Use of the courtesy title 'Dr' by RCVS-registered veterinary surgeons

Introduction

We would like to consult veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and the general public on the proposal that all veterinary surgeons registered with the RCVS should be permitted to use the courtesy title 'Doctor' or 'Dr'

If agreed, the use of the courtesy title 'Dr' would be optional and we would regulate its use through the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct. The draft supporting guidance is set out below.

The key objective of this consultation is to gauge whether the public and the profession are in favour of the proposal, not in favour of the proposition or don't mind either way.

Purpose

The purpose of permitting all veterinary surgeons registered with the RCVS to use the courtesy title “Dr” would be to align the UK with international practice and to provide greater clarity for the profession and the public.

It would offer reassurance to clients and the animal-owning public that all veterinary surgeons registered with the RCVS, regardless of where they qualified, have veterinary degrees of an appropriate standard.

Veterinary surgeons, like doctors and dentists, are physicians. Doctors and dentists in the UK are permitted to use 'Dr' as a courtesy title and allowing members of the RCVS to do the same would provide a level of parity with fellow clinical professionals.

The Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 protects the use of the title “veterinary surgeon” from use by 'unqualified persons'. There is nothing in the Act that prohibits the use of the courtesy title 'Doctor' by those who are properly qualified and registered with the RCVS as veterinary surgeons.

There are legal consequences for misusing the title of 'Doctor'. Section 49(1) of the Medical Act 1983, which is headed 'Penalty for pretending to be registered', provides:

‘Any person who wilfully and falsely pretends to be or uses the name or title of physician, doctor of medicine, licentiate in medicine and surgery, bachelor of medicine, surgeon, general practitioner or apothecary, or any name, title, addition or description implying that he is registered under any provision of this Act, or that he is recognised by law as a physician or surgeon or licentiate in medicine and surgery or a practitioner in medicine or an apothecary, shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale [emphasis added].'

Therefore, the purpose of our guidance would be to ensure that veterinary surgeons using the title ‘Dr’ do not inadvertently mislead or confuse the public into thinking that they hold qualifications they do not, ie a medical qualification or a PhD.
It is important for veterinary surgeons to remember that if the title is used in a misleading way, this could form the basis of a referral to the RCVS Disciplinary Committee, or to the Advertising Standards Agency (ASA), as well as being an offence under the Medical Act 1983.

Our draft supporting guidance is as follows:

**Use of the courtesy title “Doctor” or “Dr”**

1. Nothing prevents veterinary surgeons using the courtesy title 'Doctor' or 'Dr' if they wish to, however veterinary surgeons using the title must be careful not to mislead the public.

2. A courtesy title does not reflect academic attainment; instead, it is associated with professional standing. As a result, it is important that the use of 'Doctor' or 'Dr' by a veterinary surgeon does not suggest or infer that they hold a medical qualification or a PhD when they do not.

3. Consequently, if the title is used, the veterinary surgeon should use the title in conjunction with:

   (a) their name; and
   (b) the descriptor “veterinary surgeon”; or
   (c) the post-nominal letters “MRCVS”.

   for example, 'Dr John Smith, veterinary surgeon' or 'Dr John Smith MRCVS'.

**International issues**

Veterinary surgeons across the world use the title 'Dr'. For some, the title recognises their academic achievement, for example, the degrees awarded by North American and European universities carry with them a doctoral level of attainment.

For others, however, the title is a courtesy title associated with professional standing and recognition, rather than academic qualification. This is the case in Australia and New Zealand.

Allowing RCVS members to use ‘Dr’ as a courtesy title, as is done in Australia and New Zealand, would mean consistency with their international colleagues.

Consistency is important because veterinary surgeons now work within a much wider international context than ever before.

There are significant numbers of veterinary surgeons from overseas working in the UK and one effect of this is that members of the RCVS often work alongside veterinary surgeons who use the title ‘Dr’.

This can be confusing for clients and animal owners, and may lead to an assumption that one veterinary surgeon is better qualified than another, when this may not necessarily be the case.
Consistency is also important for the significant numbers of UK graduates working abroad in countries where it is expected that veterinary surgeons will use the title ‘Dr’.

Understandably, RCVS members in this situation sometimes feel they should also style themselves as ‘Dr’ in order to avoid confusion and make clear that they are a qualified veterinary surgeon. Permitting RCVS members to use the courtesy title would confirm this as an acceptable practice.

There may be concerns that if all veterinary surgeons use ‘Dr’, it will not be clear which veterinary surgeons hold veterinary degrees that carry a doctoral level of qualification, for example, those awarded in North America and Europe. Further, it could be considered unfair that veterinary surgeons without such qualification may use the title ‘Dr’.

In the medical profession, although all practitioners may use ‘Dr’, those with doctorates make others aware of their qualification by using the relevant postnominals. There is no reason why the veterinary profession could not also take this approach.

**Doctors, dentists and other professionals**

Medical graduates are of course permitted to use the courtesy title ‘Dr’. The level of training and educational attainment they receive by virtue of their undergraduate degree is comparable to that of veterinary graduates.

Dentists, who also receive a similar level of training, are also permitted to use the title ‘Dr’ if they wish, provided that it does not infer or suggest a medical qualification.

As a result, allowing RCVS members to use the courtesy title ‘Dr’ would be consistent with its use by other clinical professionals with a similar level of training and professional standing.

‘Doctor’ and ‘Dr’ are not protected titles. One effect of widening the scope of professionals who may use ‘Dr’ could be that it paves the way to a future where all health care professionals are permitted to call themselves ‘Dr’.

In Australia, chiropractors, osteopaths and podiatrists (amongst others) are all permitted to style themselves as ‘Dr’, and it could be argued that the UK will inevitably follow a similar pattern.

The fact that the General Chiropractic Council already permits registered chiropractors to use ‘Dr’ (so long as they make clear they are a chiropractor) is indicative of this.

Some may consider this to be a positive development, whilst others may feel it is undesirable.
Consultation questions

- Given that medical doctors in the UK who are surgeons tend not to use the 'Dr' title, is it appropriate for veterinary surgeons to use it?
- If veterinary surgeons were to adopt the courtesy title ‘Dr’, would this be likely to cause confusion between veterinary surgeons and medical doctors?
- Is the draft guidance set out below robust enough to prevent such confusion?

Use of the courtesy title “Doctor” or “Dr”

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2. A courtesy title does not reflect academic attainment; instead, it is associated with professional standing. As a result, it is important that the use of ‘Doctor’ or ‘Dr’ by a veterinary surgeon does not suggest or infer that they hold a medical qualification or a doctorate degree (PhD) when they do not.

3. Consequently, if the title is used, the veterinary surgeon should use the title in conjunction with:
   
   (a) their name; and
   
   (b) the descriptor “veterinary surgeon”; or
   
   (c) the post-nominal letters “MRCVS”.

   For example, ‘Dr John Smith, veterinary surgeon’ or ‘Dr John Smith MRCVS’.

   • If veterinary surgeons were to adopt the courtesy title ‘Dr’, would this be likely to cause the public to believe that they hold doctorate degrees (PhDs) when they might not?
   • Is the draft guidance set out below robust enough to prevent such confusion?

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- Are you in favour of the proposal to allow veterinary surgeons to use the courtesy title ‘Doctor’ / ‘Dr’?