



THE COLLEGE OF  
VETERINARIANS  
OF ONTARIO

# **GUIDE TO THE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE STANDARD**

## ***Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)***

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### **Introduction**

The College's *Professional Practice Standard: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)* establishes the expectations that are fundamental for establishing and maintaining a veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR). The VCPR is one of the foundations of effective veterinary care and service. A VCPR is established when a veterinarian agrees with a client to provide veterinary services to an animal or group of animals.<sup>1</sup> Using a question and answer format, this Guide to the Professional Practice Standard addresses questions and offers suggestions on how to apply the Professional Practice Standard in situations that arise in veterinary practice.

### **Frequently Asked Questions about Establishing and Maintaining a VCPR**

#### **How should a veterinarian establish a VCPR with a client?**

Establishing a VCPR involves a conversation where the client retains the veterinarian, the veterinarian and client reach an agreement as to the scope of the services to be provided by the veterinarian, and the veterinarian advises the client that services will only be provided in accordance with the standards of practice of the profession. A VCPR can be established in person or via telemedicine with various technology.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that, in this context, "group of animals" refers to more than one animal of any species.

**In a multi-veterinarian veterinary facility, does each veterinarian have to establish a VCPR with a client?**

A veterinarian should explain to the client that, although the VCPR has been established with a particular veterinarian, any of the veterinarians in that same practice are able to provide care to their animal or group of animals, in order to ensure continuity of care, if the client agrees.

**If a veterinarian leaves a practice and starts to work at a new practice, would he or she have to establish a new VCPR with a client that the veterinarian previously had a VCPR with at his or her previous practice?**

Yes. A VCPR does not “travel” with a veterinarian. It is established with a veterinary facility. When a veterinarian leaves a veterinary facility and a former client wishes for him or her to treat an animal, a new VCPR will have to be established at the new facility that the veterinarian is working at.

**One of the requirements for a veterinarian to continue to provide treatment or services within an established VCPR is having recent and sufficient knowledge of an animal or group of animals. How can a veterinarian determine what constitutes “recent and sufficient knowledge”?**

What constitutes recent and sufficient knowledge of an animal or group of animals will depend on all of the circumstances of a particular case. Each case will be different and will depend on the veterinarian’s professional judgment and the presenting circumstances of the animal or group of animals.

There are certain factors, however, that may assist a veterinarian in considering whether he or she has “recent and sufficient” knowledge of an animal or group of animals, and whether an examination and/or other assessment is warranted prior to recommending and/or providing treatment (including prescribing, dispensing, or administering). These factors may include, but are not limited to:

- The animal’s age;
- The species of the animal;
- The animal’s health status, including any medical condition(s);
- The animal’s medical history as recorded in its medical record, including immunization history;
- The animal’s nutrition;
- The animal’s environment;
- The animal’s hygiene;
- The type of treatment plan being considered, including type(s) of medication(s); and
- Whether there are any industry standards or profession-based guidelines setting out best practices related to how often a veterinarian should see an animal or a group of animals of a particular species.

A veterinarian should document his or her clinical reasoning process for reaching a decision as to whether or not he or she has “sufficient and recent” knowledge of an animal or a group of animals.

### **Scenario**

*Based on the College’s previous VCPR policy, Dr. Vet would not refill a prescription for a patient unless she had examined the patient within the past year. Based on the current Professional Practice Standard: VCPR and considering the above factors, Dr. Vet uses her professional judgment to determine if she will refill the prescription. Depending on her recent knowledge of the individual patient, the purpose of the medication, and the risks and benefits to the patient, she will determine what information she needs to fill the prescription, which may or may not include a physical examination. The appropriate time between examinations can vary depending on the factors enumerated above, each individual assessment of an animal, and the circumstances.*

**In addition to the usual questions regarding the history of an animal or group of animals, what else should a veterinarian ask a client when establishing a VCPR to ensure continuity of care?**

Additional questions that assure continuity of care include asking a new client whether he or she has seen another veterinarian recently. If so, the veterinarian should inform the client that he or she will obtain the animal’s (animals’) medical records from the previous veterinarian.

**Is a VCPR required for dispensing any product?**

A VCPR must be in place before a veterinarian provides veterinary services or recommends treatment (including the prescribing, dispensing, or administering of drugs) in respect of an animal or group of animals, unless one of the exceptions to the requirement for a VCPR, which are outlined in the Professional Practice Standard: VCPR, applies. A VCPR is not required when a veterinarian dispenses any substance or preparation manufactured, offered for sale or sold as, or as part of, a food, drink or cosmetic (not defined as a drug). Currently, natural health products require a VCPR to be dispensed.

## **Frequently Asked Questions Regarding Client Issues**

**How should a veterinarian establish whether a person has decision-making authority with respect to an animal or group of animals?**

It is a best practice to establish, in writing, all owners and agents that have decision-making authority at the outset of a VCPR. The names of all owners and agents that have decision-making authority should be included in the client information. Where an individual who is not a known owner presents himself or herself as an agent and appears to be acting in the best interest of the animal or group of animals, a veterinarian may, where reasonable, assume that the person in question is a designated agent of the

owner and has decision-making authority, unless he or she has reason to believe otherwise.

### **What should a veterinarian do when he or she knows or believes that a client is seeking services from multiple veterinarians?**

In cases where a client has established VCPRs with multiple practices, a veterinarian may wish to explain the importance and benefits of continuity of care to the client and the challenges and potential dangers that may result to an animal's or group of animals' health when there is a lack of continuity of care and where a veterinarian is not aware of an animal's full medical history. In situations where a veterinarian is not comfortable with a client who he or she believes has established a VCPR with multiple veterinarians which results in a lack of continuity of care or a substandard level of care, he or she may wish to discuss withdrawal of his or her services and a potential termination of the VCPR.

## **Frequently Asked Questions Regarding the Termination of a VCPR**

### **Is there a certain period of time after which a veterinarian has not seen a client and patient after which the VCPR will automatically expire or lapse?**

No, a VCPR does not automatically end after a certain period of time. A client may assume that he or she still has a VCPR with a veterinarian if the client has not visited the veterinarian in a number of years, and even if the client has requested that their medical records be transferred to another veterinary facility. In these kinds of circumstances, a veterinarian may want to contact the client and clarify whether the client wants the veterinarian to continue to provide veterinary services to his or her animal or group of animals. The veterinarian may want to suggest that the client schedule a visit to the veterinary facility. When the client or veterinarian wishes to terminate the VCPR, the veterinarian should confirm this in writing to the client.

### **When and how should a veterinarian terminate a VCPR?**

The College recognizes that, in certain situations, a VCPR may need to be terminated, despite attempts to address concerns or problems. In the interests of optimal animal care and treatment, termination of the VCPR may be the most productive option for both parties to address on-going and unresolved issues.

Potential legitimate reasons for terminating relationships are many and can include: a client's persistent non-adherence to proper treatment plans, resulting in potential threats to the welfare of the animal; a difference in philosophy as to the approach taken for diagnosing and treating animals; verbal abuse and/or threatening behaviour of a client towards the practitioner and/or hospital staff; unreasonable demands for unnecessary medications and services, or for illegal or unethical actions (e.g. asking the veterinarian to alter a medical record); and non-payment of fees owed for services rendered.

While the College generally does not expect a veterinarian to continue a relationship that has broken down, the College also expects that practitioners will not terminate a relationship for an unprofessional reason (e.g. discrimination under the Ontario Human Rights Code).

After determining that the VCPR should not continue, termination should commence. The client must be provided with proper notice of the termination and allowed a reasonable opportunity to arrange for care with another practitioner. In order to ensure the best interests of all parties involved, the College offers the following tips:

1. The client should be provided with a written notice, delivered by courier, registered mail or by hand, confirming the end of the relationship. Electronic communication may be used as long as the veterinarian has received confirmation from the client that the client has received and acknowledged the message. The reasons for the termination need not be clearly specified.
2. A reasonable opportunity to secure a new practitioner should be provided to the client. How much time is reasonable will vary with the circumstances (e.g. reasons for the termination, available alternatives, or whether assistance is provided in locating other services), and may be dependent upon the location of the veterinary facility. In rural or remote areas, the time required to obtain a new practitioner would likely be longer than in an urban area. Where the reason for termination is abusive behaviour towards a veterinarian or staff, or where genuine safety concerns exist, the reasonable opportunity might be brief.
3. Practitioners should designate a period of time for which they will provide emergency services only, and specify a later date after which no services will be provided. Both should be clearly stated to the client in the termination letter.
4. The practitioner must also ensure the appropriate transfer of medical records and other relevant information. The termination letter should ensure the client is aware that all relevant information will be promptly forwarded when a new practitioner is secured or alternatively, include a copy of the animal's medical records with the termination letter.

### **Scenario**

*A veterinarian has been dealing with a client who has often exhibited problematic and difficult behavior. The client has been verbally abusive towards the veterinarian and clinic staff and threatened a technician. The veterinarian decides to terminate the VCPR. She sends a letter to the client that day by courier, which indicates that only emergency services will be provided until the end of the week, at which point no further services will be provided.*

## **SAMPLE TERMINATION LETTER**

Date

Dear (Client Name):

This letter will advise you that as of (dd/mm/yyyy), neither I nor the staff at our office will be able to provide further general care to your animal(s). We suggest that you seek an alternative veterinary facility to provide care for your animal(s) from this point forward. We would like to suggest that you refer to the “Find a Practice” section on the College of Veterinarians website to locate other practices in your area. In order to give you time to access alternative veterinary services, we are able to provide emergency services for your animal(s) until (dd/mm/yyyy.) Once you have made alternative arrangements, please have the facility contact us and we will forward all medical records and relevant information immediately. (Alternatively, state “Please find enclosed a copy of your animal’s medical records, which you should provide to whomever you select as your veterinarian.”).

We wish you and your animal(s) all the best in the future.

Sincerely,

(Your name), DVM

## Legislative Authority

*Veterinarians Act*, R.S.O. 1990  
R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 1093: General (*Veterinarians Act*)

## Other References

The following can be found on the College's website at [www.cvo.org](http://www.cvo.org):

*Professional Practice Standard: Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship*  
*Professional Practice Standard: Medical Records*  
*Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Medical Records*  
*Professional Practice Standard: Delegation*  
*Professional Practice Standard: Informed Client Consent*  
*Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Informed Client Consent*  
*Professional Practice Standard: Use of Compounded Products in Veterinary Practice*  
*Guide to the Professional Practice Standard: Use of Compounded Products in Veterinary Practice*  
*Policy Statement: Cardiac Screening Programs*  
*Policy Statement: Conducting Programs for the Implantation of Electronic Identification Devices in Companion Animals*  
*Policy Statement: Congenital Deafness Screening Programs for Companion Animals*  
*Policy Statement: Ophthalmic Screening Program*  
*Position Statement: Temporary Emergency Facilities*  
*Policy Statement: After-Hours Care*

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