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# Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the CVMA

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**One Profession, One Strong Voice.  
Une profession, une seule voix.**

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## Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the CVMA:

### Veterinary Oath

*"As a member of the veterinary medical profession, I solemnly swear that I will use my scientific knowledge and skills for the benefit of society.*

*I will strive to promote animal health and welfare, relieve animal suffering, protect the health of the public and environment, and advance comparative medical knowledge.*

*I will practice my profession conscientiously, with dignity, and in keeping with the principles of veterinary medical ethics.*

*I will strive continuously to improve my professional knowledge and competence and to maintain the highest professional and ethical standards for myself and the profession."*

CVMA 2004

## **I. Introduction:**

Veterinarians are members of a scholarly profession who have earned academic degrees from comprehensive universities or similar educational institutions. Veterinarians practice the profession of veterinary medicine in a variety of situations and circumstances.

Members of the veterinary profession use their special knowledge and skills to serve society through the care and treatment of animals. The purposes of the responsible practice of veterinary medicine are: to promote the health and welfare and relieve suffering of animals, to address the animal care needs of the client, and to safeguard the health and well-being of the public. While the primary professional responsibility of veterinarians is to their patients, they must balance this with responsibilities they also hold to their clients, to the public, to the profession, to their colleagues and to themselves.

Professional veterinary associations and regulatory bodies should adopt the principles or a similar code as a guide for their activities. All veterinarians in provincial associations and jurisdictions have a responsibility to regulate and guide the professional conduct of their members. Provincial professional veterinary licensing bodies may establish ethics, grievance, or peer review committees to address ethical and professional conduct issues. All veterinarians engaged in the practice of veterinary medicine must be licensed in the jurisdiction in which they are practicing and follow the jurisdictional act, regulations, and bylaws of that regulatory body.

Colleges of veterinary medicine should stress the teaching of ethical and value issues as part of the professional curriculum for all veterinary students. The National Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners is encouraged to prepare and include questions regarding professional ethics in the North American Veterinary Licensing Examination (NAVLE). CVMA should review this code periodically to ensure that they remain complete and current.

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## **II. General Principles:**

- 1. A veterinarian should be dedicated to providing competent veterinary medical care, with compassion and respect for animal welfare and human health.**
- 2. A veterinarian should maintain independence, impartiality and accountability in carrying out their professional duties. They shall follow acceptable professional procedures using current professional and scientific knowledge and obtain consultation or referral when indicated.**
- 3. A veterinarian should, in the provision of appropriate patient care, be free to choose whom to serve. The veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) is the basis for interaction among veterinarians, their clients and their patients.**
- 4. A veterinarian should respect the rights of clients, colleagues, and other health professionals, and shall maintain the confidentiality of medical information within the confines of the law.**
- 5. A veterinarian should obey all laws of the jurisdictions in which they reside and practice veterinary medicine. They shall also recognize a responsibility to seek changes to laws and regulations which are contrary to the best interests of the patient and public health.**
- 6. Veterinarians, individually and collectively, shall uphold the integrity of the veterinary profession and must maintain the trust of their clients and society through exemplary standards of clinical practice and conduct including competence, accountability, honesty, fairness, compassion and confidentiality.**
- 7. A veterinarian should continue to study, apply, and advance scientific knowledge, make relevant information available to clients, colleagues, the public and maintain a commitment to veterinary medical education.**
- 8. The responsibilities of the veterinary profession extend beyond individual patients and clients to society in general. Veterinarians are encouraged to make their knowledge available to their communities and to provide their services for activities that protect public health and environmental health.**

### **III. Professional Responsibilities:**

#### **III. A. Veterinarians' responsibilities to animals:**

1. Veterinarians should first consider the needs of the patient: to relieve disease, suffering or disability while minimizing pain or fear.
2. Veterinarians must provide veterinary care that is appropriate and adequate. The choice of treatments or animal care should consider the needs of the patient, the welfare of the client, and the safety of the public.
3. Veterinarians must follow acceptable professional procedures using current professional and scientific knowledge. All aspects of veterinary medicine should be held to the same standards, including complementary, alternative and integrative veterinary medicine, non-traditional or other novel approaches.
4. Veterinarians must keep within their own area of competence and refer cases responsibly. [see Appendix 1: Referring/consultation]
5. Regardless of practice ownership, the interests of the patient, client, and public require that all decisions that affect diagnosis, prognosis, and recommendations for treatment of patients are made by veterinarians.
6. Veterinarians should not allow their medical judgment to be influenced by agreements by which they stand to profit through referring clients to other providers of services or products, nor should their judgment be influenced by contracts or agreements made by their practice, associations or societies.
7. In emergencies, veterinarians have an ethical responsibility to provide essential services for animals when necessary to save life or relieve suffering, subsequent to client agreement (or until such agreement can be obtained when no client is present). Such emergency care may be limited to euthanasia to relieve suffering, or to stabilization of the patient for transport to another source of animal care.
8. Veterinarians must communicate with each other to ensure the health and welfare of the animal or group of animals. [see Appendix 1: Referring/consultation]
9. Veterinarians should strive to improve their veterinary knowledge and skills, and to collaborate with other professionals in the quest for knowledge and professional development.
10. Humane euthanasia of animals is an ethical veterinary procedure. [See CVMA position statement on Euthanasia.]

### III. B. Veterinarians' responsibilities to clients:

1. Veterinarians must be open and honest with clients and respect their needs and requirements. Veterinarians should be honest, fair, courteous, considerate and compassionate.
2. Veterinarians must provide independent and impartial advice and inform a client of any conflict of interest. Communications with clients will contain no false, deceptive, or misleading statements or claims.
3. Veterinarians may choose whom they will serve. Both the veterinarian and the client have the right to establish or decline a Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR). [see Appendix 2: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)]
4. Veterinarians must communicate effectively with clients and ensure informed owner consent is obtained before treatments or procedures are carried out. The decision to accept or decline treatment and related costs should be based on adequate discussion of clinical findings, diagnostic techniques, treatment, likely outcome and estimated costs. [see Appendix 3: Informed Consent]
5. A decision to consult or refer is made jointly by the attending veterinarian and the client. Attending veterinarians must honour a client's request for referral.
6. Veterinarians are entitled to charge fees for their professional services. Fees must be fair and based on professional services rendered. Regardless of the fees that are charged or received, the quality of service must be maintained at or above the professional standard as set by the provincial regulatory body. [see Appendix 4: Fees for Services]
7. Veterinarians must keep clear, accurate and detailed clinical and client records. [see Appendix 5: Medical Records]
8. Veterinarians and their associates should protect the personal privacy of patients and clients. Veterinarians should not reveal confidences unless required to by law or unless it becomes necessary to protect the health and welfare of other individuals or animals.
9. Veterinarians should address client complaints in an appropriate and timely manner.
10. Veterinarians should take all reasonable steps to prevent harm to patients. Should harm occur, this information should be immediately disclosed to the client.

### III. C. Veterinarians' responsibilities to the profession:

1. Veterinarians have a responsibility to maintain the integrity and dignity of the profession and be worthy of the trust and respect of colleagues, clients, other health professionals, and the general public.
2. Veterinarians should be honest, fair, courteous, considerate, and compassionate. Veterinarians should present a professional appearance and follow acceptable professional procedures using current professional and scientific knowledge.
3. Veterinarians should not slander, or injure the professional standing or reputation of other veterinarians in a false or misleading manner. However, veterinarians should report to the appropriate authority any unprofessional conduct by colleagues.
4. Veterinarians should view, evaluate, and treat all persons in any professional activity or circumstance in which they may be involved, solely as individuals on the basis of their own personal abilities, qualifications, and other relevant characteristics.

As health professionals seeking to advance animal and public health, veterinarians should strive to confront and reject all forms of prejudice and discrimination that may lead to impediments to access of quality animal and public health care for clients/patients or lack of educational, training, and employment opportunities for veterinary colleagues/students and other member of the animal health care team. These forms of prejudice and discrimination include, but are not limited to, race; ethnicity; physical and mental abilities; gender; sexual orientation; gender identify; parental status; religious beliefs; political beliefs; geographic, socioeconomic, and educational background; and any other characteristic protected under applicable federal or provincial law.

5. Veterinarians who are impaired or whose performance is adversely affected by physical or mental health conditions must not act in the capacity of a veterinarian and should seek assistance from qualified organizations or individuals. Colleagues of impaired veterinarians should encourage those individuals to seek assistance and to overcome their impairment.
6. A veterinarian having supervisory authority over another veterinarian should make reasonable efforts to ensure that the other veterinarian conforms to accepted standards of conduct and practice.
7. If there is evidence that the actions of a former attending veterinarian have clearly and significantly endangered the health or safety of a patient, the current attending veterinarian has a responsibility to take action.
8. Veterinarians should strive to improve their veterinary knowledge and skills, and they are encouraged to collaborate with other professionals in the quest for knowledge and professional development.

9. When conferences, meetings, or lectures are sponsored by outside entities, the organization that presents the program, not the funding sponsor, should have control of the contents and speakers.
10. Veterinarians should use only the title of the professional degree that was awarded by the school of veterinary medicine where the degree was earned. It is unethical for veterinarians to identify themselves as members of a recognized specialty organization if such certification has not been awarded and maintained.
11. It is unethical to place professional knowledge, credentials, or services at the disposal of any nonprofessional organization, group, or individual to promote or lend credibility to the illegal practice of veterinary medicine.
12. It is unethical for veterinarians to use or permit the use of their names, signatures or professional status in connection with the resale of ethical products in a manner which violates those directions or conditions specified by the manufacturer to ensure the safe and efficacious use of the product.
13. Veterinarians should recognize a responsibility to give generally held opinions of the profession when interpreting scientific knowledge to the public. When presenting an opinion that is contrary to the generally held opinion of the profession, this should be clearly indicated.

#### **III. D. Veterinarians' responsibilities to the public:**

1. Veterinarians should concurrently seek to ensure the protection of public health and general animal health and welfare, while carrying out their professional duties toward a specific patient. They must also consider the impact of their actions on the environment.
2. The responsibilities of the veterinary profession extend beyond individual patients and clients to society in general. Veterinarians are encouraged to make their knowledge available to their communities and to provide their services for activities that protect public health and environmental health.
3. Veterinarians should obey all laws of the jurisdictions in which they reside and practice veterinary medicine. Veterinarians should be honest and fair in their relations with others, and they should not engage in fraud, misrepresentation, or deceit. Veterinarians should report illegal practices and activities to the proper authorities.
4. Veterinarians may promote or advertise products and services but it is unethical to employ false, deceptive, or misleading statements or claims. Testimonials or endorsements are advertising, and they must comply with the appropriate jurisdictions' regulations or guidelines for advertising. [see Appendix 6: Advertising]



**III. E. Veterinarians' responsibilities to the veterinary team:**

1. Veterinarians must work together and with others in the veterinary team and business, to co-ordinate the care of animals and the delivery of services.
2. Veterinarians must ensure that tasks are delegated only to those who have the appropriate competence and registration.
3. Veterinarians must maintain minimum practice standards.
4. Veterinarians must treat their colleagues with dignity and as persons worthy of respect.

**III. F. Veterinarians' responsibilities to themselves:**

1. Veterinarians should seek help from appropriately qualified professionals for personal problems that might adversely affect service to patients, society or the profession.
2. Veterinarians should protect and enhance their own health and well-being by identifying those stress factors in their professional and personal lives that can be managed by developing and practicing appropriate coping strategies.

## **References:**

1. Principles of Veterinary Medical Ethics of the AVMA  
<https://www.avma.org>
2. Canadian Veterinary Oath CVMA 2004  
<https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/>
3. CVMA Constitution and by-laws. Code of Ethics 1955  
<https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/>
4. RCVS Code of professional conduct for veterinary surgeons  
<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/>
5. CMA Code of Ethics:  
<https://www.cma.ca/En/Pages/code-of-ethics.aspx>
6. Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada's CanMEDS Physician health guide.

## **Appendix 1: Referring and Consultation:**

When appropriate, attending veterinarians are encouraged to seek assistance in the form of **consultations and referrals**. A decision to consult or refer is made jointly by the attending veterinarian and the client. Attending veterinarians should honor clients' requests for referral.

- An *attending veterinarian* is a veterinarian (or a group of veterinarians) who assumes responsibility for primary care of a patient. A VCPR is established with the attending veterinarian.
- A *consulting veterinarian* is a veterinarian (or group of veterinarians) who agrees to advise an attending veterinarian on the care and management of a case. The VCPR remains the responsibility of the attending veterinarian.
- When a consultation occurs, the attending veterinarian continues to be primarily responsible for the case.
- Consulting veterinarians may or may not charge fees for service. When such fees are charged, they are usually collected from the client by the attending veterinarian.
- Consulting veterinarians should communicate their findings and opinions directly to the attending veterinarians.
- Consulting veterinarians should revisit the patients or communicate with the clients in collaboration with the attending veterinarians.
- Consultations usually involve the exchange of information or interpretation of test results.

It may be appropriate or necessary for consultants to examine patients. When advanced or invasive techniques are required to gather information or substantiate diagnoses, attending veterinarians may refer the patients. A new VCPR is established with the veterinarian to whom a case is referred. Referral is the transfer of responsibility of diagnosis and treatment from a referring veterinarian to a receiving veterinarian. A *referring veterinarian* is the veterinarian (or group of veterinarians) who is the attending veterinarian at the time of referral. A *receiving veterinarian* is a veterinarian (or group of veterinarians) to whom a patient is referred and who agrees to provide requested veterinary services. A new VCPR is established with the receiving veterinarian.

- The referring and receiving veterinarians should communicate.
- The referring veterinarian should provide the receiving veterinarian with all the appropriate information pertinent to the case before or at the time of the receiving veterinarian's first contact with the patient or the client.

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- When the referred patient has been examined, the receiving veterinarian should promptly inform the referring veterinarian. Information provided should include diagnosis, proposed treatment and other recommendations.
  - The receiving veterinarian should provide only those services or treatments necessary to address the condition for which the patient was referred and should consult the referring veterinarian if other services or treatments are indicated.
  - Upon discharge of the patient, the receiving veterinarian should give the referring veterinarian a written report, advising the referring veterinarian as to continuing care of the patient or termination of the case. A detailed and complete written report should follow as soon as possible.
  - The receiving veterinarian should advise the client to contact the referring veterinarian for the continuing care of the patient. If the client chooses continuing patient care of a veterinarian other than the referring veterinarian, the receiving veterinarian should release a copy of the medical records to the veterinarian of the client's choice.

When a client seeks professional services or opinions from a different veterinarian without a referral, a new VCPR is established with the new attending veterinarian. When contacted, the veterinarian who was formerly involved in the diagnosis, care, and treatment of the patient should communicate with the new attending veterinarian as if the patient and client had been referred.

- With the client's consent, the new attending veterinarian should contact the former veterinarian to learn the original diagnosis, care, and treatment and clarify any issues before proceeding with a new treatment plan.
- If there is evidence that the actions of the former attending veterinarian have clearly and significantly endangered the health or safety of the patient, the new attending veterinarian has a responsibility to report the matter to the appropriate authorities of the provincial professional regulatory body.

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## **Appendix 2. The Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR):**

The veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) is the basis for interaction among veterinarians, their clients and their patients. Prescribing a prescription product requires a VCPR. Without a VCPR, a veterinarian's merchandising or use of veterinary prescription drugs or their extra-label use of any pharmaceutical is unethical and is illegal under federal law.

A VCPR means that all of the following are required:

- The veterinarian has assumed the responsibility for making clinical judgments regarding the health of the patient and the client has agreed to follow the veterinarians' instructions.
- The veterinarian has sufficient knowledge of the patient to initiate at least a general or preliminary diagnosis of the medical condition of the patient. This means that the veterinarian is personally acquainted with the keeping and care of the patient by virtue of a timely examination of the patient by the veterinarian, or medically appropriate and timely visits by the veterinarian to the operation where the patient is managed.
- The veterinarian is readily available for follow-up evaluation or has arranged for the following: veterinary emergency coverage, and continuing care and treatment.
- The veterinarian provides oversight of treatment, compliance, and outcome.
- Patient records are maintained.
- Veterinarians should honor a client's request for a prescription in lieu of dispensing.

Veterinarians may terminate a VCPR under certain conditions, and they have an ethical obligation to use courtesy and tact in doing so.

- If there is no ongoing medical condition, veterinarians may terminate a VCPR by notifying the client that they no longer wish to serve that patient and client.
- If there is an ongoing medical or surgical condition, the patient should be referred to another veterinarian for diagnosis, care and treatment. The former attending veterinarian should continue to provide care, as needed, during the transition.
- Clients may terminate the VCPR at any time.

### **Appendix 3. Informed consent:**

Information on the required components of informed consent (from the client) needs to be created: The following is the current AVMA position on informed consent (revised the term to owner consent). Found at:

<https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Owner-Consent-in-Veterinary-Medicine.aspx>

#### **Owner Consent in Veterinary Medicine [AVMA]**

The public is best served when veterinarians provide sufficient information in a form and manner that enables owners or their authorized agents to make appropriate decisions when choosing the veterinary care provided.

To the best of their ability and in a manner that would be understood by a reasonable person, veterinarians should inform animal owners or their authorized agents of the diagnostic and treatment options available. They should also provide an assessment of the risks and benefits of such choices, a prognosis, and a documented estimate of the fees expected for the provision of services. The owners or authorized agents should indicate that their questions have been answered to their satisfaction, the information received by them has been understood, and that they are consenting to the recommended treatments or procedures.

The consent of owners or authorized agents should be provided in a verbal or written form and should be documented in the medical record by veterinarians or their staff members.

## **Appendix 4. Fees for Services:**

### **Language used in the current AVMA policy:**

See:

<https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Principles-of-Veterinary-Medical-Ethics-of-the-AVMA.aspx>

[Section VII.f.]

*f. Veterinarians (to include those attending, consulting, receiving and referring) are entitled to charge fees for their professional services.*

- i. Regardless of the fees that are charged or received, the quality of service must be maintained at the usual professional standard.*
- ii. A veterinarian may charge a fee for the services the veterinarian provides in conjunction with the use of third-party providers such as laboratories, pharmacies, and consulting veterinarians.*
- iii. Payment by or to a veterinarian solely for the referral of a patient is fee-splitting and is unethical.*
- iv. A veterinarian may not accept payment of any kind, in any form, from any source, such as a pharmaceutical company or pharmacist, manufacturer of medical appliances and devices, for prescribing or referring a patient to said source.*

*In each case, the payment violates the requirement to deal honestly with clients and colleagues. The client relies upon the advice of the veterinarian on matters of referral and prescribing. All referrals and prescriptions must be based on the skill and quality of the veterinarian to whom the patient has been referred or the quality and efficacy of the drug or product prescribed.*

- v. It is unethical for a group or association of veterinarians to take any action which coerces, pressures, or achieves agreement among veterinarians to conform to a fee schedule or fixed fees.*

**Appendix 5. Medical Records:**

Veterinary medical records are an integral part of veterinary care. The records must comply with the standards established by provincial regulatory bodies.

- Medical records are the property of the practice and the practice owner. The original records must be retained by the practice for the period required by provincial statute.
- Ethically, the information within veterinary medical records is considered privileged and confidential. It must not be released except as required or allowed by law, or by consent of the owner of the patient.
- Veterinarians are obligated to provide copies or summaries of medical records when requested by the client.
- Without the express permission of the practice owner, it is unethical for a veterinarian to remove, copy, or use the medical records or any part of any record.
- Medical records must be provided to another practice upon a client's request.



## **Appendix 6. Advertising:**

Advertising by veterinarians is ethical when there are no false, deceptive, or misleading statements or claims. A false, deceptive, or misleading statement or claim is one which communicates false information or is intended, through a material omission, to leave a false impression. Testimonials or endorsements are advertising, and they should comply with the guidelines for advertising. In addition, testimonials and endorsements of professional products or services by veterinarians are considered unethical unless they comply with the following:

- The endorser must be a *bonafide* user of the product or service.
- There must be adequate substantiation that the results obtained by the endorser are representative of what veterinarians may expect in actual conditions of use.
- Any financial, business, or other relationship between the endorser and the seller of a product or service must be fully disclosed.
- When reprints of scientific articles are used with advertising, the reprints must remain unchanged, and be presented in their entirety.
- Veterinarians may permit the use of their names by commercial enterprises (e.g. pet shops, kennels, farms, feedlots) so that the enterprises can advertise under veterinary supervision, only if they provide such supervision and this is permitted by provincial bodies.

The principles that apply to advertising, testimonials and endorsements also apply to veterinarians' communications with their clients.