RCVS leaflets with invoices or other mail-outs? Once you have worked through the initial batch, we can send you more for a small charge.

Other items you might think about adding your accreditation to might include plastic bags, pens, key rings or fridge magnets.

Even adding a line about RCVS accreditation to your standard email sign-off, if you use email to communicate with your clients, might be useful.

Waiting room displays

There are various display systems available for waiting rooms, to inform clients and help to pass the time. They range from PowerPoint-type presentations to more sophisticated animations on DVD. If you have one of these or are thinking about investing in one, it might be worth seeing if your RCVS accreditation, with some explanation about what it means for your clients and their pets, can be included. We are happy to help with images or text if you need it – call the External Affairs Department on 020 7202 0725.

SECTION FIVE: FEEDBACK

Have your clients noticed the campaign?



How will we know if the communication programme has worked? Your feedback will be a good starting point...

Feedback

Unfortunately, measuring the success of PR programmes is notoriously difficult – it is not an exact science. And when we are not asking people to buy something, as such, there are no easy sales figures to measure.

We are making an assumption of pretty much zero knowledge amongst the public at present, based on our research. Building awareness will take time. We plan to carry out some more research after the first year or so to see what has changed.

In the meantime, any anecdotal evidence that practices can provide us with about client awareness of the Scheme would be really interesting to hear.

If you currently ask a new client how they heard of your practice, you might want to ask them if your accreditation played a part in their choice. Or whether they found your name from the RCVSonline Find a Vet service.

Please let us know – positive or negative feedback is equally welcome as we can only adapt and change our activities if we know what effect they may be having at grass roots level.

The Practice Standards team contact details are on the front page – we look forward to hearing from you!

SECTION SIX: KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

“

How many vets are there in the Scotland?

How many pet dogs are there in the UK?

”

What does it cost to keep a cat for a year?

At the RCVS we get asked lots of different questions every day, from whether or not dogs have belly buttons to how much blood there is in a cat.

Inevitably, once you start talking to people they want to know more. If every bit of information you send out seems to invite another question... then you might find the facts and figures in this section helpful.

Facts and figures

Don't hesitate to call if you get a question you can't answer and we will see what we can do. *(The Source is RCVS data unless otherwise stated.)*

VETERINARY SURGEONS	
How many vets are there on the RCVS Register?	21,746 as of February 2006
How many practising vets are there in the UK?	15,747 as of February 2006. These break down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 12,357 in England ■ 713 in Northern Ireland ■ 1,847 in Scotland ■ 830 in Wales
How many practices are there in the UK?	The RCVS has 3,801 recorded practices. These break down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 3,144 in England ■ 98 in Northern Ireland ■ 360 in Scotland ■ 199 in Wales
How many large animal practices are there in the UK?	This is not an exact science as many practices list a range of species that they treat without quantifying how often. But looking at those that list cattle and/or sheep and/or goats, there are 1,301 large animal practices in the UK. These break down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 932 in England ■ 66 in Northern Ireland ■ 185 in Scotland ■ 118 in Wales
How many small animal practices?	There are 3,546 small animal practices in the UK, based on those treating cats and/or dogs and/or small mammals. These break down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 2,925 in England ■ 88 in Northern Ireland ■ 345 in Scotland ■ 188 in Wales
What is the average age of a practising vet in the UK?	43
What is the gender balance of practising vets in the UK?	55.5% are male 44.5% are female
VETERINARY NURSES	
How many Listed veterinary nurses are there in the UK?	6,291 as of February 2006, which breaks down into: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 5,645 in England ■ 54 in Northern Ireland ■ 382 in Scotland ■ 210 in Wales
What is the gender balance of Listed veterinary nurses?	2% are male 98% are female

PET FACTS	
How many pet dogs are there in the UK?	6.5 million (Pet Food Manufacturers Association (PFMA) 2003)
How many pet cats are there in the UK?	9.2 million (PFMA 2003)
How many UK households own a pet?	<p>Approximately 1 in 2 (52.7%) (PFMA 2003). In 2003 there were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ 6 million cat-owning households ■ 5.15 million dog-owning households ■ 4.1 million fish-owning households ■ 2.5 million rodent-owning households ■ 1.37 million bird-owning households (PFMA 2003) <p>More than 70% of dog owners and 65% of cat owners have had a pet for over 10 years (PFMA 2003)</p>
How many horses are there in the UK?	965,000, of which 900,000 are privately-owned and 65,000 are professionally-owned. 2.4 million people enjoy riding in the UK each year (4.5% of the population) (British Horse Society 2006)
How often do pets visit the vet?	Two out of three pets require veterinary care each year (The Kennel Club 2006).
How much money does an average pet owner spend at the vets per year?	<p>Veterinary treatment can account for up to 30% of the cost of owning a dog (The Kennel Club 2006).</p> <p>If, according to the Dogs Trust (2005), an average dog lives for 13-15 years and costs its owner between £500 and £1,000 per year, that means lifetime vet costs may be between £1,950 and £4,500.</p> <p>Cat owners spend an average of £476 per year on their cat (Whiskas Cat Report 2005). Figures are not available for the percentage of this which is allocated to veterinary fees and costs.</p>
How many pets are insured in the UK?	<p>Approx 15% of UK pets are covered by insurance (Pet Health Council 2006). According to the RSPCA, 12% of dog owners and 7% of cat owners now have insurance (Channel 4, <i>4 Money</i> 2006).</p> <p>Almost 45% of pet owners claim on their insurance policy every year and more claims are made on pet insurance policies than either home or motor insurance (The Kennel Club 2006)</p>

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