



Are Veterinary Nurses Paraprofessionals?



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Whenever I hear the term “paraprofessional” used to describe our profession I have a gut reaction to say: “We’re professionals, thank you.” It is critical for us as veterinary nurses/technicians to advocate for ourselves in order to establish our roles and capabilities. But is this paraprofessional versus professional debate simply a squabble over semantics? And, can we actually make a strong case?

The term “paraprofessional” has many definitions, including “a person to whom a particular aspect of a professional task is delegated but who is not licensed to practice as a fully qualified professional.”¹ This type of definition has been used as justification for many to classify veterinary nurses as paraprofessionals. On the other hand, a robust legal definition states that a professional is “a person who is a member of a professional body due to the education qualification and follows the prescribed moral and professional code of conduct. A person who has mastered a high level of expertise in a subject, notion, or field.”²

That’s more like it. We are clearly professionals. Or are we? The answer depends on whether we are being used to our full potential.

Education and Licensure

In the United States today, there are 41 states that have established licensure whether in the form of a license, registration, or certification, while 9 states do not have state licensure and rely on a certification process by a private organization. There are AVMA-accredited programs that offer associate and bachelor’s degrees in veterinary technology or veterinary nursing that lead to a national examination process to qualify for the credential. There are alternate routes in several states serving as ways for those without a formal educational degree to become credentialed. There is a mix of formally and informally educated individuals in the field, all of whom are a part of our professional population and have worked to build the profession we know today. We are educated professionals.

Moral and Professional Code of Conduct

The National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) Veterinary Technician Oath states: “I solemnly dedicate myself to aiding animals and society by providing excellent care and services for animals, by alleviating animal suffering, and by promoting public health. I accept my obligations to practice my profession conscientiously and with sensitivity, adhering to the profession’s Code of Ethics, and furthering my knowledge and competence through a commitment to lifelong learning.” This oath is pervasive and adopted by individuals, educational institutions, and professional bodies. The Model Veterinary Practice Act specifies certain aspects of ethical conduct and associated

disciplinary actions. Membership bodies such as NAVTA and some state veterinary technician associations employ codes of conduct for their members to be upstanding professionals. We have moral and ethical standards.

Mastery of Subject, Notion, or Field

When a patient arrives, are we the ones that show them into the room, take their weight and temperature, and count the heart and respiratory rates to ready them to see the doctor? Or are we obtaining a history, evaluating the cardiovascular, respiratory, and other body systems to formulate a problem list for the doctor?

When a patient is undergoing a surgical procedure under anesthesia, are we the ones that are recording the heart rate, respiratory rate, oxygen saturation, blood pressure, and temperature, and alerting the doctor when it falls outside normal parameters? Or are we the ones monitoring the anesthetic depth and perfusion parameters, balancing inhalant and injectable anesthetics with adjustments to fluid therapy, vasopressor drips, and mechanical ventilation to optimize cardiovascular function and oxygen delivery while ensuring a completely pain-free procedure?

We obviously do all of these things, but in each case, if we stop at doing the former statements, we are perhaps paraprofessionals. If we are fulfilling the latter statements, then we should be considered professionals. It all depends on how we utilize our knowledge, education, and potentials. When we are simply completing tasks that do not require the expertise credentialed veterinary technicians bring, we have unused potential, aren't challenged, and don't feel trusted, and it all turns into a "job." When we are utilized to the fullest potential, we then have autonomy; this is when leadership emerges and we become a professional. The truth is that members of our profession fall along a spectrum of education, licensing, expertise, and mastery depending on the person, practice setting, and environment. Guidelines such as graduating from an AVMA-accredited veterinary nursing/ technician program and credentialing are trying to streamline this and make us more consistent across the board in terms of skills and training. However, people who still see us where the profession used to be likely consider us paraprofessionals.

Words matter. Our profession has evolved to the point that we utilize our critical thinking and clinical judgment abilities along with our honed nursing care skills to provide treatments and make recommendations that help our patients in the best way possible. We are professionals. Use these words intentionally, and challenge those who call us paraprofessionals. **TVN**

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