British Veterinary Association

The best of care

A guide to professional health care for your pet, from the British Veterinary Association

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WHEN AN ANIMAL NEEDS HELP

For many people having a sick or injured animal can be more worrying than if they are unwell themselves. They can experience a feeling of helplessness at not being able to understand what is wrong or what has caused the problem.

NOT JUST FOR EMERGENCIES

The knowledge and skill of veterinary surgeons and their nurses is not just available for emergencies, nor is their care limited to sick animals. Injury and disease are major concerns of course, but so are regular check-ups, guidance and even advice before you buy or look after an animal.

Your veterinary surgeon is there to help you care for your pet and make sure it enjoys quality of life, so any of your requests for advice should be met. Getting to know your veterinary surgeon, your veterinary practice and the team of dedicated professionals who operate, is one of the best things you can do for your pet.

THE VETERINARY PRACTICE TEAM

The veterinary surgeon
The veterinary surgeons in the UK have studied for at least five years at university to achieve their veterinary degree. This course is intense and more diverse than that for human medicine.

Only after successfully qualifying can a veterinary surgeon be registered to practise as a member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (MRCVS). Some veterinary surgeons, having obtained their veterinary degree, undertake further study to allow them to specialise in a specific area of veterinary medicine

On graduation all veterinary surgeons promise to '*pursue the work of my profession with uprightness of conduct and that my constant endeavour will be to ensure the welfare of animals committed to my care*'.

Many veterinary surgeons also become members of their professional association, the British Veterinary Association (BVA), a voluntary membership organisation which aims to promote the interests of its members and the animals under their care.

The veterinary nurse
Veterinary nurses are a knowledgeable and vital part of the veterinary practice team. Some veterinary practices employ a mixture of nursing staff, including qualified and Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) -Listed nurses and student nurses, in addition to lay staff who care for animals.

Many nurses run their own clinics, for example, puppy parties or obesity clinics, within the practice, complementing the usual services available.

Ask your veterinary nurse whether these are available at your practice.

The practice manager
Some veterinary practices have a practice manager to run the business and administration side.

The support staff
In addition, practices may also have laboratory technicians, secretaries, kennel staff, telephonists and receptionists – all of whom play a significant part in helping the practice to run smoothly.

HOW TO CHOOSE A VETERINARY PRACTICE

How practices work
Some veterinary practices operate with just one veterinary surgeon and one member of staff. Others may have 15 or more veterinary surgeons with a similar number of nursing and support staff.

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Practices may operate on more than one site – the main practice being supported by three or more branch surgeries. The branch surgeries may have limited on-site facilities and equipment, but they allow clients to be able to see a veterinary surgeon without having to travel long distances.

Facilities do vary between practices. Some may have extensive equipment and facilities on site, while others contract some services out to specialist firms or laboratories. Similarly veterinary surgeons may forward unusual or difficult cases to veterinary surgeons who specialise in a particular species or discipline.

Ana Abejon (iStockphoto.com)

24-HOUR COVER

Whatever the size of the practice premises, veterinary surgeons have to make sure that 24-hour emergency cover is available for their clients every day of the week. This can be done in several ways, for example, some practices get together locally to provide this service which may mean that you have to travel to a different practice for an emergency call. Other practices choose to use a dedicated out-of-hours service (similar to the ones that we are familiar with from our own GPs).

Ask your practice what system they operate in case your animal needs help out of normal practice hours.

PRACTICE STANDARDS

In 2005, the RCVS, the regulatory body for the veterinary profession, launched a voluntary accreditation scheme for practices.

Practices volunteer for a rigorous inspection every four years to ensure they have met a range of standards that cover, for example, equipment, facilities, 24-hour emergency cover, cost estimation procedures, staff training and hygiene. Those meeting the standards can display the RCVS Accredited Practice badge (right).

RCVS ACCREDITED PRACTICE

There are many different types of veterinary practice available to you. For example, veterinary hospitals are likely to offer a different range of services, quality controls and facilities than general practices, while some types of practice concentrate on particular species or disciplines and others may just offer you vaccinations and worming or limited surgery. There is a level of RCVS accreditation to fit most types of practice, to find an accredited practice near you, visit 'Find a Vet' at www.findavet.org.uk

By looking for RCVS accreditation, you can be assured that your pet will be cared for in a quality-checked practice.

CHOOSING A PRACTICE

When choosing a veterinary practice, you should look for clean, well-maintained premises with adequate consulting and waiting areas. All staff should be friendly, approachable, neat and efficient. The practice is a business and should appear well organised with consultation times clearly displayed.

It is sensible for you to have a look round any veterinary practice you may want to use before registering your pet. Any good veterinary practice will be happy to show you round at an agreed time. While you might not be allowed into an operating theatre, you should be able to see through the door. Wards for inpatients should be clean, warm and comfortable.

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Any good veterinary surgeon will be happy to discuss any of the above factors with you. At the end of the day you must ask yourself – *'Will this practice team give my pet the best of care?'*

HOW DO I FIND A PRACTICE?

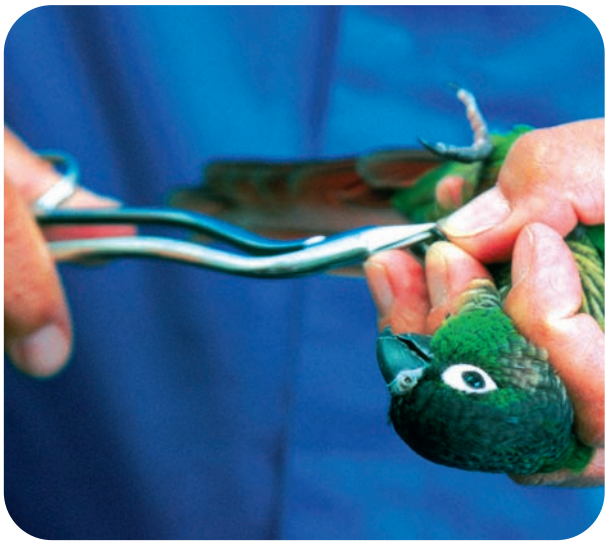
There are several websites dedicated to finding you a vet in your area. The RCVS has one called *Find a Vet*. You can find the practices closest to you according to town or postcode, or search by practice name. You can also find practices that treat a specific species or are accredited under the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme. For more information, or to find a vet, visit www.findavet.org.uk

THERE IS NO NHS FOR ANIMALS

The question of veterinary fees can be a concern for many pet owners and unfortunately there is no National Health Service (NHS) for pets. A veterinary practice has to run like a business. Staff salaries, the cost of equipment, medicines, and the overheads of running the premises and vehicles make up the bulk of the fee you pay. VAT must also be added to the charges.

A good practice will make considerable ongoing investment into staff education, training, publications and new technology – sometimes in the form of costly equipment. Veterinary medicine advances in the same way as human medicine. The range of techniques and treatments now available can save and restore to health animals that, not long ago, could only have been put to sleep. This type of treatment, however, is expensive.

Practices must give you an estimate of costs before they begin treatment, and veterinary surgeons should discuss different treatment options with you before starting expensive procedures. Ask for an estimate in advance, but remember that in some cases it may be difficult for your veterinary surgeon to predict the full nature and extent of treatment before first tests are carried out.



Similarly, unexpected complications can arise because every animal is unique and can sometimes react differently to procedures and treatment.

Many people ask why there are no standard fees within the veterinary profession. As every practice is different, none of them will have the same overheads for all the reasons outlined above. The area of the country will also have an effect. It is acceptable for you to compare prices among practices if you wish to, and you are free to choose the practice where the fees suit your pocket and the range of services suits your needs.

Building up a relationship with a practice helps to make sure that your pet is cared for by veterinary surgeons who are fully aware of your pet's medical history.

PET INSURANCE

Should your pet suffer an accident or serious illness, your veterinary surgeon's bill may be a cost you cannot afford. Owning a pet is a privilege and you must take into account the costs of veterinary attention when taking on this responsibility.

Pet insurance is a sensible approach to ensuring this does not become a concern and can provide peace of mind to owners who want to be sure they are in a position to afford all the veterinary care that may be required.

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The BVA supports the idea of pet insurance but does not recommend any specific scheme, since all policies differ and, under current financial legislation, only qualified insurance advisors are allowed to assist you with specific policies. However, the veterinary profession does support the use of insurance as a practical route to providing the best of modern veterinary care when it is necessary.

Most policies will carry some excess, that is, you may still be asked to pay a part of the treatment cost. A fee may also be charged by the practice to complete the veterinary reports required by the insurance company.

Although there is no NHS for animals, there are animal charities like the RSPCA, PDSA, Dogs Trust and the Blue Cross, which may be able to help financially with the provision of veterinary treatment for those owners who receive certain benefit payments.

VETERINARY MEDICINES

Veterinary medicines in Great Britain are licensed by the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) and are distributed by veterinary surgeons, pharmacists, agricultural merchants and in some cases by the general retail trade. Medicines are generally classified into 'prescription only' and items for general sale.

It is now possible for animal owners to get a prescription from their veterinary surgeon so that medicines can be purchased from pharmacists or other veterinary surgeons. However most clients prefer the 'one-stop shop' provided by their veterinary practice.

Where available, the veterinary surgeon must use licensed products; this means that the medicine has been tested and approved for use by the VMD. Where there are no licensed veterinary medicines available for a specific species or disease, your vet can follow a system that allows them to use licensed human medicines or medicines licensed for use in a different species or for a different disease in the same species. This should be explained to you, so that you can consent to this.

This enables veterinary surgeons to access a wide range of medicines for the animals under their care and allows owners to choose where they buy their medicines.

IF A PROBLEM SHOULD ARISE

If you are unhappy with the way either you or your pet have been treated, your first step should always be to discuss your concerns honestly with your veterinary surgeon.

Write to, or telephone, your veterinary surgeon as soon as you can. Many problems arise because of misunderstanding or lack of communication, and can often be easily dealt with at this first point of contact. If you are still unhappy, ask to speak to the senior partner, if the practice has one. If your concern has still not been dealt with you should write to or telephone the RCVS (see the Further Information section overleaf for details).

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FURTHER INFORMATION

British Veterinary Association (BVA)
The BVA is the national representative body for the veterinary profession and promotes good professional standards. Although membership is voluntary it has over 10,500 members and has evolved, over the last 125 years, into the public relations house for the profession at home and overseas. In promoting the interests of its members and the animals under their care, the BVA is committed to developing and maintaining channels of communication with government, parliamentarians and the media.

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Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)
The RCVS is the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons in the UK and deals with issues of professional misconduct, maintaining the register of veterinary surgeons eligible to practise in the UK and assuring standards of veterinary education. It also has a 'Royal College' role, which means that it is responsible for post-graduate educational and veterinary nursing qualifications.

In cases of dispute, or for information on a career in the veterinary field, contact the RCVS.

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BVA Animal Welfare Foundation (BVA AWF)
The BVA has a charitable arm, the BVA Animal Welfare Foundation (BVA AWF) which undertakes much fundamental and educational work into animal health and welfare. For example, in 2006 the Foundation funded research to improve the welfare of cats with arthritis and horses with a painful condition called laminitis. For more information on the BVA AWF or to make a donaton, please visit: www.bva-awf.org.uk

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