

Alignment of Spectrum of Care Practice with Expectations of Veterinary Regulatory Boards



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Question 1: How do the principles of spectrum of care align with general expectations of veterinary regulatory boards?

The principles of the spectrum of care (SOC) align closely with the general expectations of veterinary regulatory boards of North America, albeit with some nuances in emphasis and interpretation. They align in the following ways:

1) Standard of Practice:

Spectrum of Care: The SOC emphasizes providing care that is appropriate for the individual patient's needs and context, considering factors such as the animal's condition, client preferences, abilities, and goals, and their available resources, as well as veterinarian and veterinary practice factors.

Regulatory Boards: Veterinary regulatory boards require veterinarians to adhere to a standard of practice that is reasonable and appropriate within the profession. The standard of practice in veterinary medicine can vary by the specific regulatory board. Some boards describe a minimum standard of practice as the expected level of care, skill, and diligence that an average competent veterinarian would provide under similar circumstances.

Others define substandard practice as "a violation of general duty, consisting of negligence or failure to exercise due care." In still other cases, standards are set by veterinary practice acts or regulations established by a jurisdiction's veterinary board. When reviewing a complaint against a veterinarian, the regulatory board reviews the available facts of the case to determine if this standard of practice was met.

In making such determinations, veterinary boards do not compare the veterinarian's care to a specific "gold standard" or set of best practices. They assume instead that veterinarians should provide a full range of options to the client, including advanced diagnostics or treatments, or referral to a specialist, if applicable. In this approach to care, veterinarians should offer

less expensive, less invasive, or less advanced options that still might provide an acceptable outcome. They should avoid recommending options that would be considered negligence or substandard care, but equally avoid unnecessary diagnostic or treatment recommendations that fail to take the client's wishes into consideration.

Practitioners may sometimes encounter cases in which the client wishes to pursue a course of action that could be considered substandard care for their animal. In this instance, the practitioner must document what was offered to, and declined by, the client. These concerns must be relayed to the client in a courteous and professional way.

2) Client Consent and Client Communication:

Spectrum of Care: Client consent is a fundamental aspect of the SOC, involving communication with clients about care options, risks, benefits, and costs, to enable them to make informed decisions. Effective communication with clients is crucial to ensure understanding, adherence, and mutual decision-making regarding the care of their animals.

Regulatory Boards: Veterinarians should obtain client consent before initiating treatments or procedures. Consent is not a one-time process but should be revisited throughout the patient's care, especially when new information becomes available or when the patient's clinical status changes.

Veterinary regulatory boards emphasize clear and effective client communication as a professional responsibility. In addition to providing evidence of a client's decision, documentation of consent is essential to demonstrating transparency and ethical practice. However, it is important to note that a signed consent form does not *replace* communication, but rather documents that it has occurred.

Good client communication includes providing sufficient information about risks, benefits, and alternatives so that the owner or caregiver can make an informed decision. It also includes providing an understandable explanation of diagnoses, treatments, and prognoses, and addressing client concerns in a way that they can understand. The client must be informed of the

full range of options available, encompassing both current best practices and the minimum acceptable level of care, as well as options in between.

Clear and complete client communication aligns with the SOC because the client's goals are integral to the decision-making process. The veterinarian must ensure that substandard care is not recommended. If a client opts for a path that an average veterinarian in similar circumstances would consider to be substandard care, the client must be informed of the poor prognosis that would be expected from such a path. This conversation must be noted in the medical record or otherwise permanently documented. Allowing an animal to suffer is not an option, but absent this, doing nothing may be a suitable option for the client. If the client is unwilling or unable to pursue a path forward and the animal is suffering, euthanasia should be offered.

3) Medical Recordkeeping:

Spectrum of Care: Documentation serves to comprehensively record patient information, treatment plans, and client interactions, supporting continuity of care and accountability.

Regulatory Boards: Boards require accurate, timely, and complete documentation of all aspects of patient care. Medical records should record the patient status, exam findings, and diagnostic results and their implications for the animal's health, as well as rationale for treatment decisions, client consent and other communications, client instructions, and follow-up care.

This documentation helps demonstrate that the veterinarian has met the standard of practice, provides a medical history, and allows for continuity of care. Many regulatory boards detail specific requirements for medical records within their veterinary practice act. Veterinarians should consult this document to ensure that the requirements are met.

Veterinarians who integrate the principles of the SOC into their practice are well-positioned to meet regulatory expectations while providing care for their patients and supporting the client's needs for their animal.

Question 2: Where can new graduates learn more about their regulatory board's requirements for medical recordkeeping, client communication, and minimum standards of practice?

New graduates can learn more about their regulatory board's requirements through several avenues:

- **Regulatory Veterinary Board:** All veterinary boards have websites that provide information on regulations, practice acts, and guidelines specific to that jurisdiction. These websites often include sections dedicated to veterinary practice standards, frequently asked questions, guidance documents, and resources for new graduates. They may have regular newsletters that provide best practice examples.

Some regulatory boards discuss disciplinary cases or regulatory matters in their public board meetings. Licensees interested in learning more about their jurisdiction's statutes and regulations or examples of disciplinary cases should consider attending a board meeting. These are listed on the veterinary board's website.

- **Veterinary Practice Act:** In most veterinary regulatory boards in North America, the veterinary practice act is the primary document outlining the legal requirements and standards for veterinary practice within that jurisdiction. It is comprised of the statutes and regulations that outline the practice of veterinary medicine and veterinary technology within that jurisdiction. New graduates should familiarize themselves with their jurisdiction's veterinary practice act to understand the specific regulations pertaining to recordkeeping, client communication, handling and storage of controlled substances and other drugs, and practice standards, among many other elements of practice. Often, the jurisdiction's pharmacy board will have separate additional requirements for veterinarians.
- **Continuing Education:** Continuing education courses and conferences also offer opportunities to learn about regulatory updates and best practices in veterinary medicine. Veterinary boards or veterinary medical associations may be able to recommend specific courses for interested veterinarians in topics such as medical recordkeeping, client communication, and veterinary law and ethics. Finally, research on evidence-based medicine published in peer-reviewed journals or presented at conferences may provide novel and viable methods for treating conditions along the SOC.

By using these resources, new graduates can gain a comprehensive understanding of their regulatory board's requirements for medical recordkeeping, client communication, and minimum standards of practice. Staying informed and proactive in meeting these requirements is essential for maintaining compliance and providing quality care.

Question 3: What are the best practices for documentation to avoid disciplinary action?

To avoid disciplinary action and ensure compliance with regulatory standards, veterinarians should follow best practices for documentation, while also considering specific requirements outlined in veterinary practice acts. Many regulatory boards provide requirements for medical recordkeeping in their statutes and regulations. For prescription and controlled substance documentation, veterinarians should also consult with their respective pharmacy boards.

- **Accuracy and Completeness:** Ensure that all medical records are accurate, complete, and legible. Document patient history to include the presenting complaint or reason, physical examination, diagnostic results and interpretation, treatments administered, and client communications. Consult with the

veterinary practice act to ensure that all required information is recorded.

- **Timeliness:** Record information promptly after each patient interaction or procedure to avoid inaccuracies or omissions that could lead to regulatory issues. Some regulatory boards require medical records to be completed within a specific time period. These requirements will be in the statutes or regulations.
- **Client Consent:** Document client consent for treatments, surgeries, or procedures. Include details about discussions with clients regarding risks, benefits, and alternatives, as well as their consent or refusal. Notify clients that they can withdraw consent or refusal at any time or work with the veterinarian to change the plan.
- **Follow-Up and Progress Notes:** Document follow-up appointments, patient progress, discharge information, and any changes in treatment plan to demonstrate continuity of care.
- **Communication With Clients:** Record client communications, instructions given, and client adherence. Include discussions about treatment options, prognosis, and financial considerations.
- **Record Retention:** Maintain records for the required period as specified by regulations or practice guidelines. Ensure that records are securely stored and protected against loss, theft, or unauthorized access.
- **Confidentiality:** Absent a legal exemption, ensure that client and patient records are maintained according to ethical and regulatory confidentiality requirements
- **Training and Compliance:** Ensure that all staff members involved in recordkeeping are trained in proper documentation practices.
- **Consultation or Referrals:** Document consultations with colleagues or specialists, as well as recommendations received, and decisions made based on these consultations. Document referrals offered to the client and any follow-up steps.

In addition to these best practices, veterinarians should familiarize themselves with the specific requirements outlined in their veterinary practice act. Adhering to these regulatory standards not only helps veterinarians avoid disciplinary action but also supports quality patient care, client communication, and professional accountability. Regular updates and reviews of state regulations ensure ongoing compliance and mitigate risks associated with recordkeeping.

RECOMMENDED CITATION

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