

THE ROLE OF VETERINARY STATUTORY BODIES AND ASSOCIATIONS IN THE PROMOTION OF THE VETERINARY PROFESSION AND UPGRADING OF VETERINARY SERVICES

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***Summary:** The role of the veterinary profession is to promote animal health, animal welfare, public health and the protection of the environment. Veterinarians must adhere to high ethical standards and be prepared to apply their specialised knowledge and skills in the interest of others.*

The organisation, structure and functioning of the Veterinary Statutory Bodies and Veterinary Associations are prerequisites not only for the quality of Veterinary Services but also for private veterinary practice in a country.

Both organisations provide the necessary infrastructure to ensure that veterinarians in the public and the private sectors have the necessary qualifications, scientific expertise and experience and are free from any financial, commercial, hierarchical, political and other pressures which might affect their competence to make sound professional judgments based on existing scientific data.

It is essential that all veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals are licensed to practice by an autonomous Veterinary Statutory Body and subject to legal disciplinary provisions for any professional misconduct.

The existing structures and functional arrangements in most Member Countries of the OIE² Regional Commission for the Middle East are not up to standards. Change is therefore necessary for compliance with the provisions of the Terrestrial Animal Health Code dealing with the quality of Veterinary Services, the issue of international veterinary certificates and the regulation of the practice of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals in the public and the private sector.

Keywords: Middle East – veterinarian – veterinary para-professional – Veterinary Service – Veterinary Statutory Body – Veterinary Association – Code of Professional Conduct

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² OIE: World Organisation for Animal Health

Introduction

The quality of the Veterinary Services of a country depends on a range of factors which include fundamental principles of an ethical, organisational and technical nature. Compliance with these principles depends on their personnel who should have the necessary qualifications, scientific expertise, experience and independence to ensure that they make sound professional judgments and decisions. The integrity of the work of veterinarians, veterinary para-professionals and other members of the veterinary personnel must be guaranteed. It is essential that all categories of veterinary personnel are subject to legal disciplinary provisions.

All veterinarians are expected to adhere to the principles of veterinary ethics of the country in which they are practicing.

They should conduct their professional and personal affairs in an ethical manner, as exemplary professional conduct safeguards the dignity of the profession. They must have a good knowledge of the veterinary legislation, the guidelines for practice and especially for veterinary certification and the prescription of veterinary drugs and vaccines.

They should obey all laws and legislation of the country in which they reside and practice.

They must be honest, independent and fair and should not be engaged in fraud, regardless of political, economic or any other kind of pressure.

Veterinarians are professionals who have earned academic and professional qualifications from respected universities or other similar educational institutions and who are registered and licensed to practice in the country by the Veterinary Statutory Body.

Veterinarians are expected to show high standards of expertise, performance, conduct, integrity and accountability when providing professional services. They may undertake practice in any veterinary field relevant to their expertise and avoid undertaking duties that are beyond their competence or that require resources unavailable to them.

Registration as a veterinarian in a country offers privileges which will only last as long as veterinarians provide services with due diligence and conduct their professional and personal affairs in an ethical manner. All veterinarians should abide by the principles of veterinary ethics set by the Veterinary Statutory Body of the country where they are licensed to practice.

A veterinarian is personally responsible for any certificate issued and signed by him/her. The integrity of veterinary certification is central to the national interest, the continuity of trade, and the regulation of the veterinary profession. It is unacceptable for a veterinarian to sign a certificate that is untrue, misleading or inaccurate or where there is demonstrable conflict between his/her interests and the interest of the person or organisation to which the certificate is addressed.

All veterinarians are also expected to accept the obligation for continued education to update their scientific knowledge and develop their professional competence.

The role of veterinarians in society

Veterinarians promote human as well as animal health and welfare and contribute to the protection of the environment. About fifty per cent of veterinarians in developed countries are exclusively involved with small animals such as dogs, cats, cage birds, reptiles, and other pets. Others deal with production animals such as cattle, sheep and goats or pigs and provide on-farm services. The number of veterinarians involved in mixed practice is decreasing and veterinarians working exclusively with horses, zoo animals, wildlife and laboratory animals are very few.

Many veterinarians are employed by the Veterinary Services in animal disease surveillance and control, animal welfare and food safety, including inspection and certification and the safe disposal of animal by-products. Some veterinarians pursue their careers in other sectors, such as education, research and industry. Most veterinarians in industry are employed by pharmaceutical or animal feed and pet food companies where they are also involved in research, development or marketing of veterinary medicines, vaccines, animal feeds and veterinary hygienic products.

The number of veterinarians employed in Government Veterinary Services and the private sector in countries of the Middle East region is presented in the table below.

*Number of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals
in Member Countries of the OIE Regional Commission for the Middle East*

Country	Number of veterinarians in Government services	Number of private veterinarians	Para-professionals in Government and private practice
Bahrain	15	5	-
Cyprus	71	180	267
Djibouti	2	16	15
Egypt	11,000	25,000	-
Iran	8,179 (Government and private)		1,390
Jordan	169	563	380
Lebanon	32	118	70
Sudan	2,135	4,068	5,472
Syria	1,700	1,900	5,384
Turkey	2,500	14,000	-
Yemen	113	40	650
Total	25,916	45,890	13,628

Veterinary education and requirements for veterinarians

All veterinarians receive a general basic training encompassing all animal species and their diseases. University studies for veterinarians usually last five to six years but in view of the intensive curriculum and practical training needed, they usually require longer periods to complete.

Scientific developments in the veterinary field are increasing rapidly and many veterinary colleges allow specialisations in one or more animal species or in specific disciplines such as large animal medicine, small animal medicine, surgery, ophthalmology, veterinary public health, food hygiene, animal welfare, etc. The existing demands and pressures on the profession have made specialisation a must for veterinarians in governmental services and in private practice.

All practicing veterinarians must update their knowledge in their field of specialisation by attending relevant scientific meetings, congresses or special training courses. Continual professional development is becoming a necessity. In the near future, veterinarians in all countries will need to prove that they have spent a minimum number of hours each year on continuing education to update their knowledge.

Obligations of veterinarians

Veterinarians have a special duty towards animal welfare and for the prevention and relief of animal suffering. This includes the following:

- To maintain and improve the health, productivity and well being of animals;
- To contribute to the maintenance of high standards in public health, food safety and certification of animals and animal products;
- To promote the development of high standards of biosecurity for the prevention of the introduction of new or non existing contagious diseases or zoonoses into the country in which they are practicing;
- To observe the provisions of the current Code of Professional Conduct and, in so doing, to make animal welfare their overriding consideration at all times.

The guiding principles for compliance with professional ethics in veterinary practice are:

- Make animal welfare the first consideration for animals under care;
- Ensure that all animals are treated in a humane way and with respect;
- Maintain and continue the development of professional knowledge and skills;
- Develop and maintain a good relationship with clients, respecting their views and protecting client confidentiality;

- Promote the reputation of the profession;
- Ensure the integrity of veterinary certification;
- Maintain good relations with colleagues;
- Comply with the legal requirements for prescription, safe keeping and supply of drugs;
- Ensure that veterinary drugs are used responsibly, particularly in food-producing animals;
- Observe the legal obligations of veterinarians as employers, employees and business owners;
- Respond promptly and with courtesy to complaints and criticism;
- Maintain clear, accurate and comprehensive records and accounts;
- Avoid conflicts of interest;
- Report to the Veterinary Services any suspected cases of notifiable diseases;
- Report to the Veterinary Services any adverse reactions on the use of certain medicines or vaccines;
- Respond politely to complaints from clients discussing problems or allegations relating to the treatment provided to their animals;
- Keep all premises for veterinary practice clean and safe for the staff, clients and patients and adequately equipped for the services being provided.

The role of the Veterinary Statutory Bodies and Veterinary Associations

The role of the Veterinary Statutory Body is:

- To safeguard the health and welfare of animals through the regulation of the educational, ethical and clinical standards of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals;
- To exercise discipline;
- To improve veterinary public health;
- To protect the interests of those dependent on animals;
- To ensure that the professional standards set are met;
- To manage the registration of veterinarians;
- To hear and examine complaints;
- To promote and sustain public confidence in veterinary medicine.

The Veterinary Statutory Bodies must be autonomous and free from any political or commercial interests. The members of the governing body of the Veterinary Statutory Bodies must be elected by practicing veterinarians of the country.

They must also have the legal powers necessary to exercise and enforce control on the conduct and practice of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals.

The regulation of the veterinary profession rests on two fundamental principles: a) registration and licensing of veterinarians should be restricted to persons with recognised university degrees; and b) it should be ensured that veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals observe the standards set by the Veterinary Statutory Body.

It is widely accepted that in the interest of animal welfare and for the protection of the public, all those involved in providing veterinary services must be regulated (i.e. veterinary assistants, nurses, farriers and in general all veterinary para-professionals).

Veterinary teams should present a uniform approach when dealing with users of veterinary services and to the public in general.

If animal welfare and the public interest are to be protected efficiently, all persons involved in the provision of veterinary services need to be properly qualified, up to date and fit to practice with regard to their conduct, competence and health. It is also very important that all must be accountable for their actions.

Setting the standards for veterinary competence is different from ensuring compliance. In almost every country nowadays, the professional conduct of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals comes under scrutiny only if complaints are received. Examination of complaints is essential and should continue in compliance with the expectation of the public. Veterinary Statutory Bodies must become more pro-active and collect evidence to enable them to give assurances that the standards they have set are being met by veterinarians and in veterinary practices. The current regulatory practice demands that monitoring and assessment of compliance to standards set by Veterinary Statutory Bodies be done by a separate and independent body. The two bodies should be independent to carry out their responsibilities but they need to develop channels of communication and coordination of their activities.

To ensure compliance and adherence to the provisions of the Code of Professional Conduct, Veterinary Statutory Bodies should stress to universities and colleges the need to include ethics and values as part of the professional veterinary curriculum for all veterinary students.

Veterinary Associations represent the interests of the veterinary profession. They are committed to excellence within the profession and to the well being of animals. Their mission is to improve animal health, human health and agriculture and to advance the veterinary profession.

They provide a forum for the discussion of important veterinary issues and the development of the positions of the profession. They also develop written policy statements on issues of major concern for the profession.

They are also authorised by their members to present these positions to governments, universities, farmers, pet owners, the media and the general public.

They must also provide help and guidance for veterinarians to fulfil their professional roles.

All veterinarians are expected to adhere to the principles of veterinary ethics of the country in which they are practicing. They should conduct their professional and personal affairs in an ethical manner, as exemplary professional conduct safeguards the dignity of the veterinary profession. They must have a good knowledge of the veterinary legislation, the guidelines for practice and especially veterinary certification and the prescription of veterinary drugs and vaccines.

Certification should be based on the highest possible ethical standards, the most important of which is the professional integrity of the certifying veterinarian.

It is essential not to include in the requirements for certification matters which cannot be accurately and honestly signed by a veterinarian. It is unacceptable to ask for certification of events which are not under the direct control and supervision of the signing veterinarian.

The authority, powers and activities of the Veterinary Statutory Bodies and Associations are powerful tools to ensure that veterinarians adhere to the fundamental principles of veterinary ethics. They should obey all laws of the country in which they reside and practice. They should be independent, honest and fair and must not be engaged in fraud, regardless of any political or economic pressure.

Consultation with Member Countries (via questionnaire survey)

The structures and the existing mechanisms for the regulation of the veterinary profession in the Middle East region were studied through a questionnaire that was sent to all members of the OIE Regional Commission for the Middle East¹. Responses to the questionnaire were received from 12 members out of 20 (see [Appendix I](#)).

- In all countries which responded to the questionnaire, veterinary practice is restricted, by legislation, to veterinary surgeons with university degree. Veterinary para-professionals are regulated in only 6 Member Countries of the Region.
- Autonomous Veterinary Statutory Bodies elected by practicing veterinarians exist only in 3 Member Countries of the Region.

¹ The OIE Regional Commission for the Middle East comprises 20 members, as follows: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Cyprus, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen

- Continued education of veterinarians or veterinary para-professionals is not a legislative requirement in any of the countries in the Region. Limited training is provided by the Veterinary Services and the Veterinary Associations.
- A total of 9 Member Countries reported having Veterinary Associations. Only 1 Member Country reported that veterinary para-professionals are eligible for membership of the Veterinary Association.
- In most of the Member Countries, Veterinary Associations are allowed to negotiate directly with Governments for the promotion of the interests of the profession.
- In 7 Member Countries, private veterinarians are contracted by the local Veterinary Services.
- In most of the Member Countries of the OIE Middle East Region, no codes of professional ethics and conduct have been developed.
- Sanctions against veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals for professional misconduct were taken during the year 2006 by Government Committees in only 2 countries.

The existing structures and legal provisions in most of the OIE Member Countries of the Regional Commission for the Middle East are not ideal. Changes are therefore necessary in order to comply with:

- the provisions of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* dealing with the quality of Veterinary Services [3];
- the procedures for international certification [2];
- the provisions of the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) of the World Trade Organization.

Conclusions

To ensure that their activities are of a high standard, the Veterinary Services should define their commitment to quality and document their policy and objectives at all levels of their organisation. The official veterinarians should have the relevant qualifications, scientific expertise and experience to give them the competence to make sound professional judgments.

They should be free from any commercial, financial, hierarchical, political or other pressures which might affect their judgment or decisions.

They should act at all times in an objective, transparent and non-discriminatory manner.

The OIE has developed standards and guidelines to help Member Countries assess and evaluate Veterinary Services and their human resources.

The Veterinary Services should demonstrate that their personnel include as full-time employees qualified veterinarians, administrative officials and veterinary para-professionals. They may also include part-time accredited veterinarians from the private sector. It is essential that all members of the Veterinary Services possess the necessary qualifications and expertise and are subject to legal disciplinary provisions by an autonomous Veterinary Statutory Body governed by representatives elected by all registered veterinarians of the country.

In order to meet the demands and challenges of the continuous changes of the role of Veterinary Services, an appropriate training programme is needed for the continuing scientific and professional development of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals.

The duties and responsibilities of veterinary personnel should be clearly defined to ensure that only qualified personnel with the necessary expertise are involved in the execution of scientific and technical work. It is recommended that the Veterinary Statutory Body defines the qualifications and the educational programmes for the continual professional development of veterinarians and veterinary para-professionals in Veterinary Services.

The guidelines for the evaluation of Veterinary Services in the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* [4] provide that the Veterinary Services may also include in their personnel veterinarians who are in private practice. To ensure, objectivity, impartiality, integrity and independence, it is essential that these veterinarians are subjected to the same legal disciplinary provisions as the full-time official veterinarians.

On this basis, veterinary work is no longer divided between the Government Veterinary Services and the private practices.

A few countries have developed professional principles applicable to the work of part-time official veterinarians on short-term contracts:

- They should ensure that they have access to all legislation and any associated instructions and requirements for its enforcement.
- They must administer the legal requirements in a manner which is demonstrably competent, complete, correct, fair, and impartial. In particular, they should fully appreciate the nature of any legal powers and exercise them with care.
- They should have adequate communication with other individuals engaged in a similar work in the same area and they should keep records sufficient to confirm their actions in case of any investigations or legal action against them or against their decisions.
- They should endeavour to be free from any commercial, financial, relationship or other pressure that may affect their professional judgment in exercising their official government functions.
- They must not accept or receive financial rewards or other advantages in any form from persons subject to their official government function, or hold financial interest in an enterprise which is the subject of those functions, or be perceived as being exceptionally well treated by it.
- When asked to perform official functions in relation to a person who is also his/her client in private practice, he/she must declare that a conflict of interest exists. Having done so, the conflict of interest should not prevent the veterinarian from providing the official service, but he/she must ensure that the principles of the provision of that service are strictly applied.

Veterinarians performing official government functions should use their best efforts to ensure that any colleagues in clinical practice, either government or private, are kept informed on matters affecting their clients and their animals.

To increase confidence in the information received from private veterinarians on the incidence of animal diseases, a legislative basis is required to make the reporting of notifiable diseases compulsory.

All the members of the OIE Regional Commission for the Middle East must promote the establishment of a Veterinary Statutory Body to regulate the veterinary practice in accordance with the provisions of Article 1.3.4.12 of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* [4].

Veterinary Associations must be encouraged to develop a Code of Professional Conduct for veterinarians and para-professionals to uphold the good reputation and integrity of the veterinary profession and to improve the quality of animal health and welfare, public health and the environment.

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Resources from Veterinary Associations

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 - [8] Australian Veterinary Association web site: <http://www.ava.com.au>
 - [9] British Veterinary Association web site: <http://www.bva.uk>
 - [10] Hellenic Veterinary Association web site: <http://www.hva.gr>
 - [11] Turkish Veterinary Medical Association web site: <http://www.tvhb.org.tr>
 - [12] Veterinary Council of New Zealand web site: <http://www.vet.council.nz>
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 - [14] World Veterinary Association web site: <http://www.worldvet.org>
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.../Appendix

Appendix I

Members of the OIE Regional Commission for the Middle East having responded to the questionnaire on “The role of Veterinary Statutory Bodies and Associations in the promotion of the veterinary profession and upgrading of Veterinary Services”

1. Bahrain
 2. Cyprus
 3. Djibouti
 4. Egypt
 5. Iran
 6. Jordan
 7. Kuwait
 8. Lebanon
 9. Sudan
 10. Syria
 11. Turkey
 12. Yemen
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