Dear Mr Blackwell

Review of the 12 Principles of Certification

I am writing as Chair of the RCVS Certification Sub Committee to bring your attention to our upcoming review of the 12 Principles of Certification. We would welcome the views of the British Veterinary Association on this matter.

Background

The 12 Principles of Certification were drafted by the RCVS, the British Veterinary Association and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (now the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs [Defra]) and adopted by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe. Eight of the 12 principles are included in the EU Directive 96/93/EC on the certification of animals and animal products. Their purpose is to provide the foundation of certification for all those who draft or prepare, use or sign veterinary certificates even though at the present time veterinary surgeons may be presented with certificates, which do not conform to all of them.

2015 Review

The RCVS Code of Professional Conduct sets out veterinary surgeons’ professional responsibilities and, on the subject of certification, states that veterinary surgeons must certify facts and opinions honestly and with due care, taking into account the 12 Principles of Certification. Those principles are included in Chapter 21 of the Supporting Guidance to the Code, which provides further advice on the proper standards of professional practice. A copy of the full Supporting Guidance is enclosed (Annex A).

The purpose of our guidance is to help veterinary professionals to understand their obligations thus supporting compliance. It is essential that our guidance meets the needs of the profession and the public and reflects up-to-date practice. Legislative developments, changes to industry and increased public demands mean that the professional environment in which veterinary professionals work continues to evolve and with that so must our guidance.

The 12 Principles have been in place for a number of years and we believe it is time for these to be reviewed to ensure they remain fit for purpose.

Added to this, the Committee has in recent years seen an increased number of enquiries relating to certification from government agencies, industry and the profession. Some examples include questions about remote certification, electronic certification, reliance on statements from non-veterinary surgeons such as animal health officials and concerns about clarity of the wording on
certificates and associated notes for guidance. As part of our review, we want to consider whether some of these issues could be addressed in revised and updated guidance.

Separate to this, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) has recently developed a position paper outlining the main principles of veterinary certification in 1998 (FVE/98/053). Now, more than 15 years later, they have revised and updated the original document and the FVE Veterinary Statutory Body Working Group has recommended 10 Principles of Veterinary Certification. Copies of the FVE documents are enclosed (Annex B). We would welcome your views on these 10 Principles, particularly whether you feel the RCVS should adopt a similar position and whether these are appropriate for the UK veterinary sector.

**Evidence gathering**

We welcome your thoughts on the existing 12 Principles, specifically whether you feel these are fit for purpose. We are also interested to know if you feel there are any additional areas on which guidance may be helpful or whether there are any particular issues that you feel should be addressed.

Finally, the Committee will consider all comments as part of the review and any recommendations for updated guidance will be referred to the RCVS Standards Committee for approval in due course.

Thank you in advance for your input.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Jinman OBE BVetMed DipArb FCIArb MRCVS  
Chair of RCVS Certification Sub Committee  

cc David Catlow, Chair of the RCVS Standards Committee
RCVS Supporting Guidance

21. Certification

Updated 12 April 2012

Introduction

21.1 The simple act of signing their names on documents has a great potential for error for veterinary surgeons. A certificate is a "written statement made with authority", the authority in this case coming from the veterinary surgeon's professional status.

The 12 Principles of Certification

1. A veterinarian should be asked to certify only those matters which are within his own knowledge, can be ascertained by him personally or are the subject of a supporting certificate from another veterinarian who does have personal knowledge of the matters in question and is authorised to provide such a supporting document. Matters not within the knowledge of a veterinarian and not the subject of such a supporting certificate but known to other persons, eg the farmer, the breeder or the truck driver, should be the subject of a declaration by those persons only.

2. Neither a veterinarian nor any person described in Principle 1 above should be requested or required to sign anything relating to matters which cannot be verified by the signatory.

3. Veterinarians should not issue a certificate which might raise questions of a possible conflict of interest eg in relation to their own animals.

4. All certificates should be written in terms which are as simple and easy to understand as possible.

5. Certificates should not use words or phrases which are capable of more than one interpretation.

6. Certificates should be:
   a. produced on one sheet of paper or, where more than one page is required, in such a form that any two or more pages are part of an integrated whole and indivisible;
   b. given a unique number, with records being retained by the issuing authority of the persons to whom certificates bearing particular numbers were supplied.

7. Certificates should be written in the language of the veterinarian signing them, and accompanied by an official translation of the certificate into a language of the country of ultimate destination.

8. Certificates should identify animals individually except in cases where this is impractical, eg day old chicks.

9. Certificates should not require a veterinarian to certify that there has been compliance with the law of the European Union or a third country unless the provisions of the law are set out clearly on the certificate or have been provided to him by the issuing authority.

10. Where appropriate, notes for guidance should be provided to the certifying veterinarian by the issuing authority indicating the extent of the enquiries he is expected to make, the examinations he is required to carry out, or to clarify any details of the certificate which may require further interpretation.

11. Certificates should always be issued and presented in the original. Photocopies are not acceptable. Provided that:
a. a copy of the certificate (clearly marked ‘COPY’) should always be provided to the authority by
whom the certificates were issued - see Principle 6 above; and
b. where, for any good and sufficient reason (such as damage in transit) a duplicate certificate is
authorised and supplied by the issuing authority, this must be clearly marked ‘duplicate’ before issue.

12. When signing a certificate, a veterinarian should ensure that:

a. he signs, stamps and completes any manuscript portions in a colour of ink which does not
readily photocopy, ie a colour other than black;
b. the certificate contains no deletions or alterations, other than those which are indicated on the
face of the certificate to be permissible, and subject to such changes being initialled and stamped by
the certifying veterinarian;
c. the certificate bears not only his signature but also, in clear lettering, his name, qualifications
and address and (where appropriate) his official or practice stamps;
d. the certificate bears the date on which the certificate was signed and issued and (where
appropriate) the time for which the certificate will remain valid;
e. no portion of the certificate is left blank, so that it could subsequently be completed by some
person other than the certifying veterinarian.

General principles of certification

21.2 The 12 Principles of Certification were drafted by the RCVS, the British Veterinary Association
and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (now the Department for the Environment, Food
and Rural Affairs [Defra]) and adopted by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe. Eight of the 12
principles are included in the EU Directive 96/93/EC. Their purpose is to provide the foundation of
certification for all those who draft or prepare, use or sign veterinary certificates even though at the
present time veterinary surgeons may be presented with certificates which do not conform to all of
them.

21.3 In framing obligations which veterinary surgeons must fulfil under day-to-day working conditions,
the RCVS has taken into account not only the 12 Principles of Certification but also relevant UK law
including the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 (as amended) which specifies the defences open to the
signatory of a certificate or equivalent document if he or she is challenged, and also the fact that
veterinary surgeons may be presented with certificates which do not conform to all of the 12
principles.

21.4 Given that veterinary surgeons' professional reputations and livelihoods may be at stake if their
signatures on certificates are open to challenge, and that they may be presented with certificates that
do not conform to all of the 12 Principles of Certification, the RCVS strongly advises veterinary
surgeons as follows:

a. CAUTION Before signing any certificate veterinary surgeons must:

i. scrutinise the document, whatever its title
ii. be clear as to whom they are responsible in exercising their authority when they sign the
document

b. CLARITY Scrutinising the document includes:

i. reading and understanding any explanatory supporting material;
ii. checking carefully for any ambiguity which should be clarified with whoever has issued the
certificate;
iii. in the case of certificates relating to international or European Economic Area trade, veterinary
surgeons may need to ask Defra's assistance. They should record in writing the information
received, the date and time it is received and the name of the Defra official giving the
advice. They should expect their own queries to be similarly recorded. They may request and expect to receive written confirmation of the guidance given to them.

c. **CERTAINTY** In considering what they will attest in order to satisfy the obligation of certainty, veterinary surgeons:

   i. must be sure that they attest only to what to the best of their knowledge and belief is true;
   ii. do not attest to future events;
   iii. do not recklessly attest to what others have declared or asserted;
   iv. may attest to what another veterinary surgeon has certified. They may also attest to the fact that a declaration or assertion has been made by another person without attesting to its validity.

d. **CHALLENGE** If they have gone further in what they have attested, they must consider what their defence would be if challenged, and keep appropriate written records made at the time of the decision to sign. For example, if challenged under the Animal Health Act 1981 (as amended) with false certification could they show (in the words of that Act):

   i. that he did not know of that falsity and that he could not with reasonable diligence have obtained knowledge of it or, if challenged under the Trade Descriptions Act 1968 (as amended) could they show (in the words of that Act):
   ii. that the commission of the offence was due to a mistake or to reliance on information supplied to him or to the act or default of another person, an accident or some other cause beyond his control; and
   iii. that he took all reasonable precautions and exercised all due diligence to avoid the commission of such an offence by himself or any person under his control.

21.5 Some documents (for example, forms, declarations, insurance claims, witness statements and self-certification documents) may involve the same level of responsibility even if they do not bear the name of ‘certificate’. If the facts are incorrect or misleading, the professional integrity of the veterinary surgeon is called into question. Cases coming before the Disciplinary Committee may arise from allegations of false certification.

21.6 There are three hazards for the veterinary surgeon when ‘certifying’ in the wider sense:

   a. **Negligence:** a breach of the duty owed to a relevant party with consequent damage. Negligence may arise from a failure to disclose all of the material facts or supplying incorrect information. The consequence may be civil court proceedings.
   b. **Criminal offences:** criminal offences may be committed under trade descriptions legislation, legislation controlling animal exports and by aiding and abetting a third party. They may include fraud, or knowingly or recklessly supplying false information. Any conviction brought to the notice of the RCVS may be considered in relation to the fitness of the veterinary surgeon to practise.
   c. **Professional misconduct:** even if no criminal charges are brought, an aggrieved party or enforcement authority may make a formal complaint to the RCVS. If the complaint is judged to be justified, penalties may follow.

**Electronic certification**

21.7 The RCVS considers electronic veterinary certificates are acceptable, subject to sufficient safeguards and security. An example of a system that has been accepted by the RCVS is TRACES (Trade Control and Expert System), an EU-wide electronic certification and notification system that is
being phased in for the provision of export health certificates and supporting documents for intra-Community trade in certain circumstances; and currently used by DEFRA.

Additional matters

21.8 Veterinary surgeons may be asked to attest ‘to the best of their knowledge and belief’. In these circumstances, veterinary surgeons should exercise caution and attest only to what to the best of their knowledge and belief is true. They should not attest to future events; or recklessly attest to what others have declared or asserted, without giving any apparent thought to the ‘Four Cs’ outlined above in paragraph 21.4.

21.9 All parts of a certificate or its equivalent should bear the date of the examination or test carried out, vaccination or sample taken, the date of signing the certificate and the name and address of the signatory veterinary surgeon.

21.10 Mistakes on forms/certificates can occur; occasionally, these may be inadvertent. Such mistakes should be rectified as soon as they are identified.

21.11 A veterinary surgeon who acts in an official capacity should only use any official stamp issued to him on official certificates issued or approved by Defra.

Identification of animals

21.12 If an alleged identification mark is not legible at the time of inspection, no certificate should be issued until the animal has been re-marked or otherwise adequately identified.

21.13 When there is no identification mark, the use of the animal’s name alone is inadequate. If possible, the identification should be made more certain by the owner inserting a declaration identifying the animal, so that the veterinary surgeon can refer to it as ‘as described’. Age, colour, sex, marking and breed may also be used.

21.14 The owner’s name must always be inserted. (In the case, for example, of litters of unsold puppies this will be the name of the breeder or the seller.)

21.15 Where microchipping or tattooing has been applied it should be referred to in any certificate of identification.

Official certification for export of live animals and animal products and casualty slaughter certificates

21.16 Guidance is issued by Defra for the completion of these certificates and should be scrupulously followed. When problems are identified, the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency should be consulted and, if not then resolved, the advice of the RCVS should be sought.
The veterinary certificate, being a formal declaration of a veterinarian, plays an important role in the prevention and control of animal health and welfare issues and related public health issues. Veterinary certificates must be clear and reliable. For this reason the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) developed a position paper outlining the main principles of veterinary certification. The paper was published in 1998 (FVE/98/053). Now, more than 15 years later, the time had come to revise and to update the original document. The FVE Veterinary Statutory Body Working Group proposed the following 10 principles of veterinary certification.

### Disclaimer

These 10 principles represent best practice in veterinary certification

<table>
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<th>Details</th>
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<tbody>
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| 6.        | Certificates should be:  
| a. | Produced on one sheet of paper or, where more than one page is required, in such a form that any two or more pages are part of an integrated whole and indivisible. |
| b. | Given a unique number, and a record should be retained by the issuing person or by the Institution or Company they work for. |
| 7.        | Veterinarians should only sign certificates written in a language they understand. |
| 8.        | Certificates should clearly identify the subjects of certification. |
| 9.        | Veterinarians should only sign original certificates. Where there is a legal or official requirement for a copy of the certificate (marked as such) it can be provided. |
| 10.       | When signing a certificate, veterinarians should ensure that:  
| a. | Their signature is legible;  
| b. | The certificate bears not only the signature but also, in clear lettering, their name, qualifications and address and (where appropriate) their official or practice stamp;  
| c. | The certificate bears the date on which the certificate was signed and issued and (where appropriate) the time for which the certificate will remain valid; |
d. No part of the certificate is left blank so that it could subsequently be completed by some person other than the veterinarian;

e. The certificate contains no deletions or alterations, other than those initialled and stamped by the certifying veterinarian.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{1}}\] Defined by FVE as "a professional with a comprehensive scientific education, licensed by the legal authority, to carry out, in an independent, ethical and personally responsible capacity, all aspects of veterinary medicine, in the interest of the health and welfare of animals, the interest of the client and of the society".