

DRAFT VETERINARY SERVICE STANDARDS FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

These FAQs have been developed mainly to address the new or clarified aspects of the draft Standards. A non-exclusive list of references to relevant Draft Standards are included for each question.

Why are Veterinary Service Standards (VSS) necessary?

VSS support, guide and oblige veterinarians to demonstrate a level of professionalism in their daily practice. This justifies the public's confidence in veterinarians with respect to the health and welfare of the animals in their care and/or subject to their advice or related actions.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Background and purpose of Veterinary Service Standards

Why is 'professionalism' so important?

The veterinary profession encompasses a wide range of roles from clinical practice and scientific research to government policy development and response. Despite this diversity the single underpinning principle that enables veterinarians to be trusted by the public and discharge their various responsibilities is their professionalism, expressed in the services they provide and the way they provide them as veterinarians.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Background and purpose of Veterinary Service Standards

Standard 1 and associated guidance

Does the wellbeing of an animal trump the safety of an attending veterinarian or their staff?

The short answer to this is NO! The safety of the veterinarian and other people in the vicinity of the case needs to be considered before, during and after attendance to an animal and addressed appropriately. The welfare interests of an animal are also put at risk if the veterinarian is injured or otherwise harmed and unable to provide the level of care necessary. Safety includes mental as well as physical aspects. After exhausting reasonable and practically available options for a safe service in the circumstances, the veterinarian is not and must not be expected to persist in an unsafe manner.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 2 and associated guidance

Who is responsible for the outcomes of a case whether requested professional advice provided to a veterinarian is followed or not?

The veterinarian requesting the advice is responsible for the case and its outcomes unless care of the case has been transferred to a colleague.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 1.7 and associated guidance

After discussion of relevant diagnostic and treatment options based on information available to the veterinarian from a physical examination and history, can a client opt just for symptomatic treatment for their animal (such as pain relief)?

Yes, IF the veterinarian is confident adequate symptomatic treatment can be prescribed to relieve pain or suffering without specific testing. Depending on the case however, some testing may be required to ensure the treatment is not contraindicated for the presumptive diagnosis.

The veterinarian is not necessarily privy to the owner's circumstances or other motives and provides advice according to the information available, including the likely effect too little information may have on the animal's future health. This is an example of why clear, non-judgemental communication is very important when discussing options for an animal.

During treatment option discussions, the owner should be sufficiently comfortable to ask the veterinarian whether a recommended intervention or diagnostic procedure would result in any different actions/options being recommended. If there are none or it is unlikely to change the owner's preferred option then an alternative treatment regime needs to be considered (or the case referred to another veterinarian) as long as it does not cause unacceptable welfare outcomes.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 1 and 4 and associated guidance

Does a veterinary practice have to provide out-of-hours services?

Veterinary practices do not have to provide out-of-hours services however the normal hours of business must be communicated to clients and the public.

Veterinarians must ensure continuing care is provided for cases requiring it. The arrangement for that care must have been consented to by the client prior to the initial service being provided.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 2 and 12 and associated guidance

What is 'continuing care'?

Recent surgical or medical issues serviced by that practice that can be reasonably anticipated to require a more immediate response than that delivered within normal hours are cases under continuing care. Animals are under continuing care when the condition requires active veterinary supervision either in hospital or at home, with planned communications with the client and scheduled revisits over the short term as necessary until the condition is no longer anticipated to require rapid intervention. Continuing care may be provided by the veterinarian's practice, a separate dedicated out-of-hours service or another practice with which there is a written arrangement.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 2 and 12 and associated guidance

When is an animal not under 'continuing care'?

A case is not under continuing care where the veterinarian discharging the patient has assessed that the animal's owners can manage the animal's ongoing condition and the veterinarian does not reasonably anticipate representation out-of-hours if instructions are followed.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 2 and 12 and associated guidance

Do veterinarians have to provide services to anyone?

Veterinarians do not have to provide services to anyone – including existing or previous clients. Veterinarians may also choose not to provide services for a particular animal unless it is currently under active care of the veterinarian or has been presented with unreasonable and unjustifiable pain or suffering and first aid and pain relief can be provided safely.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 2 and associated guidance

Can a veterinarian refuse to continue to provide services to a client or for a particular animal?

Yes. Where a veterinary practitioner-owner-animal (VOA) relationship exists, the veterinary practitioner may terminate that relationship at any time, with due consideration of the immediate wellbeing of the animal in question. To facilitate the ongoing wellbeing of the animal in question any alternative options for veterinary services should be communicated at the time. Terminating a VOA may be necessary on safety grounds and actioned immediately. While written notice of VOA termination is expected under most circumstances, the Board understands that this may not be possible under all.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 3 and 4 associated guidance

An injured animal in a cardboard box is found at the front door of a clinic; no owner/carer is in sight or can be identified to the case. Is the veterinarian on duty obliged to examine and treat it?

Yes, but only to the extent of providing first aid and relief of unreasonable and unjustifiable pain or suffering (with due regard for WHS). Other actions may be subject to animal control, biosecurity or wildlife legislation if applicable, and practice policies and procedures.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 1 and 2 and associated guidance

Is consideration of pain management necessary for all cases where pain is evident or can be reasonably assumed or predicted?

Yes. For those species where credible pain management guidance exists that guidance should be followed. For species where pain management has not been well established the veterinarian should apply first principles in their considerations, including making reasonable extrapolations from relevant species they are more familiar with. Using pain as a means of limiting excessive mobility during recovery or rehabilitation is not acceptable.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 1 and 2 and associated guidance

How much employer support for out-of-hours duty is reasonable for new graduates?

A neat gradient cannot be applied to the level of support a colleague may require per unit of time after graduation or recruitment. Each employee is different as is each employer and practice context, thus emphasising the need for on-going conversations between senior, junior and new associates about expectations. No veterinarian should practice outside their professional competence nor be required to do so without adequate support. To do so or so require is considered unprofessional conduct.

A prudent employer will ensure there is more support available than a new graduate actually asks for given the power imbalance between new graduates and employers. Industry 'rules of thumb' indicate availability for out-of-hours telephone advice and physical backup for the first 2-6 months (at least) is a reasonable expectation; 6-12 months in rural areas.

The need for support should diminish and self-management improve with experience. This is accelerated by the level of commitment the new employee demonstrates to practice policies and procedures, and CPD, AND the support provided by the practice and other colleagues.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 8 and associated guidance

Do veterinarians servicing remote farming properties have to visit those properties on a regular basis to maintain a prescribing relationship with the property manager?

Veterinarians servicing flocks, herds and other animals on remote properties have the same obligations to be sufficiently familiar with the animals they are dealing with there as with animals presented to urban veterinary clinics or visited on the urban fringes. Annual physical visits are required as a minimum to maintain the necessary level of familiarity with the enterprise. Visits should be augmented with regular updates via other means including discussion of health monitoring reports. Timing of visits should coincide with management operations that inform the veterinarian about the current and likely ongoing management of animal health and welfare on the property.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 3 and 14 and associated guidance

A veterinarian suspects a notifiable disease is present on a very important client's stud on the eve of their annual on-site sale. What must the veterinarian do?

This is a type of scenario all veterinarians dread but unfortunately can be applied to any context where there are animals. The veterinarian must notify the biosecurity authorities as soon as practicable and put in place measures (such as isolation of affected animals and restricting property access) to assist in managing the biosecurity risk until further instructions are received from the authorities. Veterinarians have a particular duty of care with respect to biosecurity aligned with their training and professional status. They need to be familiar with and apply that general biosecurity duty in their professional practice even if it may be at odds with a client's or employer's wishes.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 1, 4, 10, 16 and 18 and associated guidance

To expedite a sale, a veterinarian is asked to sign a health certificate that requires clinical examination for an animal the veterinarian has not seen. Can the veterinarian sign the certificate as asked?

The veterinarian must not sign the certificate unless they have personally conducted the examinations within the timeframes as required by the conditions of that certificate. Any conflicts of interest must also be managed.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 1, 3, 4, 10 and 17 and associated guidance

Why doesn't Tasmania have a simple scoring system for recording continuing professional development (CPD) compliance as other Australian jurisdictions do?

Like other Australian and New Zealand jurisdictions, CPD in Tasmania is considered a central requirement for veterinary practice no matter what form that practice takes. CPD activities need to be relevant, contemporary and appropriate for a veterinarian's practice, and undertaken in an effective manner. It is this latter aspect that the draft CPD standard seeks to address, and which scores alone do not.

The draft CPD standard requires some detail to be recorded as well as retaining verification such as receipts and participation certificates. It is increasingly evident that documenting intention and reflection in terms of CPD planning, execution and review, is more effective in improving professional practice than attendance alone. It is also considered that making the CPD record summary an auditable document supports greater public confidence in the profession in Tasmania than an annual score sheet can do. Audits would be scheduled on a 3 yearly cycle and aimed at educative rather than punitive outcomes.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 9 and associated guidance

Can non-technical topics be included in recognised CPD (e.g. mental health first aid)?

Yes, and is encouraged. Any topic that can be related to your learning needs as set out in your CPD plan and assists you to carry out your work as a veterinarian is relevant.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standard 9 and associated guidance

Can an interstate veterinarian provide consultations via telemedicine?

A veterinarian residing interstate but registered in Tasmania may provide telemedicine consultations for clients if there is a pre-existing veterinarian-owner-animal (VOA) relationship. A valid VOA relationship requires that a physical examination of the animal has been undertaken by the veterinarian within the past 12 months and the animal is currently under the veterinarian's care so there is sufficient history for the veterinarian to provide an acceptable level of service. Not all clinical cases can be adequately addressed via telemedicine and technological issues may also reduce its value. The veterinarian must use their professional judgement to decide if and how telemedicine may be used and advise the client accordingly.

A veterinarian registered in another Australian jurisdiction (thus registerable but not actually registered in Tasmania) may provide emergency triage advice and instructions to owners without requiring a physical examination of the animal and irrespective of whether a VOA relationship has been established.

Draft VSS Section reference:

Standards 3 and 13 and associated guidance