



# Guidance on Professionalism for Veterinarians



**CVO**  
College of  
Veterinarians  
of Ontario



This guidance document is not intended to describe specific standards for practice or create legal obligations. It does not override a veterinarian's legal obligations. Veterinarians are encouraged to refer to relevant College Professional Practice Standards outlining professional expectations and obligations, including those set out in legislation.

This is a living document, and while the values and principles of the profession will likely remain the same, the professional duties and professional expectations may change as veterinary practice evolves.



# Guidance on Professionalism for Veterinarians

Being a professional has meaning in society. It indicates that an individual has undertaken training and education to hold specialized knowledge and skills. The public expects that professionals will conduct themselves appropriately by demonstrating certain behaviours, attitudes and skills that are perceived to mean that an individual is competent, ethical and professional.

- By defining professionalism for veterinarians, the College is supporting veterinarians in meeting the public's expectations and earning their trust.
- It also guides veterinarians in the expected conduct among colleagues, co-workers and other veterinary team professionals that ensures the quality and safety of veterinary medicine in Ontario.
- Guided by core values outlined in a Code of Ethics, veterinarians hold themselves and their colleagues to a high standard of ethical conduct. Demonstrating professionalism and ethical conduct in the practice of veterinary medicine contributes to veterinarians earning and maintaining public trust. It contributes to interactions and outcomes that bring satisfaction and fulfillment to a veterinarian's work.
- Veterinary professionalism is demonstrated when a veterinarian's conduct reflects the values of the profession.

## **The Purpose of this Document is to:**

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- *Provide broad guidance to the profession;*
- *Articulate a definition of veterinary professionalism;*
- *Articulate the elements of professionalism as defined by guiding principles and duties; and*
- *Assist veterinarians in upholding the social contract between the public and the profession in the practice of veterinary medicine.*

# Definition of Veterinary Professionalism

Professionalism is a set of behaviours, attitudes and skills that reflects the values of the profession, as expressed in the Code of Ethics, and reinforces the social contract between the profession and the public.

- The veterinarian uses their judgment in any given interaction to respond with behaviours, attitudes and skills that are appropriate to the context and draw on the elements of professionalism.
- While basic guidance for professional behaviours is established in regulations and professional standards, the expectation is that veterinarians will work respectfully and collaboratively with clients and colleagues, putting the interest of the patient above self-interest.
- The elements of professionalism are further defined by a set of guiding principles, professional duties, and professional expectations.

## Guiding Principles and Professional Duties

In approaching their professional work, a veterinarian must consider the social contract between the profession and the public.

- A veterinarian is guided by their responsibilities to animals, clients, themselves and colleagues, and the profession and society. The elements of professionalism are further defined by these guiding principles and professional duties that reflect the values of the profession.





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# Responsibilities to Animals

## Beneficence

- Acts in the patient's best interest
- Recognizes animal health and welfare first
- Interactions with patients demonstrate kindness and dignity
- Recognizes the obligation to report to a provincial animal welfare inspector (Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act, 2019, S.O. 2019, c. 13, s 14) when there are reasonable grounds to believe that an animal is being abused or neglected
- Accepts professional responsibility for a patient, and continues to provide services until they are no longer required or wanted; until another veterinarian has assumed responsibility for the patient; or until the client has been given reasonable notice that the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) has been discontinued

## Non-Maleficence

- Makes a reasonable and conscientious effort to prevent harm to patients and society
- If harm occurs, discloses it to the client and takes appropriate steps to prevent recurrence

## College Resources:

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- [Reporting Animal Abuse or Neglect – Position Statement](#)
- [Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship \(VCPR\) – Guide to the Professional Practice Standard](#)
- [Animal Welfare](#)
- [Pain Management](#)

## Competence

- Responsible for maintaining the knowledge and skills necessary to provide competent, quality care to patients
- Committed to lifelong learning throughout their career
- Recognizes limitations or deficiencies in knowledge and skills
- Ensures their practice matches their level of competence
- Refers cases appropriately to a colleague with the relevant competence
- Recommends or seeks additional opinions or services when appropriate
- Participates in quality improvement activities to improve their practice and maintain knowledge and skills
- Participates in quality improvement initiatives and strategies to deal with errors, adverse events, close calls, and disclosure

## Conflict of Interest

- Recognizes and discloses conflicts of interest that arise and resolves them in the best interest of patients
- “Conflict of interest” means an actual, potential or perceived interest of a licensed member that may undermine the impartiality or appearance of impartiality of that licensed member. For example, the licensed member has a personal or business interest that could influence their judgment in performing their duties

## College Resources:

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- [Continuing Professional Development for Licensed Members](#)
- [Peer Advisory Conversation](#)
- [Medical Records Review and Assessment](#)

# Responsibilities to Clients

## Confidentiality and Privacy

- Respects and maintains the client's privacy and confidentiality
- Safeguards confidential information
- Does not disclose confidential information about the client or animal to anyone other than the client or another veterinarian treating the animal, unless the client gives consent or animal welfare or the public interest may be compromised

## Communication

- Collaborates and works effectively with clients to provide quality care to animals
- Communication with clients demonstrates courtesy, honesty, dignity and respect
- Aids the client's understanding of the information exchanged
- Refrains from behaving in a manner that may reasonably be considered offensive to others or disruptive to the workplace or patient care
- Responds promptly and courteously to clients' complaints
- If conflicts arise, the veterinarian works with the client to resolve the conflict respectfully
- Accepts professional responsibility for a patient, and continues to provide services until they are no longer required or wanted; until another veterinarian has assumed responsibility for the patient; or until the client has been given reasonable notice that the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) has been discontinued

## College Resources:

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- [Medical Records – Professional Practice Standard](#)
- [Medical Records – Guide to the Professional Practice Standard](#)

## College Resources:

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- [Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship \(VCPR\) – Professional Practice Standard](#)
- [Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship \(VCPR\) – Guide to the Professional Practice Standard](#)
- [Learning Modules: Communication](#)



## Autonomy of the Client

- Provides clients with the information they need to make informed decisions about their animal's medical care and answers questions to the best of their ability
- Respects the client's right to accept or decline veterinary care recommendations
- Facilitates a client's reasonable request for a second opinion or referral
- Refers clients to another veterinarian who performs a service that they do not perform or refuse to perform

## Boundaries

- Recognizes the power imbalance inherent in the VCPR and assumes responsibility for maintaining appropriate professional boundaries always
- Respects the personal boundaries of clients and their rights to privacy and confidentiality

## Human Rights

- Demonstrates cultural sensitivity in their communication with clients
- Avoids discrimination based on, but not limited to, age, gender, race, national or ethnic origin, religion, physical or mental disability, sexual orientation or socioeconomic status

## Conflict of Interest

- Avoids situations that are or may be perceived to be a conflict of interest
- Provides independent and impartial professional advice and discloses any conflicts of interest to the client

## College Resources:

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- [Informed Client Consent – Learning Module](#)
- [Informed Client Consent – Professional Practice Standard](#)
- [Informed Client Consent – Guide to the Professional Practice Standard](#)
- [Informed Client Consent – Sample Form](#)
- [Veterinary Euthanasia – Professional Practice Standard](#)



# Responsibilities to Themselves & Colleagues

## Wellness

- Promotes and maintains their health and wellbeing
- Recognizes when they are not well enough to provide competent care to patients
- Seeks help if necessary to ensure their own wellness
- Takes reasonable steps to address adverse physical or mental health or performance that could impair their fitness to practice; or, that results in harm, or a risk of harm, to animal health or welfare, public health or the public interest
- Takes reasonable steps to ensure that animals are not put at risk and that the interests of the public are protected when concerns arise about a colleague's fitness to practice

## College Resources:

- [Peer Advisory Conversation](#)
- [Homewood Health Program](#)

**Identifies and manages stress factors in their professional and personal lives and practices appropriate coping strategies**

# Responsibilities to Themselves & Colleagues

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## Collegiality and Civility

- Interactions with colleagues are collegial and demonstrate courtesy, honesty, dignity and respect
- Collaborates and works effectively with colleagues to ensure the comprehensiveness and continuity of patient care
- Refrains from behaving in a manner that may reasonably be considered offensive to others or disruptive to the workplace or patient care
- Avoids impugning the reputation of colleagues for personal motives

## Boundaries

- Respects the personal boundaries of colleagues and co-workers and their rights to privacy and confidentiality

## Education/Mentorship

- Role models and teaches professional behavior in all facets of the member's chosen area of practice
- Provides to colleagues and accepts from colleagues teaching and mentoring to help ensure that high quality care is provided to the public

### College Resources:

- [Peer Advisory Conversation](#)

# Responsibilities to Profession & Society

## Privilege of Profession-based Regulation

- Recognizes that profession-based regulation is a privilege and that each licensed member has a professional responsibility to merit this privilege by seeking trustworthiness and building confidence in each member individually and the profession as a whole
- Participates in the regulatory process to ensure the continuity of profession-based regulation
- Recognizes the responsibility to ensure quality care through quality improvement and assurance activities as well as responding pro-actively to concerns around practice/behaviour
- Contributes to defining professional practice standards and expectations of the profession and upholds the standards in their own practice

### College Resources:

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- [Peer Advisory Conversation](#)

## Quality Assurance

- Takes a collaborative approach by accepting and supporting meaningful peer reviews as a mechanism for upholding the standards of the profession
- Effectively learns from critical incidents to reduce the occurrence of medical error and adverse outcomes

### College Resources:

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- [Continuing Professional Development for Licensed Members](#)

## Lifelong Learning

- Commits to lifelong learning and continuous improvement throughout their career
- Seeks out new evidence and knowledge and applies it in practice
- Maintains an awareness of relevant practice guidelines and implements them as appropriate

# Responsibilities to Profession & Society

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## Boundaries

- Does not ask for or accept gifts, inducements or referrals that may affect or be perceived to affect their professional judgment

## Public Health

- Recognizes the profession's responsibility to society in matters relating to public health, including zoonotic diseases, food safety, protecting and improving both animal health and human health, and [Antimicrobial stewardship](#)

## Represent the Profession

- Recognizes a responsibility to give generally held opinions of the profession when interpreting scientific knowledge to the public; and discloses when presenting an opinion that is contrary to the generally held opinion of the profession

# Professional Expectations

- While striving for professionalism, veterinarians should be aware of the rules of conduct that exist to guide behavior and what is expected of them. Veterinarians conduct themselves according to the expectations outlined in Ontario Regulation 1093, Part II Professional Misconduct and the College's Professional Practice Standards, which identify both unacceptable conduct and acceptable conduct.



**Recognizes that profession-based regulation is a privilege and that each licensed member has a professional responsibility**



## Acknowledgement

This document was developed with input from multiple resources, including various health professions and organizations, as well as scientific literature. Particularly helpful were The Practice Guide – Medical Professionalism and College Policies, 2007, The College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, and Dr. Elizabeth Mossop's definition of veterinary professionalism.

A full list of resources is available upon request.



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