



VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS BOARD
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

ACT VETERINARY PRACTITIONERS BOARD'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Dear colleagues

The veterinary profession will no doubt be faced with a variety of challenges, changes and uncertainty in the next few months as a result of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost, the Board's priority is the health and safety of the veterinary community. We hope this information regarding COVID-19 will assist you when making the tough decisions ahead and enable you to maintain personal safety whilst continuing to provide the best care you can to your patients at this challenging time.

Your personal wellbeing and that of your colleagues, staff and clients must take priority.

It is important that you and the public are aware of and adhere to current advice and guidance from the Federal and ACT Government, as follows:

- [ACT Government's dedicated COVID-19 website](#)
- [Australian Government Department of Health website](#)

The Australian Veterinary Association is providing regular updates on their [website](#) with specific veterinary information and resources. Most of the information has been made available to both members and non-members and we encourage you to read and provide this important information to all of your staff members.

1. Are veterinary services regarded as an essential service?

Yes.

The Board has received advice from the ACT Government that in this jurisdiction veterinary services are considered essential.

Further, on the 27 March 2020, the Federal Minister for Agriculture, the Hon David Littleproud MP, issued a statement that veterinary services including livestock, companion animal and wildlife are considered to be essential.

While continuing to provide essential veterinary services to the community, our advice is that veterinarians should also consider what aspects of their work can be postponed to help minimise risk and spread of the disease as far as possible.

Examples of essential work could be:

- Production animal services need to continue to ensure that food production is maintained and is safe and humane;
- All veterinary emergency services;
- Companion animal services that cannot be postponed or cancelled without impacting the animal's health or welfare.

Essentially any medical or surgical treatment of an unwell companion animal needs to proceed, to ensure the animal is not suffering. This would range from true life-threatening emergencies such as GDV or medical emergencies, through to more minor treatments of injuries or infections for example – essentially anything that is impacting the animal's health or welfare.

Elective procedures may have to be postponed, but not if animal health or welfare will be compromised. We would expect that veterinarians use their clinical judgement and determine procedures based on a risk-based assessment.

In summary, and as a guide, consider whether failure to perform the service or procedure could result in:

- a risk to the animal's health, or
- an impact on the animal's welfare, or
- an impact on food security and safety.

If any of the above apply, then the procedure can be justified.

Even if non-essential services have to be postponed or cancelled, we see nothing stopping veterinarians offering telemedicine as outlined below.

2. Using telemedicine to deliver veterinary services during the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency

Veterinary telemedicine can be used by veterinarians in the ACT and may be a helpful tool to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19. The Board has developed a telemedicine policy that is attached to this email.

3. What if our practice has to close or reduce services?

We understand that animal health and welfare will always be a vet's primary concern. If COVID-19 becomes widespread, it is possible that some practices may need to close or reduce services because staff members test positive for the virus, become unwell and/or need to self-isolate or quarantine.

We encourage the profession to work together both within a workplace and within the ACT to co-ordinate the best care possible for our animals and to use clinical and professional judgement when assessing risk and making decisions. Building relationships between veterinary practices can only result in the best possible care and we encourage all veterinary hospitals to show professionalism and come together as required.

If your practice has to close or reduce services, the practice should:

- Notify their clients as soon as possible. Give them as much information as possible about how long this will be in effect for and, if possible, direct them to other places they can find help. That could be a neighbouring practice (ideally talk to them first) or our online [register of practices](#).
- Make sure the phones are diverted and the answering service is updated.
- Consider putting a notice on the practice's website.
- If the practice operates its own emergency afterhours service, try to find alternative cover for this. If an afterhours centre is used, double-check that this is still able to operate.

Where services have to be reduced, the focus should be on triage and prioritising urgent cases. Veterinary telemedicine may also be helpful.

4. What if a client is self-isolating or has COVID-19?

Consider ways the animal could be examined while minimising risk. This could be someone other than the owner bringing the animal or admitting the animal as an inpatient with minimal direct contact with the client.

There is no current evidence that animals can spread COVID-19.

A person with COVID-19 may sneeze or shed the virus onto the fur of animals which could spread the virus to other people and good hygiene practices should be used.

In appropriate cases, veterinary telemedicine can be used, particularly for initial triage. If necessary, medicines could be authorised using veterinary telemedicine where it isn't safe to see the animal in person (see Veterinary Telemedicine Policy).

Please refer to the Australian Veterinary Association's website for further information relating to [pets of COVID-19 positive/at-risk humans](#).

5. General guidance on acting in situations where you may need to depart from best practice

It is possible that this pandemic may place you in situations where you find yourself compromising your usual standards and leave you questioning what your legal obligations are.

If the COVID-19 infection becomes more widespread, looking after yourself and your staff may mean you need to depart from best practice. We recognise this and will take the broader situation into account if any concerns are raised with us.

Think about:

1. Is this an emergency (is there a need for immediate or early veterinary treatment to save life or relieve unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress)?
2. Can the animal be referred to someone better able to deal with the situation?
3. Discussing the situation with the client and getting their views and informed consent.

4. What are the risks and are there ways to reduce them (e.g. regular and frequent follow up)?
5. Could your actions be justified to your peers?

To this end, we would advise you to include a detailed note of any decisions you make regarding changes made as a result of this outbreak within your clinical records.

6. CPD Requirements

We will not be strictly enforcing CPD points requirements so there is no need to worry about cancellations affecting your ability to get the minimum points needed.

It is still a good idea to keep learning, where possible, even if only to take your mind off COVID-19 for a bit.

Webinars, online discussions and video-conferences are all good, physically distant, ways to keep learning and get input from your peers.

This position will be reviewed in six (6) months time.

7. Support

The spread of COVID-19 and the publicity around it may be a cause of serious concern for some veterinary practitioners. If you would like professional support with this (or any other issue), free and confidential counselling is available to all veterinarians through the [Doctors' Health Advisory Service](#) on 02 9437 6552. Other resources available include (but not limited to):

- Beyond Blue – 1300 224 636
- Lifeline – 13 11 14
- AVA counselling (only open to AVA members) – 1300 687 327

8. Other

The Board may need to evolve its guidance as circumstances change and as official entities provide further information. You will be kept updated via email.

The Board sincerely wish you and your loved ones, safety and strength during this uncertain time.

The ACT Veterinary Practitioners Board management and staff have moved to working from home. All contacts remain the same.