

Chapter 1 Introduction to the Veterinary (or Assistant) Profession

Welcome to veterinary medicine! Congratulations on choosing one of the most rewarding and enriching professions! Veterinary medicine is a profession that involves medicine, compassion, technical skills, and teamwork. It provides care for species that cannot speak for themselves. As in human medicine, the veterinary health-care team is composed of many members, each with an important role in the proper care of patients and functioning of a veterinary hospital.

The goal of the veterinary practice should be excellent patient care and exceptional customer service. This textbook will look at the veterinary assistant's role in making this goal a reality. Veterinary practices should also provide team members with a friendly, well-organized, and safe workplace. Every veterinary health-care team member is responsible for the success of the practice.

The veterinary health-care team works together in the best interest of the patient. All team members, regardless of their role in the veterinary hospital, have the responsibility to ensure the safety and comfort of all patients. Each member of the health-care team has specific roles and responsibilities, and often times these responsibilities are shared. Whatever the hierarchy in the practice, all members must provide the best care to all patients at all times. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) likewise recognizes the value of the various health-care team members: "The veterinary profession is enhanced through efficient utilization of each member of the veterinary healthcare team by appropriate delegation of tasks and responsibilities to support staff."

The various members of the health-care team include the following.

- Veterinary assistant
- Veterinarian

- Veterinary technician
- Veterinary technologist
- Veterinary technician specialist
- Receptionist
- Office managers
- Groomers
- Kennel assistants

Veterinary assistants may be approved through the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA)-approved veterinary assistant program or trained on the job (www.navta.net/assistants). The term *veterinary assistant* is used typically for a person who assists in the care of animals but is not a credentialed veterinary technician, laboratory animal technician, or veterinarian.

The roles and responsibilities of veterinary assistants will be covered in detail in the forthcoming chapters. The duties of the veterinary assistant may include restraining and exercising patients, cleaning hospital and boarding premises, setting up equipment and supplies, cleaning and maintaining practice and laboratory facilities, and feeding patients. They may also be responsible for other clinical support tasks assigned by the credentialed veterinary technician and/or veterinarian. Most veterinary assistants are trained on the job by a supervising veterinary technician or veterinarian, but some assistants complete 6–12 months of training in a formal course of study.

The veterinarian is a doctor of veterinary medicine. Veterinarians have graduated from a 4-year AVMA-accredited postgraduate doctoral program culminating in a doctor of veterinary medicine (DVM) or veterinary medical doctor (VMD)

degree. Veterinarians must also pass the licensing board in the state or province in which they wish to practice. Veterinarians have many responsibilities in the hospital, and they are licensed to perform surgery, diagnose diseases and conditions, give a prognosis relating to the diagnosis, and prescribe medication. These skills are the veterinarians' alone – no other health-care team member can do these tasks.

The veterinary technician is a graduate of a program in veterinary technology accredited by the AVMA Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities (CVTEA). The technician typically has received an associate's degree and national credentialing through the Veterinary Technician National Examination (VTNE). Some states require a national as well as a state credential, verified by the state board of veterinary medicine. Only graduates of an AVMA-accredited program are allowed to take the national board exam. The duties of a veterinary technician are many and often include, but are not limited to, nursing care, anesthesia, surgery, dental, laboratory, radiography, etc.

A veterinary technologist is a graduate of a 4-year, AVMA CVTEA-accredited program who holds a bachelor's degree from a veterinary technician school. Alternatively, a veterinary technologist may be a credentialed veterinary technician who holds a bachelor of science degree in another program with studies in supervision, leadership, management, or a scientific area. The technologist's responsibilities are similar to but more in depth than those of veterinary technicians. Veterinary technologists may also pursue careers in hospital management, education, or research.

Veterinary technician specialists (VTS) are veterinary technicians who have pursued further education, experience, and training in one of 16 current areas of specialization recognized by the NAVTA. Credentialed technicians who choose to specialize must accumulate a specific number of hours within a particular specialty during a set number of years. VTS candidates are also expected to have a strong knowledge and skill set pertaining to their specific area of medicine and nursing as well as a minimum number of continuing education hours specific to their specialty. Their advanced education and training culminates in taking a board examination specific to their specialty showing their advanced knowledge and skills.

The following are the 16 veterinary technician specialty academies currently recognized by the NAVTA.

1. Academy of Veterinary Emergency & Critical Care Technicians and Nurses (AVECCTN)
2. Academy of Veterinary Technicians in Anesthesia and Analgesia (AVTAA)
3. Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians (AVDT)
4. Academy of Internal Medicine for Veterinary Technicians (AIMVT)
5. Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians (AVBT)
6. Academy of Veterinary Zoological Medicine Technicians (AVZMT)
7. Academy of Equine Veterinary Nursing Technicians (AEVNT)
8. Academy of Veterinary Surgical Technicians (AVST)
9. Academy of Veterinary Technicians in Clinical Practice (AVTCP)
10. Academy of Veterinary Nutrition Technicians (AVNT)
11. Academy of Veterinary Clinical Pathology Technicians (AVCPT)
12. Academy of Laboratory Animal Veterinary Technicians and Nurses (ALAVTN)
13. Academy of Dermatology Veterinary Technicians (ADVDT)
14. Academy of Physical Rehabilitation Veterinary Technicians (APRVT)
15. Academy of Veterinary Ophthalmic Technicians (AVOT)
16. The Academy of Veterinary Technicians in Diagnostic Imaging (AVTDI)

For more information on veterinary technician specialties, please visit www.navta.net/page/specialties.

Like all other members of the health-care team, receptionists play a significant role in the success of a practice. Receptionists benefit the practice as the face and voice of the hospital. They greet clients, detail and clarify invoices, and receive money. They are professionals with great people skills. Receptionists answer the hospital phone and schedule appointments. They are responsible for acknowledging clients when they walk in and out of the practice. Because they typically make the first impression on clients, receptionists affect the clients' perception of the hospital and are thus critical to the success of the hospital.

Office managers are responsible for the management of the front office staff. Their duties include training receptionists on proper and excellent customer service and communication skills. Office managers often make important decisions on behalf of the practice and supervise the running of the practice. They are typically responsible for the banking needs of the practice and resolution of performance issues among the team members.

Groomers have experience and education in performing technical skills relating to the fur and dermis of the patient. Many breeds of animals require specific grooming techniques, and advanced training is necessary to acquire such skills. Training and good communication skills are important to meeting the needs of the patient and the client. Groomers must also take precautions to prevent injury to animals and to themselves. A number of courses and on-the-job training programs are available for groomers. Many groomers belong to the National Dog Groomers Association (NDGA). This association works in conjunction with groomers throughout the country to promote professionalism. In some states, licensing or certification is required. The NDGA educates all areas of the profession and the public with regard to the pet grooming profession.

The NDGA's goals are to:

- unite groomers through membership
- promote communication with colleagues
- set recognized grooming standards
- offer those seeking a higher level of professional recognition the opportunity to have their grooming skills certified.

Kennel assistants are responsible for the cleanliness of the patient and monitoring patient status and immediately alerting the team to any changes. The majority of kennel assistants receive on-the-job training where they learn the workings of a veterinary hospital as well as procedures and protocols crucial to the patients' health and safety. Kennel assistants are taught to interpret correct nutritional instructions, feed the diet prescribed in the right amount, and remove food from *preoperative* patients. They are responsible for reporting any and all behavior or condition changes to the immediate patient caregiver.

Ethics

Ethics is defined as the moral principles that govern an individual's behavior or the conducting of an activity. In the veterinary profession, the way we handle pet owners, patients, and their care is guided by ethics. Ethics provides a map which lays out the rules of best practices and standards in protocols, procedures, and practices. Ethics is the discipline of dealing with what is right and wrong or associated with moral duty and obligation. It is also the principles of conduct overseeing an individual or a profession. Ethics provides a map for people to do "the right thing" within our profession.

According to Dr Albert Schweitzer, "Ethics is the name that we give to our concern for good behavior. We feel an obligation to consider not only our own personal well-being, but also that of others and of human society as a whole."

Often the line between ethical violations and legal violations is thin. A breach of descriptive or official ethical values would not be enforced by a court of law but might be cause for dismissal from the professional association.

Laws set the boundaries to which individuals must adhere. They are a system of rules created and enforced through legislation to regulate behavior

Ethics is usually centered around principles even higher than legal requirements. Additionally, members of professions, especially medical professions, are expected to adhere to ethical standards above those considered appropriate for individuals not involved in a medical profession. Pet owners accept, without question, the decisions and judgments made by medical professionals because of their education and expertise.

The AVMA provides principles of veterinary medical ethics for licensed veterinarians and can be found at www.avma.org/resources-tools/avma-policies/principles-veterinary-medical-ethics-avma

Veterinary medicine has a code of ethics for health-care team members to follow. Both veterinarians and veterinary technicians have a code of ethics. Additionally, when entering the veterinary profession, after meeting all the requirements for becoming a licensed veterinary medical professional, veterinarians and veterinary technicians take an oath to use their skills and knowledge for the benefit of animal health, animal welfare, public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge. All members of the veterinary health-care team adhere to the medical profession's ethic of *Primum non nocere* – first do no harm.

The veterinary technician oath is as follows: "I solemnly dedicate myself to aiding animals and society by providing excellent care and services for animals, by alleviating animal suffering, and 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."

The veterinary technician code of ethics and oath can be found on the NAVTA website: www.navta.net/page/TechnicianOath

Coinciding with the evolution of electronic communication are systemic changes in health-care delivery. An increasing amount of medical knowledge is necessary to deliver even the most basic care. Telemedicine, the use of technology in the delivery of medicine to advance clinical care at a distance, is increasing in use. However, since the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, telemedicine has become more significantly utilized to provide care to pets while keeping the safety of owners and veterinary team members at the forefront. As has been seen to date, telemedicine has helped to continue medical care and has the potential to transform patient-centered care. Technology platforms allow veterinary team members to communicate with pet owners through a variety of means, including text, email, and mobile device applications. This technology is especially important when more members of the veterinary team are involved, as it can enable communications between members of the team, thus improving overall coordination of care.

However, in medicine as a whole – human and veterinary – there are concerns about the adoption of telemedicine and its potential impact on patient care. Ensuring that telemedicine is ethically acceptable will require anticipating and addressing possible drawbacks such as the impact on the veterinarian–client–patient relationship (VCPR), imposing one-size-fits-all applications, and the belief that new technology must be effective.

The veterinary team must consider the same ethical issues with telemedicine that have always been thought of when providing care for patients. Focusing on maintaining a strong VCPR, advocating equity in access and treatment, and seeking the best possible outcomes, telemedicine can enhance veterinary practice and patient care in ways that provide quality medicine and are ethical.

The veterinary health-care team comprises many positions, each with various roles and responsibilities. It is important that teamwork is emphasized, as good patient care is a result of great teamwork.

References

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Please go to the companion website for assignments and a PowerPoint relating to the material in this chapter.