



Guidance on Religious Clothing and Beliefs



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Guidance on Religious Clothing and Beliefs



This guidance is a key output of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)/Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Student Support Working Group. The Working Group was established to explore issues in supporting BAME veterinary students during their studies and to propose recommendations to improve their experience.

The document has been produced in collaboration with staff and students at the University of Liverpool and the University of Surrey. The content is based on guidance developed by the School of Veterinary Sciences at the University of Liverpool, although it has been generalised so that it can be customised and adapted for use by other higher education institutions, veterinary environments and organisations across the veterinary sector. Veterinary students at the University of Surrey have kindly given permission for their images to be used in this document. These images should not be used when recreating customised versions of the document but have been used to illustrate the type of photographs that might be included. We would encourage you to work with your students and staff to create the image bank for your version.



Introduction

All students studying for a veterinary degree need to be able to study in a safe and supportive environment without fear of prejudice in order to maximise their potential and become competent, capable veterinary surgeons upon graduation. These values are supported by both the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the Veterinary Schools Council. The veterinary degree course provides undergraduates with the Day One Competencies and skills to become a Member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

As part of the RCVS and VSC commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, it is imperative that, where possible, all students of every religious and social group are included. The aim of this practical guide, which is based on a guidance document produced by the University of Liverpool, is to highlight to staff, students and placement providers that reasonable accommodations may be offered to students for reasons of religious beliefs. Such accommodations may be requested by students both within the university and whilst on extra-mural studies placements, although considerations of animal health and welfare and public health (for example, local infection control policies) will take precedence over the guidance in this document.



1. Requesting that a reasonable accommodation be made

Should any student wish to request that a reasonable accommodation be made on the grounds of religious beliefs during their undergraduate practical sessions, then an approach to the member of staff responsible for that year should be initially made. The request can then be assessed and the relevant members of staff can be informed. Where appropriate, the veterinary school will make reasonable adjustments to facilitate the request in-line with local policies. Where a request for accommodations on the grounds of religious beliefs do not comply with local policies, then the undergraduate must abide with the department's regulations.

2. Uniforms and workwear policy

2.1 'Bare below the elbows' policy

In 2007 the Department of Health (DH) published a document 'Uniforms and workwear: An evidence base for developing local policy,' which was further updated over the years with its latest iteration published by NHS England and NHS Improvement in 2022. This document widely became known as the 'bare below the elbows' policy and it aims to help combat infection. The policy emphasised the vital importance of hand washing as part of infection control. In line with this policy, it is common that veterinary schools and practices adopt similar guidelines. Therefore, any personnel who come in to contact with patients or contaminants must wash/ sanitise their hands between patients and additionally, an individual may need to wash their hands several times when examining or treating the same patient.

When involved in direct patient care activity, a strict 'bare below the elbow' approach must be followed. Any sleeve must be able to be rolled or pulled back and kept securely in place during hand-washing and direct patient care activity.

Local exceptions to this rule may be agreed, for example, between a veterinary student and the practice where they are undertaking their EMS placement, but any exceptions should not compromise animal health and welfare and/or public health.



2.2 Dress codes

It is important to understand that the development of any dress code should be decided locally within each vet school and/or placement practice. Dress codes remain the responsibility of each individual department and may vary between departments on the same site for health and safety reasons. Staff and students alike need to be aware that dress permitted at one placement may not be permitted at another, depending on decisions made by the clinical managers and the local infection prevention and control team. The same may apply to external placement providers for which the vet schools have no authority to override.

3. Forearms

3.1 Sleeve length

We are aware that for cultural or religious reasons, during times when individuals are not directly on certain clinics and treating patients, some students may not wish to expose their forearms.

Taking the advice of the National Institute for Clinical Excellence Guidelines Equality Impact Assessment Form Recommendations, if the exposure of forearms is not acceptable due to religious faith, clothing may include provision for sleeves that can be full or 3/4 length when personnel are not engaged in direct patient care, but they must not be loose or dangling. The sleeves must also be able to be rolled or pulled back and kept securely in place during hand washing and direct patient care. Additionally, disposable over-sleeves, elasticated at the elbow and wrist, may be used, but must be put on and discarded in the same manner as disposable gloves ie changed between patients. Veterinary students are, however, required to comply with any local infection control or other regulations with regard to the permitted length of sleeves.



4. Surgery

4.1 Surgical attire

All veterinary students are required to be able to correctly scrub into surgical procedures as part of the course. It is recognised that this may be problematic for some as it will involve exposing the forearm in order to surgically scrub. This is especially the case for some female students who have to scrub up whilst being supervised by a male colleague.

4.2 Request for a reasonable accommodation

We are aware that for cultural or religious reasons some females may wish to be observed by a female staff member when scrubbing in and reasonable accommodation should be made for this to happen. However, students need to be aware that it may not always be possible to make such an accommodation due to the staff availability in the practices. While universities may have no authority to facilitate this for placements, they should make placement providers aware of such requests, so that advance planning can be made.

5. Alcohol-based hand gel

According to advice obtained from the 'Muslim Spiritual Care Provision' project in the NHS, alcohol-based hand gel contains synthetic alcohol and so does not fall within the Muslim prohibition against natural alcohol (made from fermented fruit or grain). Alcohol-based gel is used widely in Islamic countries within healthcare settings and so it is permissible for Muslims to use such gels.



6. The Headscarf



We are aware that for religious reasons some personnel will choose to cover their hair, ears and/or neck but leave the face exposed by wearing a headscarf such as a hijab, tichel or chunni.

On campus and on placements it should be permitted to wear a religious headscarf.

In surgical settings students can continue to wear a religious headscarf provided it is itself covered by appropriate surgical head-coverings. Alternatively sterile, disposable head coverings are available from medical equipment providers and should be issued to students and staff as required by the vet school.

7. The Turban

We are aware that for cultural or religious reasons some Sikh students may wish to wear a turban. It should be permitted to wear the turban both on campus and on placements.



In surgical settings students should wear a theatre head-covering to appropriately cover the turban. Turban-wearing Sikhs are exempted from any legal requirement to wear head protection at a workplace under the Employment Act, including when on equine or farm rotations.

8. The Yarmulke

We are aware that for cultural or religious observance some Jewish male students may wish to wear the yarmulke skullcap. This should be permitted both on campus and EMS placements.

In surgical settings students should wear a theatre head covering to appropriately cover the yarmulke.

9. Face Veil

As part of their religious or cultural observance, some personnel may wish to wear a veil, such as a half-face veil (eg a niqab) or a full-face veil (eg a burka).

On campus

Effective communication is an important skill that is needed by all veterinary professionals.

Face veils are permitted on religious grounds, provided that patient care, health and safety, infection control and security and safety of patients, staff and students is not compromised. However, veterinary students may be required to expose their face in certain clinical settings and in some teaching situations where this is deemed important for communication with another person. In these situations, it may therefore be permissible for staff to request that an individual removes their face veil.



On placement

While on placements, all students are expected to comply with each individual establishment's dress policy and infection control regarding the niqab or burka.

Reference

The wording in this section has been changed to be more inclusive in tone. References to specific situations/examples have been removed to convey the message that it is only necessary to expose the face in certain clinical and teaching situations when this is important for communication, rather than suggesting it is required for effective communication in the majority of settings.

08 July 2022

10. Loose dress

As part of their religious or cultural observance, to avoid showing the contours of their body, some personnel may wish to wear loose clothing such as a jilbab (a loose dress from neck to ankle which covers the arms including the wrists) or a chador (a full-body cloak).

On campus

It should be permitted to wear loose clothing as long as this does not impede:

- Direct patient contact
- Working with staff or students
- Examining a patient
- Health and safety while undertaking lab work

In order to maintain asepsis in certain procedures; personnel who require below-elbow coverage for religious reasons, will need to use a long plastic gloves that cover below the elbow in order to prevent contamination to a patient. In the theatre suite, long sleeves are not



permitted in order to scrub up for surgery. Long sleeve gowns are used in theatre which may be acceptable (see section 4.2).

On placements

Students are expected to comply with each individual placement's dress code and infection control policy regarding the chador and jilbab or other similar items.

11. The Kara: steel bangle



Sikhs may choose to wear the Kara; a sacred bracelet made of steel. The Kara is an article of faith and should not be removed.

On campus

It is permitted to wear the Kara on campus. During hand washing, scrubbing for surgery and direct patient care activity it is recommended that Sikh personnel should ensure that the Kara is pushed up the forearm and secured in place with tape just above or below the elbow.



On placement

Provided that it is taped to the arm just above or below the elbow, practices should allow Sikhs to wear the Kara when in surgical theatre.

12. The Kirpan: Ceremonial Sword

A Sikh may be uninitiated or initiated. Initiated Sikhs are required to wear the Kirpan (a ceremonial sword). The Kirpan is carried in a sheath attached to a cloth belt. It is normally worn discreetly under clothes and most people would be unaware that a Sikh was carrying a Kirpan. The size of the Kirpan may differ depending on the personal taste of the initiated Sikh but may be only a few inches.

Under the 1988 Criminal Justice Act, the Kirpan is NOT classified as an offensive weapon and therefore Sikhs carrying the Kirpan are exempt from prosecution under the Offensive Weapons Act 2008.

On campus

Sikhs should be permitted to wear the Kirpan on campus. However, universities should be mindful that not everyone will be familiar with the full significance of the Kirpan. In order to avoid undue alarm to others, when on campus, wearers of the Kirpan must ensure this item is worn discreetly. This means that the Kirpan should remain out of sight by such methods as:

- Tucking it inside clothes.
- Tucking it inside a belt and ensuring the wearer's clothes cover the belt.

Any person wearing the Kirpan should also ensure it is secured so it cannot easily be drawn.

On placements

If a student needs to scrub in to take part in a surgical procedure then practices may require that the student tapes the Kirpan securely to their body.



13. Suitable clothing for rotations

Veterinary work can be physically demanding and may require personnel to sit / kneel on the floor when dealing with patients, especially in a small animal environment. Flat shoes with enclosed toes are mandatory for all personnel to prevent inadvertent injury. Students may wear head coverings when on clinical placements as well as a skirt over trousers. However, long flowing skirts or very long heavily flared trousers are not permissible as they can easily be caught and are a significant risk in the clinical environment.



13.1 Equine and farm placements.

Sturdy footwear is required for all personnel when on farm and equine work on the grounds of health and safety. Students are also required to wear overalls and relevant protective clothing. Head protection (hard hat or riding hat) is also required for students at all times around horses, and staff, with the exception of turban-wearing Sikhs who are exempt from these requirements (see Section 7).

14. Suitable clothing for laboratory work



14.1 Laboratory coats

Inside laboratories, all personnel must wear laboratory coats over their clothes and must be able to close the coat up completely.

14.2 Trailing clothing

Apart from shoes, personnel must not wear any clothing that touches the floor, as this could potentially pick up contamination from the floor surface, dangle in chemical or biological hazards, or become a trip hazard.



14.3 Personal protective equipment

Individuals working in laboratories must be able to wear the full range of personal protective equipment such as gloves, eye protection eg safety glasses or face shields, full face masks and a filtering face mask in certain areas. Head wear must allow individuals full frontal and peripheral vision at all times and must allow for communication in an unobstructed manner especially during emergency situations or when alarms are sounding.

15. Identification checks

Some personnel may choose to wear a facial covering when travelling around the campus. Whilst this is permitted on occasions, an individual's identity may need to be verified for security reasons. This is often done by checking photographic ID. In order to verify the identity of an individual wearing a facial covering, we recommend that an appropriate colleague should, wherever possible, perform this identity check in a private viewing area. However, if a suitable staff member is not available, students should be prepared to unveil for another member of staff performing any such check. Checks must always be conducted in a sensitive and respectful manner.

16. Changes to the academic or exam timetable

16.1 'Religious Observance and the Academic Timetabling' policy

We recommend that policies be put in place to allow students to request a change to their academic timetable – including rotations and EMS placements - for reasons of religious observance. Such requests should be dealt with fairly and with due consideration of the Equality Act and any other relevant legislation, as well as any impact that changes may have on the individual's learning outcomes.



16.2 'Religious Observance and Exams' policy

We recommend that universities have a policy in place that allows students to make requests for a change to be made to their exam timetables in the grounds of religious observance. Such a policy should outline the circumstances under which the university may be able to offer reasonable adjustments and all requests should be dealt with fairly and with due consideration of relevant legislation, and any impact changes may have on the individual's learning outcomes.

17. Multi-faith and quiet contemplation (MFQC) rooms

We recommend that MFQC rooms are provided on campus and on placement where possible.

18. Food

18.1 Food on campus

Universities should take steps to provide facilities that cater for specific food needs based on religious beliefs eg Halal or Kosher foods.

18.2 Food on placement

If any student has special dietary requirements due to religious beliefs then the student must be prepared to make their own arrangements with regards to food. Placements should not be changed because of an individual's dietary requirements.

We recommend that students going on placement during a period of religious fasting inform the University and the placement provider, allowing plenty of notice to discuss how the fasting may impact their time on placement. Any requests for reasonable accommodations should be considered by the placement provider.



19 Keeping a record of each student's request

We recommend that records are kept of all student requests for religious accommodations. This information may include for example:

- the student's programme
- the student's religion or belief
- the nature of the accommodation requested
- if the accommodation was made, how so, if not, why not – so as to record the 'objective justification' to making such an accommodation should the institution receive a legal challenge.

Please note that religious belief is regarded as a special category as part of the GDPR and should be treated accordingly.

Anonymised information can be used for EDI monitoring purposes.

