



**SASKATCHEWAN
VETERINARY MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION**

**VETERINARY CASE REFERRAL
STANDARDS AND OPERATIONAL
POLICIES**

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Veterinary Case Referral Guidelines

The best patient care is often accomplished through the coordinated efforts of multiple individuals working together to provide the highest quality veterinary medicine in a professional and collegial environment. With that in mind, the following communication guidelines for veterinarians who collaborate on patient care are provided.

Definitions

Referring Veterinarian: The veterinarian (or group of veterinarians) providing care at the time of the referral.

Receiving Veterinarian: The veterinarian (or group of veterinarians) to whom a patient is referred.

Consultation: A communication between two or more veterinarians concerning the diagnosis and/or care of a patient.

Consultation with veterinary specialists is increasingly common because of the increased access to immediate electronic communication by mobile veterinary clinicians. While this document is meant primarily to address situations in which direct transfer of patient care occurs between two or more veterinarians, some guidelines related to consultation without transfer of patient care responsibility are included.

- A consulting specialist veterinarian is a specialist veterinarian (or group of specialist veterinarians) who agrees to advise an attending veterinarian on the care and management of a patient. The Veterinarian Client Patient Relationship (VCPR) remains the responsibility of the attending veterinarian.
- Veterinarians requesting consultations with veterinary specialists should realize that consultations require the time and resources of the specialist veterinarian and that compensation may be appropriate. Specialist veterinarians should determine if compensation is appropriate on a case-by-case basis.
- When a consultation occurs, the attending veterinarian retains primary responsibility for the medical management of the patient.
- Consulting specialists should convey their findings directly to the veterinarian requesting the consultation.
- Consulting specialists should revisit patients and communicate with clients only in collaboration with the veterinarian requesting the initial consultation.

Referral: The transfer of responsibility for diagnosis and/or care of a specific problem from a referring veterinarian to a receiving veterinarian.

Recognized Veterinary Specialist: A veterinarian who is certified by an AVMA-recognized veterinary specialty organization. Only those individuals who have completed all aspects of the specific training and testing required by a recognized veterinary specialty organization can

describe or advertise themselves as a veterinary specialist. These individuals are ethically bound to advertise or claim expertise only in their area of board certification. Veterinarians who have completed internships or residencies but have not fulfilled all the requirements of a specialty discipline (e.g. credentials and testing), shall not call themselves veterinary specialists. The SVMA has stated that only veterinarians who have been certified by an AVMA-recognized specialty organization or those approved by the council shall refer to themselves as specialists.

Legal Owner/Client: The legal owner is the individual or syndicate of individuals who have legal ownership of the animal or group of animals. The term “client” refers to the agent with legal authority to make health care decisions for the patient at the time it is being examined and treated. This individual may be the legal owner, trainer, caretaker, or other proxy.

The best patient care is provided when veterinary professionals work as a team to provide the highest quality of veterinary medicine possible in an environment of exceptional client service and education. For this to happen, it is imperative that clear lines of communication and responsibility be established between veterinarians, clients, and other interested parties.

Prior to Referral

Prior to referral, it is the responsibility of the referring veterinarian to be aware of specialty referral resources in their geographic area, to communicate the option of referral to the client in a timely fashion, and to contact the receiving veterinarian to discuss the patient. It is the responsibility of the receiving veterinarian to provide appropriate preliminary visit information to the referring veterinarian and owner or agent for the patient. The referral process functions optimally if the owner or agent communicates clearly their expectations for the animal and the limits for costs that will be incurred. It is important that all parties provide a clear and accurate medical history to the receiving veterinarian. Both the referring and the receiving veterinarian should emphasize a team approach to patient care.

Responsibilities of the Referring Veterinarian

The referring veterinarian should:

In general, be prepared for the possibility of a patient consultation or referral by:

- Being aware of specialty services and veterinarians in the appropriate geographic area.
- Being aware of client preferences regarding referral facilities.

Consider a referral when there are any of the following:

- A need for additional expertise and/or advanced training
- A need for additional equipment or services to provide further diagnostic testing or care
- An inconclusive diagnosis
- An unresolved or worsening medical condition

- A need for medical supervision (24 hours/7 days/week)
- Client dissatisfaction with the progress of the case

Acknowledge, respect and honor a client's request for a second opinion in a timely manner.

When a referral is indicated, to the best of his/her ability, communicate to the client:

- The purpose for the consultation or referral.
- The name, advanced credentials, and qualifications of the attending clinician(s) that they will be seeing.
- A brief overview of the anticipated referral experience.
- An approximate estimate of initial or anticipated costs of referral, including credit and billing policies of the referral hospital.
- The policies of the receiving hospital, should the patient be hospitalized, regarding phone calls and hospital visits.

Educate clients as to whether the referral facility is associated with a veterinary college/school to assist in managing the client's expectations as to the number of individuals expected to attend the referral, the fact that veterinary students, interns and residents may be involved with their animal's care and that the duration of an appointment may be longer.

Refrain from specifying to the client exactly which procedures will be undertaken except in cases when the referral is being made for a specific diagnostic procedure only as agreed upon by both the referring and receiving veterinarians.

Contact the referral veterinarian or hospital to notify them of the intent to refer and provide client and patient information including:

- Signalment
- Owner contact information
- Relevant medical history and presenting clinical signs
- Diagnostic tests performed with results or anticipated timeline for results
- Outline of medical treatment to date with times and dosages of most recent drug administrations
- Summary of relevant discussions with the owners or care-givers
- Assessment of medical condition at time of referral or last examination
- Personal contact information with clear expectations for follow-up communications.

Transfer the responsibility for the case once the referral has taken place. At that point, the healthcare decision process becomes the responsibility of the receiving veterinarian.

Avoid performing diagnostic tests for which the results are not likely to be available at the time of the referral in order avoid duplication of diagnostic test and additional client expense.

Avoid dispensing medications to the client for them to take to the referral center, except for dietary supplements or medications that the patient is currently receiving. Any other medications sent with the client should be clearly communicated to the receiving veterinarian.

Responsibilities of the Receiving Veterinarian

The receiving veterinarian should:

In general, be prepared for the possibility of receiving referral patients by:

- Providing a description of professional credentials to the community of referring veterinarians.
- Communicating the services, they provide to the veterinary community.
- Informing the veterinary community of their willingness to provide limited function referral services such as specific diagnostic procedures, therapies, or surgeries.
- Providing guidance to referring veterinarians as to how their fees should be discussed with clients prior to referral, for example as an estimate range or as a specific quote for certain procedures.
- Informing referring veterinarians of the nature and format preferred for transfer of medical record information.
- Providing referring veterinarians with an expected framework for case communication during referrals.

Clearly communicate to the referring veterinarian any specific diagnostic or treatment recommendations that should or should not occur prior to transport of the patient to the referral appointment.

Clearly communicate to the client, when patients are examined without referral, the need to include the usual attending veterinarian in any communications to provide optimal care for the patient throughout the course of treatment and the convalescent period.

Responsibilities of Both the Referring and Receiving Veterinarians

Both the referring and receiving veterinarian should:

Ensure that their primary focus, when considering a referral, is the best interest of the patient.

Work together to create a relationship built on mutual trust and respect in all matters of communication between themselves and the client.

Acknowledge that patient care may be best served through the referral process rather than client self-referral.

Make every effort to maintain and enhance the relationship the client has with both veterinarians.

Enhance the relationship and communication between the referring veterinarian and the receiving veterinarian in his/her marketing materials by:

- Emphasizing a team approach to patient care
- Focusing on education and improving awareness of services provided by board-certified specialists
- Emphasizing the importance of the role of primary care veterinarians

Recognize that telephone and electronic consultations require the time and resources of both the receiving veterinarian and the veterinarian requesting consultation, and that compensation may be appropriate. Receiving veterinarians should determine whether compensation is appropriate in a given case and should clearly communicate this to the veterinarian requesting the consultation.

Responsibilities of Owners

The owner or his/her agent should:

- Communicate freely with the referring veterinarian as to the expectations for an animal and the limits of costs that may be incurred.
- Provide a complete medical history to all relevant parties.
- Discuss in advance the expected cost for evaluation and treatment at the referral facility.
- Understand their obligation to meet financial commitments in a manner consistent with the mutually-understood policies of the referring and receiving veterinarian.
- Provide information regarding active insurance policies to all veterinarians.
- Inform any insurance agencies providing coverage that an animal is receiving veterinary care (in accordance with the insurance policy guidelines and stipulations).
- Make all necessary arrangements to ensure timely arrival at the designated time, day, and location of the referral appointment.
- Provide clear authorization, preferably in writing and at the time of the referral, if any non-owner individuals (e.g. a trainer or agent) are to be involved in medical or financial decision-making regarding a specific patient and communicate that authorization clearly to all parties involved at the time of the referral.

Responsibilities of Other Individuals

Trainers, agents and other individuals associated with a patient should:

- Inform owners accurately and in a timely fashion regarding the nature and extent of any required veterinary care.
- Communicate to the owner that the owner may at any time request to speak to the referring or receiving veterinarian.

- Inform veterinarians of the names and contact information of all legal owners and facilitate direct communication with owners for the decision-making process and financial arrangements (unless specific written authorization specifies otherwise).
- Have explicit written authorization, if possible, from owners if other individuals are to be accorded medical or financial decision-making authority for a patient.

During the Referral Visit

During the referral visit, the referring veterinarian transfers the responsibility for health-care decisions to the receiving veterinarian but remains accessible for communication. The receiving veterinarian should clearly explain all aspects of the examination, evaluation, diagnostic, and treatment procedures and options to the client. This process should emphasize support of the referring veterinarian to the fullest extent possible without a compromise of integrity. The receiving veterinarian should communicate with the referring veterinarian and client regularly about case progression and decisions. The receiving veterinarian should limit services to those related to the problem for which the animal was referred. Additional services should be provided only when they are in the best interest of the patient and after consultation with the referring veterinarian. All parties should work together to formulate a follow-up treatment and evaluation plan for the patient that can be implemented effectively and economically. It is the responsibility of the owner to clearly determine and communicate who is legally and financially responsible for the patient and assure this individual or their legal proxy is available for decision-making during the referral visit and at the time of patient discharge.

Responsibilities of the Referring Veterinarian

The referring veterinarian should:

- Transfer the responsibility for the case so that the health-care decision process becomes the responsibility of the receiving veterinarian.

Responsibilities of the Receiving Veterinarian

The receiving veterinarian should:

- Introduce themselves to the client and acknowledge communication with the referring veterinarian prior to patient admission. When multiple specialists become involved with a case, the names of all specialists should be clearly specified to the owner and referring veterinarian in a timely manner.
- Confirm that the referring veterinarian is the regular attending clinician; if not, obtain contact information for other veterinarians who may be involved with patient care and include all veterinarians in patient communication strategies.

- Emphasize to all parties the importance of the role of the primary care veterinarian, the receiving veterinarian, and the owner in the overall care and well-being of the patient, as well as the importance of accurate, concise, and open communication between all parties.
- Give the client a brief overview of the admission, examination, financial, and communication policies of the receiving veterinarian, practice, hospital, or institution.
- Discuss the history and medical treatment of the patient prior to referral, if possible. In emergency referral situations, obtain this information as soon as is practical.
- Assess the owner's understanding of the medical condition, anticipated therapy, and possible outcomes.
- Perform a clinical examination.
- Discuss findings, recommended diagnostic plans, and estimated costs with the owner before completing these diagnostic tests and procedures.
- Perform the agreed-upon diagnostic tests and procedures. Clearly explain to the owner any need for repeated diagnostic testing.
- To the extent possible, describe and explain all diagnostic findings with their implications for treatment and prognosis.
- Describe initial recommended medical or surgical treatment and monitoring plans, including estimated costs.
- Regularly inform client of the current invoice including potential charges that may not yet have appeared on the invoice.
- Set up a communication schedule with the owner and any other clearly identified appropriate parties (e.g., the trainer or other agent for the patient).
- Limit services to the problem for which the animal was referred. Additional services should be provided only when they are in the best interest of the patient and after consultation with the referring veterinarian.
- Support the referring veterinarian fully without compromising integrity. Always communicate and educate in a constructive and positive manner.
- At the earliest opportunity or at agreed upon intervals, inform the referring veterinarian of the tentative diagnoses, diagnostic and therapeutic plans, and all subsequent revisions. If possible, provide the referring veterinarian with daily updates, or as frequently as mutually agreed upon, on the status of hospitalized patients.
- Update the referring veterinarian and client (either through written or verbal communication) at similar times during the referral visit so that consistent and accurate updates are similarly understood by all parties.
- If another professional opinion is requested by the owner, discuss with the original referring veterinarian the client's desire to refer the patient. If possible, this should take place prior to transfer of patient care.
- Initiate communication with the referring veterinarian regarding when or if the referring veterinarian should resume care of the patient for the problem for which the patient was referred.

Responsibilities of Both the Referring and Receiving Veterinarians

Both the referring and receiving veterinarian should:

- Strive to enhance communication between all parties throughout the referral process.
- Ensure that the receiving veterinarian receives and is familiar with all pertinent information regarding the patient's medical history and any non-medical issues that should be considered for optimal case management.
- Ensure all contact information is up-to-date in the medical record system at the time of referral.
- Determine the frequency of communication between the referring veterinarian and the receiving veterinarian at the time of referral, based on previous interactions, or by mutual understanding.
- Determine the preferred method of communication (telephone, including home or cell, email, fax, or other) and when it is acceptable to contact each other outside of normal business hours.
- Communicate regularly and effectively through this agreed-upon schedule and format to:
 - Determine who will set up suggested treatment and monitoring, communications
 - Communicate openly with each other regarding all opportunities to improve the quality of care or service provided by either.
 - Address difficult situations early and directly, before serious communication problems develop.
 - Agree upon determinants of clinical response.
 - Consider communication schedule for pending diagnostic test results.
 - Create a discharge plan with appropriate consideration of capabilities of the client or home facility to carry out the proposed plan.
 - Determine who will be responsible for providing proposed medications.
 - Develop a plan for post-discharge communications including:
 - ❖ Notification of discharge from hospital.
 - ❖ Follow-up communication protocol with owner.
 - ❖ Inform clients of the pertinent services available and the extent of after-hour staffing. If available and deemed appropriate for the patient, the practice not offering 24-hour care should give clients the option of transferring patients to a facility that can provide that service.
 - ❖ Share the concern of the client with the other veterinarian as soon as possible, when a client expresses a concern regarding one of the veterinarians involved in the referral process and work to allay the concern.
 - ❖ Inform the other veterinarian when a patient is euthanized, or the patient dies during the convalescent period. This should be done as soon as possible (within 24 hours).

- ❖ Provide follow up information to involved veterinarians and the client in a timely manner. This should include information related to pending ancillary diagnostic test results and necropsy reports. Communicate with each other when they believe there is an opportunity to improve the quality of care or service provided by either.

Responsibilities of Owners

The owner or his/her agent should:

- Bring all medical records for the patient, vaccination history, health certificates and pertinent clinical history.
- Arrive at the referral appointment prepared to pay for all agreed-upon veterinary care in a way that conforms to the predetermined financial policies of the receiving veterinarian.
- Be realistic in assessing their individual financial situation and ability to pursue treatment based on estimates given by the referring and receiving veterinarians.
- Provide all contact information and be available as agreed upon to make necessary decisions as patient management progresses.
- Clearly determine and communicate who is legally and financially responsible for the patient and assure that this individual or their legal proxy is available for decision-making during time of referral.
- Ask questions of the referring and receiving veterinarians if any of the policies, procedures, or logistics concerning the referral process are not completely understood.
- Ensure that information they relay between the referring veterinarian and the receiving veterinarian is accurate and correct to minimize misunderstandings or factual errors in communication between parties.

Responsibilities of Other Individuals

- All individuals affiliated with veterinary practices, including veterinarians, veterinary technicians, and support staff, should maintain strict confidentiality of all information related to all patients including but not restricted to, confidentiality of patient identity, owner/agent identity, financial information, and medical record information.
- If an individual who is not the owner of the animal being examined is accorded financial or medical decision-making authority, that individual has the responsibility to provide appropriate contact information to all treating veterinarians and be accessible for discussions of patient condition.

After Referral

At the time of discharge of the patient, the receiving veterinarian should ensure that all relevant medical information and instructions for patient care are clearly communicated to the referring veterinarian. In most cases the referring veterinarian will then resume responsibility as the attending clinician for the patient by taking responsibility for any agreed-upon follow-up care as described in the discharge instructions. The receiving veterinarian should be informed of the results of follow-up evaluation and care. It is the responsibility of the owner to comply with all discharge instructions to the best of their ability and to communicate in a timely way with the veterinarians if unable to comply with the instructions or to meet the financial obligations incurred.

Responsibilities of the Referring Veterinarian

The referring veterinarian should:

- To the extent possible, be responsible for agreed-upon follow-up care as described in the discharge instructions from the receiving veterinarian.
- Inform the receiving veterinarian any time the patient is re-evaluated or re-examined for the problem(s) that lead to the initial referral, whether the problem was anticipated, or the examination was scheduled or specified within the discharge instructions.
- Honor any requests for follow-up information on the patient from the receiving veterinarian.

Responsibilities of the Receiving Veterinarian

The receiving veterinarian should:

- Ensure that effective communication has occurred with the referring veterinarian prior to transferring care back to the referring veterinarian for ongoing medical care in both a written (preferable) and oral format. This includes but is not limited to:
 - Diagnostic findings and interpretations
 - Status and prognosis
 - Treatment plans and recommendations for ongoing care
 - Level of follow-up care including timelines
 - The responsibilities of each veterinarian and how this information is to be communicated

- A copy of the discharge instructions given to the client and other communications deemed appropriate by the receiving veterinarian
 - Any pending tests that are then to be forwarded at the time the results become available
- After consultation with the referring veterinarian, establish a clear timeline and chain of responsibility for further follow-up examinations and recommendations.
 - Provide to the referring veterinarian a summary of the information that was provided to the client, including a copy of the discharge notes for the patient. The discharge notes for the patient should include the chief complaint, the diagnosis, a summary of the procedures, recommendation(s) for therapy, and the prognosis.
 - Provide a list of pending diagnostic test results at the time of discharge and communicate those results and their interpretation to the referring veterinarian in a timely manner.
 - Provide a supplemental letter and/or other medical information to the referring veterinarian upon request. This may also include images and video clips captured during examinations and stored in electronic format on CD, DVD, or flash drive storage devices. Provision of this medical record information may require written consent from the owner and/or an appropriate fee as determined by the policy of the referral veterinarian, clinic, hospital, or institution and in compliance with appropriate laws.
 - Upon request, provide treatment/observation sheets to accompany the patient when the patient is returning to the referring veterinarian for immediate on-going care or is referred to another receiving veterinarian for postoperative care.
 - With the consent of the owner, provide a summary or the complete medical record to designated individuals (e.g., the trainer, agent, or farm manager). In many cases, transfer of this information to multiple parties will require written owner consent and a fee that will be charged to the owner.
 - Provide medication and any special dietary needs sufficient for the animal's travel and intervening time before a follow-up appointment with the referring veterinarian; subsequent medication should be supplied by the referring veterinarian unless all parties agree to an alternative arrangement. Recommendations for sources of long-term medication or special diets should be made by the referring veterinarian if indicated.
 - Inform the referring veterinarian when the patient returns for evaluation of the problem that led to referral and significant changes in medical condition are identified, whether the problem was anticipated, or the examination was scheduled or specified within the discharge instructions.
 - Provide appropriate tactful, constructive, and positive education of the client and referring veterinarians.

Responsibilities of Both the Referring and Receiving Veterinarians

Both the referring and receiving veterinarians should:

- Ensure that the referring veterinarian does not receive any financial fee, reward, or other service from the receiving veterinarian that is in any way connected with the referral of the case.

Responsibilities of Owners

The owner or his/her agent should:

- To the best of their ability, comply with all discharge instructions and communicate in a timely way with referring and referral veterinarians in the case of an inability to comply with these instructions.
- Meet all financial obligations incurred with all involved parties including the referring veterinarian, the referral veterinarian, and any associated parties (e.g. transportation fees, external laboratory charges, external consultants, etc.)
- Communicate all relevant information with the referring veterinarian, the receiving veterinarian, agents, handlers, and trainers in a timely manner.
- Communicate changes in the patient's status pertinent to the referral to both the referring and receiving veterinarian.

Responsibilities of Other Individuals

- If an individual other than the owner is the primary responsible party for the patient, that individual has the responsibility to maintain clear communication with the true owner of the patient throughout the referral process.
- Any individual responsible for follow-up care of the patient must maintain communication with the treating veterinarians to be aware of the timing of discharge and the requirements for follow-up care. Such an individual must clearly communicate to the referring and receiving veterinarians their ability to comply with all discharge instructions for further care of the animal.

Legal and Ethical Considerations in the Sharing of Medical Records

- Veterinary medical records are an integral part of veterinary care. The records must comply with the standards established by the SVMA.
- Medical records are the property of the practice and the practice owner. The original records must be retained by the practice for 5 years.
- The information within veterinary medical records is considered privileged and confidential. It must not be released except by court order or consent of the owner of the patient.
- Veterinarians are obligated to provide copies of medical records when requested by the client. Veterinarians should secure a written release to document that request.
- Without the express permission of the practice owner, it is unethical for a veterinarian to remove,

- copy, or use the medical records or any part of any record.

Conclusions

For all patients, effective communication between referring and receiving veterinarians, clients, farm managers and any other agent for an animal is essential to ensure optimal patient care. Despite the best efforts of all involved, there will be times when communication is less than optimal or when difficult information must be discussed. Referring and receiving veterinarians are encouraged to seek training to develop communication skills through any of a wide variety of excellent public and private resources. This type of training is especially beneficial for young professionals at the beginning of their veterinary career.

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The SVMA thanks the American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP), American College of Veterinary Internal Medicine (ACVIM), American College of Veterinary Surgeons (ACVS), American College of Theriogenologists (ACT), and American College of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care (ACVECC) for allowing extensive use of similar documents developed through their collaborative efforts.