GUIDELINES

Medically Unnecessary Veterinary Surgery (“Cosmetic Surgery”)

Publication Date: November 2015
Legislative References: Veterinarians Act R.S.O. 1990
O. Reg. 1093, Sections 17 and 18 (1) (see Appendix 1)
College Contact: Registrar
Reference Materials: Professional Practice Standard: Informed Client Consent
Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Informed Client Consent

Purpose
This document is intended to serve as a guideline for use by veterinarians when deciding whether or not to proceed with medically unnecessary (or “cosmetic”¹) veterinary surgery (hereafter referred to as MUVS). It does not prohibit any surgical procedure, but sets out principles to assist individual veterinarians with their decision-making.

Scope
This Guideline document applies to all licensed veterinarians in Ontario who perform surgical procedures on animals, including (but not limited to) companion animals, horses, and those used for food and/or fibre. The Guideline allows for every decision about MUVS to be made by the individual veterinarian based on his/her reasonable professional judgment.

¹ Many groups and jurisdictions refer to procedures discussed in this document as “cosmetic” in that they generally serve aesthetic (not medical) purposes. See Definition section of this Guideline.
**Background**
In the past several years there has been increasing discussion within the North American veterinary community and the greater public, in keeping with precedents set around the world, about the ethics of performing specific procedures commonly referred to as “cosmetic surgery” on animals. Questions on the matter have come not only from animal welfare proponents, but also from the pet-owning public and, pro-actively, from within the veterinary community.

The veterinary profession—with its expertise in and knowledge of animal physiology, anaesthesiology, diagnostics, treatment, and welfare—has a social responsibility to take the initiative on making recommendations about medically unnecessary animal surgeries. Although individual veterinarians on a practice-by-practice basis have taken leadership roles with regard to their views on these procedures, there is an expectation that the veterinary profession as a whole should address the matter publically. In response to this evolution of societal ethics, the Canadian veterinary community in general has elected to address at least portions of this complex issue by way of changing by-laws, codes of ethics, and/or position statements (the approach taken depends on the regulatory framework of each jurisdiction). See Appendix 2 for current positions across Canada. The CVO’s current position is outlined below.

**Definitions**
Veterinary medicine is broadly defined under the *Veterinarians Act*, and surgery is considered part of the scope of practice of veterinary medicine.

While section 17(1).7 of Regulation 1093 states that it is professional misconduct for a veterinarian to provide services or treatments that are “not reasonably useful or needed” (see Appendix 1), neither the *Veterinarians Act* or Regulation 1093 refers to specific types of surgery; nor does the legislation specify what veterinary procedures shall be considered “reasonably useful or needed”—or not. It is therefore up to the veterinary profession in Ontario as a whole to establish peer expectations of CVO members and to determine criteria and factors to consider when deciding if surgery is an appropriate course of action.

Medically unnecessary veterinary surgeries are those that are either not required or are not in the animal’s overall best interest. The CVO uses the broad term “medically unnecessary veterinary surgery” (MUVS) rather than “cosmetic surgery” since surgeries that are labelled as “cosmetic” are sometimes done for the prevention of predictable medical conditions and/or for valid reasons related to the overall welfare of the animal, which make them necessary rather than cosmetic.

**Position**
A licensed veterinarian is authorized in the *Veterinarians Act* to perform any surgical procedure that has been determined by that veterinarian to be reasonably appropriate and necessary, and in keeping with an established veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR). Any change to this position without similar and consistent changes within other relevant legislation could create unintended consequences that would not support animal welfare.²

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² Appendix 3 provides a list of surgeries that could be considered MUVS. It is included to provide examples of surgeries which are being performed by fewer veterinarians due to the belief these surgeries convey little or no benefit to the animal and/or may cause pain or other harm. If a veterinarian is trying to decide whether to perform one of these surgeries, use of this guideline with respect to the intended surgery would be prudent.
**Principles**

**Patient/Medical-Surgical Context**
Veterinarians make their decisions about conducting any surgery on patients based on consideration of the following:
1. the best available evidence for the need to perform the surgery under the circumstances, including the risks and benefits of, and alternatives to, so doing;
2. all patient factors, including the animal’s living environment and purpose, health status, age, and risk for zoonotic disease and/or injury; and
3. procedural factors, including anesthetic options, surgical techniques, necessity of pain management, and post-surgical care.

**Client/Community Context**
Licensed veterinarians perform all surgical procedures, including those considered as “cosmetic,” only after:
- engaging in and documenting thorough discussion with the client, who—with knowledge of risks and benefits of, and alternatives to, the procedure—provides informed consent; and
- giving due consideration to the specific circumstances pertaining to the health and welfare of the animal(s)—including the values of the client, the veterinarian, and the community in which they live—that could have an impact on the ultimate well being of the animal.

**Education of the Animal- Owning Public**
The CVO believes that veterinarians, as advocates of animal welfare, must play a leadership role in the education of clients who request “cosmetic” surgeries on “show animals” (such as dogs and horses) in an attempt to influence their choices and perspectives.
APPENDIX 1

Relevant Legislation

The *Veterinarians Act, 1989*, is the profession specific *Act* which governs the practice of veterinarians in Ontario. O. Reg. 1093 is the Regulation made under that *Act*.

Ontario Regulation 1093 states that Professional Misconduct includes the following:

- **17(1)7.** Providing, or attempting or offering to provide, services that are not reasonably useful or needed.

- **17(1)7.1.** Recommending, referring, ordering or requisitioning laboratory tests, technical procedures or professional services that are not reasonably useful or needed.

- **17(1)9.** Making a claim respecting the utility of any remedy, treatment, device or procedure other than a claim which can reasonably be supported as professional opinion.

- **18(1)** A member shall comply with the standards of practice of the profession in the performance of veterinary services.
### APPENDIX 2

**Current Canadian MUVS Positions by Jurisdiction, Organization**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction, Organization</th>
<th>Surgeries addressed</th>
<th>Source of Authority, Position</th>
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| Newfoundland and Labrador College of Veterinarians [Regulator] | Ear cropping dogs<br>Ear cropping and tail docking in dogs. | **Act:** Illegal under *Animal Protection Act* since 1978.  
**By-law:** prohibits both. [2010] |
<p>| Nova Scotia NSVMA [Regulator and Association] | Tail docking in the equine, bovine, canine&lt;br&gt;Tail docks in newborn puppies&lt;br&gt;Dewclaw removal in newborn puppies&lt;br&gt;Tail alteration (nicking/setting) in equine&lt;br&gt;Ear cropping&lt;br&gt;Onychectomy (de-claw) in species other than the domestic cat | <strong>Code of Ethics:</strong> No member of NSVMA shall perform cosmetic surgery on an animal for the purpose of having the animal's appearance conform to a breed standard or tradition. Cosmetic surgery is defined as non-therapeutic surgical procedures which alter the appearance of an animal for purely cosmetic purposes. [2011] |
| New Brunswick NBVMA [Regulator and Association] | Tail docking in dogs, horses, and cows&lt;br&gt;Tail nicking and setting in horses&lt;br&gt;Ear cropping in dogs&lt;br&gt;Declawing in species other than cats | <strong>By Law:</strong> Considered professional misconduct for a veterinarian to perform cosmetic surgery (non-therapeutic surgical procedures which alter the appearance of an animal for purely cosmetic purposes). [2009] |
| Prince Edward Island [Regulator and Association] | Tail docking in the canine, equine, and bovine species&lt;br&gt;Tail nicking and setting in the equine species&lt;br&gt;Ear cropping in the canine species | <strong>By-Law</strong> Considered unprofessional conduct for a veterinarian to perform cosmetic surgery on any animal. Cosmetic surgery is defined as non-therapeutic surgical procedures (i.e. of no medical benefit) which are performed purely to alter the appearance of an animal. [2010] |
| Ordre des médecins veterinaires du Quebec [Regulator] | Ear cropping and Tail docking in dogs&lt;br&gt;Tail docking in cattle&lt;br&gt;Tail nick/set or dock in horses | <strong>Position Statement:</strong> States that these surgeries are veterinary procedures not to be performed by non-veterinarians. However veterinarians are encouraged not to perform these surgeries. Requires members to educate the public, breeders, and breed standards organizations. [2009] |
| Manitoba MVMA [Regulator and Association] | Ear Cropping dogs | <strong>By-Law:</strong> No member shall perform cosmetic ear cropping on a canine for the purpose of having the animal's appearance conform to a breed standard or tradition. [2012]. |
| Saskatchewan SVMA [Regulator and Association] | Cosmetic Surgery | <strong>By-law:</strong> No member shall perform cosmetic ear cropping on an animal for the purpose of having the animal's appearance conform to a breed standard or tradition. [2011] |
| Alberta [Regulator and Association] | Tail docking: equine, bovine, or canine&lt;br&gt;Tail nicking/setting in the equine species&lt;br&gt;Ear cropping in canine species&lt;br&gt;Onychectomy in other than domestic cat | <strong>Supports CVMA recommendations</strong> – it is not professional misconduct to perform any surgery; issue needs to be addressed by industry and society generally. [2011] |
| British Columbia CVBC [Regulator] | Ear cropping&lt;br&gt;Tail docking | <strong>Implicit in Act</strong> that unnecessary surgery might lead to a misconduct finding, depending on all circumstances. [2011] |</p>
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Association</th>
<th>Procedures</th>
<th>Positions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CVMA</td>
<td>Tail docking in equine, bovine, or canine Tail nicking/setting in the equine species Ear cropping in canine Onychectomy in species other than the domestic cat Declaw of Non-Domestic Felids in Captivity</td>
<td>Opposes surgical alteration of any animal for purely cosmetic purposes. Recommends breed associations change their breed standards so that cosmetic procedures are not required.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ontario OVMA</td>
<td>Tail docking in equine, bovine, or canine species Tail nicking/setting in the equine species Ear cropping in canine species Onychectomy in species other than the domestic cat</td>
<td>Opposes surgical alteration of any animal for purely cosmetic purposes. Recommends breed associations change their breed standards so that cosmetic procedures are not required.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Canadian Kennel Club</td>
<td>Ear cropping dogs Differentiates from: Tail docking Dewclaw removal</td>
<td>Will not unilaterally legislate changes to breed standards. Ear cropping must be done under general anesthetic. Tail docking and removal of dewclaws in young puppies is similar to practices in livestock industry.</td>
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<td>Canadian Federation of Humane Societies</td>
<td>Cosmetic Surgery (&quot;eg: tail docking, ear cropping, etc.&quot;)</td>
<td>Opposes surgical alterations of companion animals for cosmetic reasons; encourages breed associations and the Canadian Kennel Club to change breed standards so that cosmetic procedures are not required.</td>
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Surgeries that could be considered Medically Unnecessary

The list below is not inclusive and will be amended over time as the profession’s views evolve.

- canine tail dock > 4 days (96 hours) of age
- canine ear crop
- canine debarking
- canine dewclaw removal
- canine or feline healthy tooth extraction/blunting
- canine or feline cosmetic eye surgery
- dairy cattle tail dock
- equine tail nick/set or tail dock
- equine ear setting