



WORKPLACE TABOOS

Providing Veterinary Medical Advice to Friends and Family

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How many times have you been approached in the last year by a friend or family member asking you to look at the rash on their dog, the lump on their cat, or the wound on their horse? Have you been stopped at the grocery store by those you know (and even those you do not know!) with veterinary-related questions? Browsing through various social media platforms, there is an overabundance of stories and situations where veterinary nurses are solicited for veterinary medical advice.



Veterinary nurses possess an incredible amount of knowledge and expertise, yet we must develop appropriate, professional boundaries. How can we navigate these situations, and what are best practices to establish these boundaries while maintaining our roles and commitment to animal health?

LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The AVMA considers veterinary nurses an integral part of the veterinary team, working with the veterinarian to provide the best care to their patients.¹ Although each state's veterinary practice act may delineate specific tasks and responsibilities of veterinary nurses and other team members, it's the veterinarian's role to prescribe medications, perform surgery, or diagnose patients.¹ For example, Virginia's veterinary practice act exclusively states that, "No person licensed as a veterinary technician may perform surgery, diagnose, or prescribe medication for any animal."² According to the NAVTA code of ethics, veterinary nurses/technicians must adhere to the code of practice for their locality/ state, and work in partnership with their veterinary team and profession.³

These legalities and ethics are essential to adhere to when making the decision to respond to advice requests from loved ones. Veterinary nurses are trusted with providing care for animals. We want the public to appreciate our expertise and knowledge and recognize our profession. However, veterinary nurses also need to adhere to the laws and regulations in order to avoid situations such as inadvertently diagnosing patients. It is also important to bear in mind that a veterinarian-client-patient relationship needs to be established to offer advice. This means that the patient needs to be examined with recorded documentation by the veterinarian. Veterinary nurses and staff potentially run the risk of working outside of their scope of practice, leading to the possibility of acting as a veterinarian when not licensed as one.⁴

Providing the wrong information and guidance may be detrimental to the care of the patient. Incorrect advice could cause the patient to receive delayed treatment, interrupt or alter current treatment protocols, and exacerbate the pet's condition.⁴ Pet owners may accidentally omit important medical history of their pets, repeat misinformation they read online, or miss other comorbidities of their pets. While the well-intentioned veterinary nurse does not want to create



Empower friends and family to journal their findings, questions, and concerns and share the information with their veterinarian.

more problems for the pet and family, providing advice in the absence of a full physical exam, diagnostics, and treatment by a licensed veterinarian does not provide the best possible care for the patient.

ADVICE VERSUS EDUCATION

Advice is defined as an opinion or recommendation offered as a guide to action or conduct. *Education* is defined as the act or process of imparting or acquiring general knowledge, developing the powers of reasoning and judgment, etc. In human medicine, websites such as that of the American Heart Association have a medical advice disclaimer stating that staff are not able to provide medical advice but that the website contains general information to educate the public about heart health.⁵ Providing medical education supports the sharing of knowledge while maintaining distance from medical advice.

SETTING BOUNDARIES

In human medicine, doctors and nurses are also approached by friends and family for medical advice. According to Tammy Dean, RN, BSN, MSN, nurses are not able to provide medical advice as it can be outside of their scope of practice and should instead refer their friends and family to their healthcare providers. To avoid uncomfortable situations and risk of liability, doctors will refer their friends and family to seek advice from their own doctors.⁶

HOW IT PLAYS OUT ONLINE

While that all sounds good in theory, how does it play out in the real world? Situations posted on social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit show a variety of responses from veterinary medical providers regarding friend and family medical advice requests. Some ignored the requests altogether while others chose



to offer general information. Most stated that they promptly refer inquiries to seek veterinary care. Several responses point out that friends and family are not satisfied with a referral, leading to frustration and even anger. Costs, lack of access to care, and mistrust appeared to be recurring themes as to why the requests were initiated.

BEST PRACTICES

So, what should you do? Veterinary nurses should adhere to laws and regulations, maintaining boundaries while attempting to provide the best care for their friends' and families' pets. It is important to clarify the role of the veterinary nurse to loved ones, collaborating as part of a team in the interest of pet health. This means the veterinarian needs to be involved to provide complete care. It is acceptable to say, "No, sorry, I am unable to provide advice. Please seek care directly from a veterinary clinic."

Veterinary nurses can focus on education versus advice. General information about parasite control or allergies

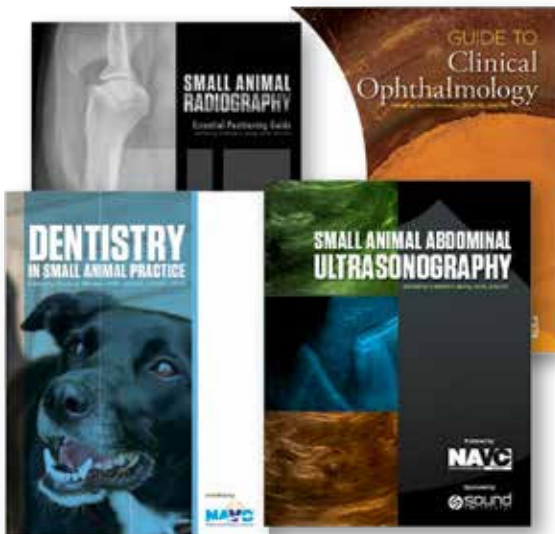
can help educate so informed decisions can be made to pursue care. Nicholas Raimondi, CVT, veterinary technician instructor at New England Institute of Technology, says that veterinary nurses can provide education to the client that they may not be aware of, such as seeking specialty care or providing clarification after talking with their veterinarian. Empower friends and family to journal their findings, questions, and concerns and share the information with their veterinarian. This can help improve dialogue with the veterinary care team. Finally, show support for your friend's or family member's inquiry, acknowledging their concerns and offering a referral for veterinary care or any other veterinary resources in the area. **TVN**

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Dr. Melvin works as a full-time high school biomedical science instructor and part-time veterinary nurse in northern Virginia. She earned her bachelor of science degree in biology from Worcester State University, master of public health from the University of New England, and doctorate in education for health professions from A.T. Still University. She is an LVT in Virginia and a CVT in Massachusetts. Dr. Melvin's professional interests include One Health, health literacy, and health education. She previously started and directed a high school veterinary assistant program in Massachusetts.

**Perspectives from Veterinary Nurses on
Providing Medical Advice to Friends and Family**



Ashley Byrne, LVT, CVT

“It is important to remember that while it is great to have an enhanced picture of the patient’s home

life with people we know, we almost always carry a bias as we consider providing medical advice. That bias can affect our ability to issue appropriate guidance.”



Amanda Eick Schwarzwald, RVT, KPA CTP, VTS (Behavior), CVPM

“Asteya, or nonstealing, is a principle we talk

about in yoga. As a registered yoga teacher and veterinary nurse, this topic is a great application! If I provide advice, am I stealing the opportunity for the pet to receive proper care or the person to receive complete information on their pet’s condition? Conversely, what is the person taking from me? Time, energy, information?”



Julie Nettifee, RVT, MS, VTS (Neurology)

“With family and friends, I have had to learn to set boundaries, while at the same time support

where I can, ensure that they are reaching out to their own veterinary medical team for specific guidelines, and share with them resources so that they can advance their own understanding. If I am not careful in the above, the oath of ‘above all, do no harm’ can easily be broken.”

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