

# CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT (Veterinary Nurses)



VETERINARY COUNCIL OF IRELAND  
CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT FOR VETERINARY NURSES

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## INTRODUCTION

The Veterinary Council is a statutory body established under the Veterinary Practice Act 2005, the long title of which Act reads as follows: "An Act to establish a body know as Comhairle Tréidlianna na hÉireann or, in the English language, The Veterinary Council of Ireland to regulate and manage the veterinary professions and to provide for its other functions, to provide for establishment of a body know as Bord Altraí Tréidliachta na hÉireann or, in the English language, the Veterinary Nurses Board of Ireland, to dissolve the Veterinary Council established under the Veterinary Practitioners Act 1931, to repeal the Veterinary Practitioners Acts 1931 to 1960 and certain other enactments and to provide for related matters". In 2012 the Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Act 2012 came into force, this Act amends some sections of the 2005 Act.

The principal function of the Council is to regulate and manage the practice of veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing in the State in the public interest. The functions of the Veterinary Council are the protection of the public, in particular by the registration of premises, by the supervision of veterinary education, by the keeping and the publishing of the Register of Veterinary Practitioners and by the taking of disciplinary action when required in cases of professional misconduct.

### Definition of Professional Misconduct

Professional Misconduct in relation to a registered person, means any act, omission or pattern of conduct that –

- (a) is connected with the practice of veterinary medicine or veterinary nursing and represents a serious falling short of the standard that could reasonably be expected of a registered person,
- (b) is infamous or disgraceful in a professional respect (notwithstanding that, if the same or like act, omission or pattern of conduct were committed by a member of another professional it would not be professional misconduct in respect of that profession), or
- (c) involves fraud or dishonesty of a nature or degree which bears on the carrying on of the profession of a registered person.

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**Negligence**

Professional misconduct is different from negligence. Negligence arises when a registered person has failed to exercise the normal level of skill which would be expected of the average registered person, consequent on which damage is suffered. Allegations of negligence are typically matters for adjudication by the civil courts and the Veterinary Council has no power to usurp the Courts' jurisdiction in this respect or to award damages or compensation in respect of negligence claims. It may be the case that in some rare circumstances, negligence and professional misconduct overlap where for example the negligence has been so gross as to amount to a serious falling short and therefore professional misconduct and judgement.

**Code of Professional Conduct**

The Code of Professional Conduct, consists of the rules and principles which govern veterinary nursing in the exercise of their profession. Adherence to the Code of Professional Conduct is frequently more exacting than conformity with the law. This ethical code seeks standards which are, in many instances, higher and more demanding than those required by law.

In order that a proper standard of conduct shall be maintained, the Veterinary Council is empowered under the Act to discipline veterinary nurses under Part 7 of the Veterinary Practice Act 2005.

**Legal obligations**

Every veterinary nurse is bound by the provisions of the Veterinary Practice Act 2005 and the Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Act 2012. The veterinary nurse is also bound by other laws that affect professional performance and practice, such as, safety, health and welfare at work legislation. Professional discretion does not take precedence over legal requirements. Every veterinary nurse, therefore, has an obligation to familiarise himself or herself with legislative and ethical requirements relevant to his or her professional area of operation and to act in compliance.

## **CHAPTER 1 VETERINARY ETHICS**

### **CODE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT**

This Code of Conduct is issued by the Council pursuant to its powers under S13(2) of the Veterinary Practice Act 2005. It applies to persons registered under Part 8 of the Act. The Code of Professional Conduct consists of the rules and principles which govern veterinary nurses in the exercise of their profession. In order that a proper standard of conduct shall be maintained, the Council may under Part 7 of the Act take disciplinary action against a veterinary nurse who contravenes the Code.

### **VETERINARY NURSES AND THE LAW**

Every veterinary nurse is bound by the provisions of the Veterinary Practice Act 2005 and the Veterinary Practice (Amendment) Act 2012. Appendix One of this Code provides a summary of the Council's fitness to practise procedures. The veterinary nurse is also bound by other laws that affect professional performance and practice such as health and safety legislation and employment law. Professional discretion does not take precedence over legal requirements. Every veterinary nurse, therefore, has an obligation to familiarise himself or herself with legislative and ethical requirements relevant to his or her professional area of operation and to act in compliance.

### **VETERINARY NURSES' POSITION IN SOCIETY**

Veterinary nurses occupy a trusted, privileged position in society because of unique knowledge and training. With this privileged position comes certain rights, but also responsibilities.

### **ANIMAL WELFARE THE PRIMARY CONCERN OF THE VETERINARY PROFESSION**

The primary concern of the profession is for the welfare of animals and a veterinary nurse shall at all times act to protect animal health and relieve animal suffering.

### **VETERINARY NURSES' DUTIES TO SOCIETY**

Veterinary nurses have a duty to society to

- promote responsible animal ownership;
- advance veterinary medical knowledge;
- promote public health;

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- ensure responsible use of medicines;
- uphold the integrity of veterinary certification;
- protect the environment;
- conserve livestock resources and promote biosecurity.

**DUTY TO FELLOW VETERINARY PROFESSIONALS**

The veterinary profession is highly esteemed in society. Veterinary nurses have a duty to their professional colleagues to uphold the honour, dignity and integrity of the profession by their words and actions.

**DUTY TO CLIENTS**

When a client entrusts the care of his/her animal(s) to a veterinary practitioner, he/she has a right to confidentiality and to be treated with respect and courtesy. These expectations of the client extend to any veterinary nurse employed by the veterinary practitioner. Where a veterinary nurse is aware of his/her limitations of knowledge, competence or resources, he/she should take all reasonable steps to avoid exceeding these limitations. Veterinary nurses in the course of their work shall maintain high standards of biosecurity.

**DUTY TO KEEP RECORDS**

Veterinary practitioners are expected to keep a written record on each consultation he or she has relating to a veterinary matter, whether by telephone, in a clinic or on a farm or other location. Veterinary nurses employed by a veterinary practitioner should, as far as is practicable, assist the veterinary practitioner in keeping accurate clinical notes and records.

**DUTY TO OWN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Veterinary nurses have a duty to keep abreast of advances in their professional field by regularly participating in Continuing Veterinary Education.

## **CHAPTER 2 VETERINARY NURSES AND ANIMAL WELFARE**

### **DEFINITION OF ANIMAL WELFARE**

For the purpose of this code, animal welfare is defined as: the state of well-being in which an animal is in reasonable harmony with its environment, has adequate fulfilment of physical and behavioural needs and is not subjected to unnecessary pain, fear or suffering. The Five Freedoms in relation to animal welfare are listed at the end of this chapter. The need for society to make use of animals for companionship, work, production, teaching, research, recreation and sport is recognised. However, these uses must not be at the expense of the welfare of the animal.

### **RESPONSIBILITY OF THE VETERINARY PROFESSIONS**

The veterinary professions have a special responsibility for animal welfare. They must provide a standard of care that ensures that the needs of animals are met.

### **WELFARE IMPLICATIONS OF PROCEDURES**

Veterinary nurses must consider the welfare implications of any procedure involving animals and as appropriate, should act or advise to minimise suffering. Benefit to the animal should transcend personal advantage or monetary gain in decisions concerning therapy.

### **CLINICAL PRACTICE**

Veterinary nurses in clinical practice have responsibility for recommending appropriate preventative measures and advice regarding animal husbandry. The prime consideration when giving advice should be the welfare of the animal under care.

### **HANDLING AND MANAGEMENT OF ANIMALS**

Handling of animals must be carried out with the minimal amount of stress and the maximum amount of care. By their own example, veterinary nurses should encourage people to handle animals as gently, quietly and safely as circumstances allow.

### **GUIDANCE TO BE GIVEN RE PROLONGED CARE**

Where in the opinion of the attending veterinary practitioner the treatment of an animal may involve a period of prolonged care in the charge of its owner,

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it is essential that sufficient guidance be provided by the veterinary practitioner to the owner/person in charge of the animal to ensure that the animal's welfare is not compromised. Whilst the responsibility for the communication of this advice rests with the veterinary practitioner, the veterinary nurse has an important role in ensuring that the owner/person in charge understands the advice given.

**ANALGESIA AND ANAESTHESIA FOR SURGERY**

Effective analgesia and anaesthesia shall be utilised on all animals undergoing surgery where required by national legislation, including routine animal husbandry type surgical procedures.

**GUIDELINES FOR SURGERY**

Veterinary nurses should familiarise themselves with sections of the Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Practitioners dealing with unnecessary surgery and surgery to conceal genetic defects.

**EUTHANASIA**

Euthanasia of animals may be necessary where an animal is suffering unmanageable pain in a terminal condition, or where the prognosis is hopeless. At all times the decision for euthanasia should be made by a veterinary practitioner in consultation with the owner. Veterinary nurses have a particular role where there is a strong emotional bond between the animal and its owner, and any discussions with clients should be compassionate. Veterinary nurses must ensure that euthanasia be carried out humanely and where possible out of the sight of the general public.

**CLINICAL GOVERNANCE**

Veterinary practitioners and veterinary nurses must ensure that clinical governance forms part of their professional activities, including monitoring and reviewing clinical outcomes with the aim of improving the quality of the veterinary care they provide.

**ACTIONS TO BE TAKEN IF ANIMAL IS SUFFERING UNREASONABLE OR UNNECESSARY PAIN OR DISTRESS**

A veterinary nurse who becomes aware of an animal suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress must take action to ensure that the matter is effectively dealt with. These actions shall include the following:

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- (i) Carrying out a thorough examination of all the circumstances in the particular case and recording same, and
- (ii) Where an animal is presented that has clearly been in a state of unreasonable or unnecessary suffering and distress for some time, enquiring if that animal has previously been presented to a veterinary practitioner and
- (iii) Assist in obtaining professional advice on the relief of unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress or euthanasia, if appropriate, and
- (iv) If the situation still shows no sign of being remedied and the animal is still suffering unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress, the veterinary nurse must report the case to the relevant authority such as the District Veterinary Office, Local Authority Veterinary Service or Garda Síochána, and
- (v) Should a case become the subject of an investigation by the Garda Síochána, cooperating with this investigation and proffering an opinion as to whether the case constitutes wilful cruelty or neglect.

## Appendix to Chapter 2

### 1.1 Five Freedoms

- 1. Freedom from Hunger and Thirst** - by ready access to fresh water and a diet to maintain full health and vigour.
- 2. Freedom from Discomfort** - by providing an appropriate environment including shelter and a comfortable resting area.
- 3. Freedom from Pain, Injury or Disease** - by prevention or rapid diagnosis and treatment.
- 4. Freedom to Express Normal Behaviour** - by providing sufficient space, proper facilities and company of the animal's own kind.
- 5. Freedom from Fear and Distress** - by ensuring conditions and treatment which avoid mental suffering.

### 1.2 Useful Links

The Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council (FAWAC) has published several useful documents on the welfare of Beef Cattle, Sheep, Dairy Cattle, Horses, Ponies and Donkeys. These documents may be downloaded from the following website:

[www.agriculture.gov.ie/fawac/index.jsp?file=publications.xml](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/fawac/index.jsp?file=publications.xml)

[www.agriculture.gov.ie](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie) – Department of Agriculture and Food

[www.vci.ie](http://www.vci.ie) – Veterinary Council

[www.veterinary-ireland.org](http://www.veterinary-ireland.org) – Veterinary Ireland

A useful reference for veterinary nurses is the ISPCA legal handbook ([www.ispca.ie/content/legal.html](http://www.ispca.ie/content/legal.html)).

### **CHAPTER 3 VETERINARY NURSE AND CLIENTS**

#### **PROFESSIONAL COURTESY TO CLIENTS**

Veterinary nurses should at all times treat the clients of a veterinary practice in a courteous manner.

#### **PROFESSIONAL INDEMNITY INSURANCE**

A registrant who practises veterinary medicine or veterinary nursing must have a policy of indemnity insurance in place that provides appropriate cover.

#### **PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENTIALITY**

A veterinary nurse must consider as confidential to the owner, information concerning an animal under the care of the veterinary practice derived either from the owner or someone acting on the owners behalf, or by examination of the animal except in the following situations:-

- (i) the communication of information to professional colleagues, lay staff properly involved in the animals case, or to students receiving instruction in relation to the animal or in research;
- (ii) where he/she has an obligation under the Law;
- (iii) where in an exceptional case he/she is clearly of the opinion that the public interest or the animal's welfare is so endangered as to outweigh his/her primary obligation to the owner;
- (iv) when required to do so by a Court of Law;
- (v) when it is necessary for the investigation and/or control and/or elimination of zoonotic conditions of public health significance;
- (vi) with the owners consent and if applicable the consent of the referring veterinary practitioner

#### **LAY STAFF/STUDENTS AND PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENTIALITY**

The veterinary nurse concerned must ensure that the lay staff and students are fully aware of the provisions of this part of the Code and abide strictly by them.

#### **POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST IN ANIMAL WELFARE CASES**

Where a veterinary nurse is requested by a member of the Garda Síochána to fully cooperate in investigating a welfare case this assistance should be provided regardless of any conflict of interest. However, the potential for such conflict of interest should be made known.

## **CHAPTER 4 THE VETERINARY NURSE AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC**

### **PREMISES ACCREDITATION SCHEME**

Part 9 of the Veterinary Practice Act 2005 obliges the Council to ensure that all non-exempt premises in the State are provided with a Certificate of Suitability in accordance with the Regulations set out by Council for this Scheme. The Certificate of Suitability must be displayed in the premises in view of the public.

### **HEALTH & SAFETY LEGISLATION AND WASTE DISPOSAL FOR VETERINARY PREMISES**

Health and safety legislation and legislation controlling the disposal of waste places very onerous conditions on registered persons. All veterinary nurses should ensure that they fully understand this legislation and keep up to date with current and evolving legislation. The requirements of veterinary hygiene (e.g. control and disposal of possibly infected material) must also be reflected in the design, construction and maintenance of the veterinary premises.

### **SECURITY OF RECORDS AND MEDICINES**

The security of records, medicines, controlled drugs and products such as anaesthetic agents must be reflected in the design, structure and maintenance of the veterinary premises and in the control of public access to them.

### **CARCASE/CADAVER DISPOSAL IN PRACTICE**

The manner of handling, storage and disposal of a dead animal should give the client no cause for complaint and cause no public offence or health hazard.

### **EMERGENCY ACCESS TO PRACTICE UNIT**

The registered persons and the clients of the practice must have access to the practice unit for emergency treatment when the commercial premises may be closed to the public.

### **INFORMATION ON SIGNS**

The information which may be provided should be limited to the following.

- (a) The name (or names) of the principal(s) of the practice as listed in the register. The sign may provide the names of all registered persons.
- (b) Qualifications and/or specialties as registered in the Specialist Register may also be provided on the sign.
- (c) Telephone number(s), including ones for use in case of emergency when the premises is unoccupied.

### **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON SIGNS**

In addition to the above, signage on a veterinary premises may also contain

- (a) The registered title authorised under the Veterinary Council's Premises Accreditation Scheme (PAS).
- (b) Hours of attendance/consultation times.
- (c) A logo.

An identification sign may be illuminated.

Signage on vehicles must conform to the same principles.

### **CONVENTIONS RE TRADE NAMES IN ARTICLES**

When a veterinary nurse writes articles in which trade names are used they should follow the conventions below:

- a) in scientific journals the generic name should be used. But on the first occasion when the generic name is used, the trade name may appear in brackets or as a footnote;
- b) in general or popular articles aimed at veterinary nurses, the author must make clear in what capacity he or she is writing e.g. a company employee. The trade name may be used but the generic name must appear in a foot note.
- c) in articles intended for the general public the veterinary nurse should not use his or her qualifications to mislead, to present exaggerated claims about the product or, in any way, to depart from a factual presentation. If the product is not the only one in the field, no impression otherwise should be given.

### **RESPONSIBILITIES RE PRESENTING EVIDENCE**

Veterinary nurses have a responsibility to prepare and present their evidence, whether serving as an expert witness or in any other capacity in a thorough and professional manner. The veterinary nurses primary duty is to assist the Court to reach a conclusion based on a fair and proper interpretation of the facts of the case.

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**CHAPTER 5 - THE VETERINARY NURSE  
AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE VETERINARY PROFESSION**

**CO-OPERATION BETWEEN MEMBERS OF THE PROFESSION**

Professional co-operation between veterinary nurses should be as constructive and informative as possible and should be governed by the highest ethical standards. This applies not alone in relations between veterinary nurses engaged in private practice, but also to relations between veterinary nurses and veterinary practitioners in different sections of the profession. The owner of an animal is entitled to consult whomever they wish concerning their animal.

**SPEAKING OR WRITING ABOUT OTHER MEMBERS OF THE PROFESSION**

No veterinary nurse shall speak or write disparagingly of a fellow member of the profession to the public. To do so not only undermines the standing of the colleague in question in the eyes of the public but will reduce the public's confidence in the profession as a whole. (This obligation does not cover evidence given in a court of law, which is absolutely privileged).

**OBLIGATIONS OF VETERINARY NURSES EMPLOYED BY OR ADVISING LAY BODIES**

Veterinary nurses employed in or advising bodies or committees which include non registered persons are obliged to comply with the Code of Professional Conduct regardless of their obligation to these bodies or committees. Veterinary nurses have a responsibility to advise these bodies on all professional matters, including ethics.

**SERVICE, EMPLOYMENT AND PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS**

When a veterinary nurse enters a practice the relationship should always be defined clearly in an agreed, fair and correctly prepared contract and the Council recommends that such agreements be in writing. Dispute resolution may not be possible or may be delayed in the absence of a clear written contract.

**PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT**

Veterinary practitioners and veterinary nurses must provide appropriate professional support for newly qualified veterinary nurses working in the same practice. A newly qualified veterinary nurse is one who is within the first year of graduation/registration. A veterinary practitioner employing a veterinary nurse must ensure that they are legally registered in the State with the Veterinary Council (Ref: Veterinary Practice Act 2005, Section 57). Guidelines for New or Returning Graduates and their employers are provided separately.