Veterinary Nurses and the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966

Introduction

1. Under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 the general rule is that only a veterinary surgeon may practise veterinary surgery. There are, however, a number of exceptions to this rule, and two of them concern veterinary nurses. This note explains the law as it applies to them.

Definition of veterinary surgery

2. Veterinary surgery as defined in the Act "means the art and science of veterinary surgery and medicine and, without prejudice to the generality of the foregoing, shall be taken to include-

(a) the diagnosis of diseases in, and injuries to, animals including tests performed on animals for diagnostic purposes;

(b) the giving of advice based upon such diagnosis;

(c) the medical or surgical treatment of animals; and

(d) the performance of surgical operations on animals."

What can be done by people other than veterinary surgeons

3. Schedule 3 to the Act allows anyone to give first aid in an emergency for the purpose of saving life and relieving suffering. The owner of an animal, or a member of the owner's household or employee of the owner, may also give it minor medical treatment. There are a number of other exceptions to the general rule, mainly relating to farm animals, in addition to the exceptions which apply to veterinary nurses. These are explained below.

What can be done by veterinary nurses

4. Veterinary nurses, like anyone else, may give first aid and look after animals in ways which do not involve acts of veterinary surgery. In addition, veterinary nurses may do the things specified in paragraphs 6 and 7 of Schedule 3 to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 as amended by the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (Schedule 3 Amendment) Order 2002. The text of these paragraphs is set out in the annex below.

Registered veterinary nurses

5. Paragraph 6 applies to veterinary nurses whose names are entered on the register maintained by RCVS. They may administer "any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity)" under veterinary direction.
6. The animal must be under the care of a veterinary surgeon and the treatment must be carried out at his or her direction. The veterinary surgeon must be the employer of the veterinary nurse or be acting on behalf of the nurse's employer.

7. The directing veterinary surgeon must be satisfied that the veterinary nurse is qualified to carry out the treatment or surgery. RCVS will advise from time to time on veterinary nursing qualifications which veterinary surgeons should recognise.

8. All registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) are qualified to administer medical treatment or minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity), under veterinary direction, to all the species which are commonly kept as companion animals, including exotic species so kept. Unless they hold further qualifications they are not qualified to treat the equine species, wild animals or farm animals. Registered veterinary nurses who hold an equine qualification or a qualification with an equine pathway are qualified to administer medical treatment or minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity), under veterinary direction, to any of the equine species - horses, asses and zebras.

9. A veterinary nurse should only carry out a particular act of veterinary surgery if she or he is competent to do so and has the necessary experience to deal with any problems which may arise. Where appropriate, a veterinary surgeon should be available to respond to a request for help. A veterinary nurse may only carry out acts of veterinary surgery under the direction of a veterinary surgeon.

**Student veterinary nurses**

10. Paragraph 7 applies to student veterinary nurses. A student veterinary nurse is someone enrolled for the purpose of training as a veterinary nurse at an approved training and assessment centre (VNAC) or a veterinary practice approved by such a centre (TP). This does not include those who are undertaking a pre-veterinary nursing, animal nursing assistant or veterinary care assistant or other access qualification.

11. A student veterinary nurse may administer "any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity)" under veterinary direction.

12. The animal must be under the care of a veterinary surgeon and the treatment must be carried out at his or her direction. The veterinary surgeon must be the employer of the student veterinary nurse or be acting on behalf of the nurse's employer.

13. The treatment or minor surgery must be carried out in the course of the student veterinary nurse's training. In the view of RCVS, such work should be undertaken only for the purpose of learning and consolidating new skills.

14. The treatment or surgery must be supervised by a veterinary surgeon or a registered veterinary nurse. In the case of surgery the supervision must be direct, continuous and personal.
15. In the view of RCVS, a veterinary surgeon or registered veterinary nurse can only be said to be supervising if they are present on the premises and able to respond to a request for assistance if needed. "Direct, continuous and personal" supervision requires the supervisor to be present and giving the student nurse his or her undivided personal attention.

Medical treatment and minor surgery

16. The Act does not define "any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity)". Ultimately it would be for the courts to decide what these words mean.

17. The procedures which veterinary nurses are specifically trained to carry out include the following:

- administer medication by mouth, topically, by the rectum, by inhalation or by subcutaneous, intramuscular or intravenous injection;

- administer other treatments, including oral, intravenous and subcutaneous rehydration, other fluid therapy, catheterisation, cleaning and dressing of surgical wounds, treatment of abscesses and ulcers, application of external casts, holding and handling of viscera when assisting in operations and cutaneous suturing;

- prepare animals for anaesthesia and assist in the administration and termination of anaesthesia, including premedication, analgesia and intubation;

- collect samples of blood, urine, faeces, skin and hair; and

- take X-rays.

Guidance on anaesthesia

18. Particular care is needed over the administration of anaesthesia. A veterinary surgeon alone should:

- assess the fitness of the animal to undergo anaesthesia;

- select and plan a suitable anaesthetic regime;

- select any premedication; and

- administer anaesthetic if the induction dose is either incremental or to effect.

19. Provided the veterinary surgeon is physically present and immediately available for consultation, a registered veterinary nurse may:

- administer selected sedative, analgesic or other agents before and after the operation;

- administer non-incremental anaesthetic agents on the instruction of the directing veterinary surgeon;
- monitor clinical signs and maintain an anaesthetic record; and

- maintain anaesthesia by administering supplementary incremental doses of intravenous anaesthetic agents or adjusting the delivered concentration of anaesthetic agents, under the direct instruction of the supervising veterinary surgeon.
Annex

Paragraphs 6 and 7 of Schedule 3 to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, as amended by the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (Schedule 3 Amendment) Order 2002, SI 2002/1479, with effect from 10 June 2002

6. Any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity) to any animal by a veterinary nurse if the following conditions are complied with, that is to say -

   (a) the animal is, for the time being, under the care of a registered veterinary surgeon or veterinary practitioner and the medical treatment or minor surgery is carried out by the veterinary nurse at his direction;

   (b) the registered veterinary surgeon or veterinary practitioner is the employer or is acting on behalf of the employer of the veterinary nurse; and

   (c) the registered veterinary surgeon or veterinary practitioner directing the medical treatment or minor surgery is satisfied that the veterinary nurse is qualified to carry out the treatment or surgery.

In this paragraph and in paragraph 7 below –

"veterinary nurse" means a nurse whose name is entered in the list1 of veterinary nurses maintained by the College."

7. Any medical treatment or any minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity) to any animal by a student veterinary nurse if the following conditions are complied with, that is to say -

   (a) the animal is, for the time being, under the care of a registered veterinary surgeon or veterinary practitioner and the medical treatment or minor surgery is carried out by the student veterinary nurse at his direction and in the course of the student veterinary nurse's training;

   (b) the treatment or surgery is supervised by a registered veterinary surgeon, veterinary practitioner or veterinary nurse and, in the case of surgery, the supervision is direct, continuous and personal; and

   (c) the registered veterinary surgeon or veterinary practitioner directing the medical treatment or minor surgery is satisfied that the student veterinary nurse is qualified to carry out the treatment or surgery.

In this paragraph –

"student veterinary nurse" means a person enrolled under bye-laws2 made by the Council for the purpose of undergoing training as a veterinary nurse at an approved training and assessment centre or a veterinary practice approved by such a centre;

"approved training and assessment centre" means a centre approved by the Council for the purpose of training and assessing student veterinary nurses."

1The list refers to the Register of Veterinary Nurses
2The bye-laws have now been replaced with the Veterinary Nurse Registration Rules