

# TRANSPARENCY AND CLIENT CHOICE

## Guidance for the veterinary profession

This guidance for vets and the wider veterinary team aims to drive positive change and facilitate the provision of client choice in veterinary practice.

Outlining the voluntary actions which veterinary practices may wish to take in light of some of the provisional areas of concern identified by the Competition and Market Authority's (CMA) review of the provision of veterinary services for UK household pets.

These simple measures relating to transparency of fees, transparency of ownership, and prescribing and dispensing will collectively contribute to good animal welfare outcomes through improved client choice and shared responsibility for the delivery of contextualised care.

Although this guidance is intended to apply primarily to small animal practice, we encourage all members of the profession to consider whether the suggested measures may be relevant to other types of clinical practice.



### Transparency of fees and the value of veterinary care

Vets and Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVNs) are required by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Codes of Professional Conduct Supporting Guidance on Practice information, fees and animal insurance to:

“...be open and honest about fees for veterinary treatment. Clients should be provided with clear and easy to understand information about how fees are calculated and what it is they are being charged for. Clients should be furnished with sufficient information about the fees associated with treatment to be in a position to give informed consent to treatment.”<sup>1</sup>

### Benefits of transparency of fees

Transparency around costs and the true value of veterinary care is key to giving clients choice and facilitating informed consent.

Additionally, transparency in relation to fees helps support the wider veterinary team, making it easier to discuss costs with clients. Charging appropriately for the provision of professional services should not be seen as detrimental to the profession's reputation for care and compassion. Veterinary practices must be financially sustainable businesses in order to be able to deliver good outcomes for animals and be able to offer pro bono work for stray animals and wildlife. The veterinary team should be supported and enabled to speak confidently to clients about costs, without feeling embarrassed about charging appropriately for professional services which are tailored to the specific circumstances and needs of both animal and owner.

To maximise the benefits associated with transparency of fees, clients should be invited and encouraged to discuss costs as early as possible. This normally means in advance of treatment taking place, however, veterinary practices should tailor their approach so that cost is discussed by the appropriate member of the veterinary team at the appropriate time. For example, where life-saving emergency care is required, it may be necessary for one team member to start delivering first aid, whilst another member of the team is responsible for obtaining consent and providing estimates.

### Price lists for frequently offered services

Many practices already display price lists for their most frequently offered services. Although this can present challenges, particularly for more complex procedures, publishing a price list for more routine services can help to build client trust and create an opportunity for open conversations about contextualised care.

Although practices should tailor price lists to display those services which are most relevant to the client base, examples of the standard services which most practices should be able to display as either a fixed price or as a range include:

- a standard consultation with a vet
- a vaccination or course of vaccinations
- neutering services for cats and dogs
- prescription fees
- insurance administration fees
- microchipping
- out-of-hours charges

#### When developing a price list for frequently offered services:

- It should be clear whether you are displaying the price for a one-off service, such as a consultation, and whether there are any limitations associated with that service (e.g. duration or time of day/night).
- It should be clear whether you are displaying an aggregate price for a package of services (such as a vaccination course), what is included and what isn't.
- It should be clear whether there are any factors unique to the animal which might influence the price, such as size/weight or age.
- It should be clear whether there is any follow-up care associated with the service, and whether this is included in the price or will result in an additional charge.
- It should be easy to understand and should facilitate client choice.

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1. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/practice-information-and-fees/> and <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-nurses/supporting-guidance/practice-information-and-fees/>

### Displaying fees and communicating value

A standard price list should be available in a variety of formats to ensure the information is accessible to all clients. This should be displayed:

- Prominently in the reception area – both as a poster and as a leaflet for clients to take away.
- In the window or in such a way that anyone passing by the practice can readily access the information.
- Prominently on the practice website

The price list, however displayed, should be accompanied by a clear invitation for clients and potential clients to discuss their individual circumstances with the practice team.

You should also think about the way in which you choose to communicate the **value** of the veterinary care your practice provides, tailored to the needs of your clients, their animals, and your business. You may choose to display case studies in the waiting area, testimonials from clients, or profiles of the veterinary team alongside their qualifications and particular areas of interest. This is particularly important for showcasing the key role played by RVNs, and their invaluable contribution towards successful medical and surgical outcomes for animals.

Inviting and encouraging open and honest conversations about fees at an early stage, and educating and empowering the veterinary team to champion the value of the veterinary care being offered, is key to the best possible outcomes for animal health and welfare, increased client trust, loyalty, and thriving veterinary businesses.

### Facilitating payment

Alongside your price list for frequently offered services, and to further support client choice, you should include clear information about payment options available, such as:

- the practice payment policy, which should also be included in the terms of business.
- the important role of pet insurance in offering security if unexpected illness or injury occurs, and how claims are managed.

- payment plans offered by the practice or via a third-party finance provider which allow clients to pay for treatment in instalments.
- locally available charitable assistance and links to eligibility information.

### Delivering client choice and contextualised care

Contextualised care describes appropriate and proportionate care tailored to the needs of both the client and the animal.

The important relationship between vets and their clients and the principle of a jointly owned vet-client approach to patient management has always been critical to optimising animal welfare outcomes through the provision of contextualised care.

This shared responsibility means that owners should be enabled to collaborate with their vet on an approach to patient care, with the principle normalised within the practice culture and all members of the veterinary team feeling confident to encourage vet team-client discussions.

Contextualised care should not be seen as lower standard, and clients may feel less willing to be open and honest about their preferences if quality of care is perceived to be directly related to ability to pay. Instead, contextualised care should consider:

- **Animal factors** such as welfare concerns, age, temperament, general health, and the context in which it lives.
  - **Client factors**, such as lifestyle, preferences, ability to provide suitable care and comply with an agreed treatment plan, and any financial constraints (including of any insurance cover).
  - **Practice factors** such as availability of skills and equipment, and potential referral options.
  - **Human factors** such as workplace culture, cognitive and emotional wellbeing, or any other workplace context which influences behaviour at work and affects clinician decision making.
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### Prescribing and dispensing medicines

The RCVS Codes of Professional Conduct Supporting Guidance on Practice information, fees and animal insurance<sup>2</sup> is clear that vets may make a reasonable charge for written prescriptions, clients should be provided with adequate information on medicine prices, and clients should be informed of any significant changes to the practice's charges for prescriptions or medicines at the earliest opportunity to do so. The Codes are also clear that clients may ask for a prescription and obtain medicines from another vet or pharmacy.

The RCVS Codes of Professional Conduct Supporting Guidance on Fair Trading<sup>3</sup> supplements this by requiring vets and RVNs to advise clients, by means of a large and prominently displayed sign, or signs, (in the waiting room or other appropriate area), that prescriptions are available and that clients can also purchase veterinary medicinal products from another veterinary surgeon or pharmacy.

Online pharmacies can often supply medicines more cheaply than veterinary practices due to lower overheads, the benefits of economies of scale, and reduced wastage. Being open and transparent with clients about dispensing options brings multiple benefits. Increased access to a greater range of affordable veterinary medicines means that the treatment options available are maximised, which can be key to the client's ability to comply with a recommended treatment plan. This can be particularly true for those with pets suffering from chronic conditions which require long-term medication. Increased accessibility in turn supports improved animal welfare outcomes, fostering trust and long-term client loyalty to the practice.

To maximise the benefits of transparency around prescribing and dispensing options there should be a consistent approach which includes:

- proactively offering a prescription where clinically appropriate and providing clients with dispensing options.
- clear communication regarding the cost of a written prescription, the reasons for the length of the prescription, and any further charges for repeat prescriptions and associated further examinations.

- a quote for the cost of purchasing the prescribed product directly from the prescribing practice.
- signposting to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) Accredited Retailer Scheme where appropriate.

### Transparency of practice ownership and referral services

The factors which animal owners take into consideration when choosing a vet surgery for their pet will vary depending on individual circumstances. Proximity and accessibility are likely to be key, with personal recommendation and pricing also highly likely to be important to many pet owners.

Current approaches to transparency of practice ownership are variable. Some larger groups clearly display consistent branding across all their practices, while others have opted not to do so. Many practices continue to operate under their previous names after they have been acquired by corporate groups, as a way of reflecting the individual identities of those practices.

Transparency of ownership, whether a vet practice operates independently or is part of a large group, plays an important role in helping pet owners to make an informed choice aligned with their preferences, circumstances and values. That does not mean that the individual identity of a practice cannot be expressed.

- Information about the ownership of a veterinary practice should be provided to clients in the terms of business, readily available on the practice website, and at the practice premises, through clear signage, as an information leaflet for clients and on any branded materials. Clients should not have to search for such information.
- Where there are services associated with the practice and owned by the same company, this should be clearly communicated to clients both in the terms of business and on the practice website and should also be verbally communicated when presenting referral options. These may include laboratories, pharmacies, cremation or burial services, and referral practices and hospitals.

2. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/practice-information-and-fees/>

3. <https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/code-of-professional-conduct-for-veterinary-surgeons/supporting-guidance/fair-trading-requirements/>

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