

# Veterinary Board of Tasmania

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Dear Colleagues,

The Veterinary profession will no doubt be faced with a variety of challenges, changes and uncertainty in the next few months as a result of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. First and foremost the Board's priority is the health and safety of the veterinary community. We hope this document and future correspondence regarding COVID-19 will assist you when making the tough decisions ahead and enable you to maintain personal safety whilst continuing to provide the best care you can to your patients at this challenging time.

**Your personal wellbeing and that of your colleagues, staff and clients must take priority.** In the first instance, it is important that you and the public are aware of and adhere to current advice and guidance from the Government, as follows:

- [Tasmanian Government – COVID-19 website](#)
- [Australian Government Department of Health website](#)

We have recently received queries relating to effective contingency planning for veterinarians. A pandemic may place you in situations where you find yourself compromising your usual standards and leave you questioning what your legal obligations are. It is prudent for vets and employers to start thinking now about how you might manage the risks of COVID-19, at home and at work.

We understand that animal health and welfare will always be a vet's primary concern. We encourage the profession to work together both within a workplace and within a region to co-ordinate the best care possible for our animals and to use clinical and professional judgement when assessing risk and making decisions. Building relationships between veterinary practices can only result in the best possible care and we encourage all veterinary hospitals to show professionalism and come together as required.

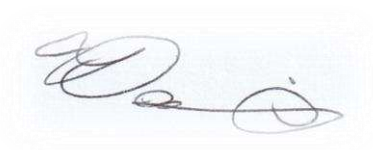
The guidance to follow is designed to be workable and applicable to wide-ranging scenarios. We acknowledge that in these exceptional circumstances, you may need to depart from the advice set out in the Standards and Guidelines, in order to safeguard yourself and your colleagues, as well as public health.

Some may feel anxious about how decision making in such circumstances might be viewed if a concern is raised with the Board about you. The Board always considers concerns on the specific facts, **taking into account the context in which decisions were made**, together with any other relevant factors. We also consider additional advice, such as this correspondence from the Board, when handling disciplinary cases.

We therefore wish to reassure you that if you act reasonably in the light of the available information and can provide justifications for the decisions you have made, it is hard to see circumstances where the Board would find you had acted inappropriately. **To this end, we would advise you to simply include a detailed note of any the decisions you make regarding changes made as a result of this outbreak within your clinical records.**

The Board will evolve its guidance and keep it under active review as circumstances change and as official entities provide further information. You will be kept updated via email. The Board sincerely wish you and your loved ones safety and strength during this uncertain time.

Yours sincerely



**Dr Tering Davies**

Chairperson

*on behalf of the Veterinary Board of Tasmania*

**Call for advice.** If you think you might have COVID-19 because of recent travel or contact with a confirmed case, phone the Tasmanian Public Health Hotline (1800 671 738) for advice. If you haven't travelled or had contact with confirmed case, phone your doctor or healthdirect Australia (1800 022 222).

# Coronavirus (COVID-19) – FAQ for vets

The FAQs set out below aim to provide a framework to assist veterinary practices with decision-making in these very challenging and rapidly-changing circumstances. It is of course impossible to provide guidance on every situation that might arise, and we are mindful that much of the following advice is likely to be most applicable to small animal practice.

If you have specific queries that go beyond the advice set out below, please contact the Registrar by email [vetboardtas@gmail.com](mailto:vetboardtas@gmail.com).

## 1. What if we **have** to completely close our premises?

This situation may arise if, for example, a member of your practice team tests positive for the virus and the entire staff has to self-isolate.

You should **notify your clients** as soon as possible that the practice is closed and let them know how long this will be the case. Where appropriate, direct clients to other sources of assistance. Ensure that your **telephone system** is appropriately diverted or, if it cannot be diverted, that there is a recorded message informing clients of how they can access veterinary help.

If you are contacted by a client and you think their **animal requires veterinary attention**, consider whether it is possible for you to see the animal at a venue other than the practice without having to have contact with its owner or putting the owner at risk.

If this is not possible, consider to what extent **services can be provided remotely**. This may include telephone calls directing clients to other sources of assistance or giving advice via remote means as to how to manage conditions at home.

In exceptional circumstances, it may also include the **remote prescribing of prescription animal remedies (PARs)**. However, as there can be no physical examination of the animal, this should only be done as a last resort where you are satisfied the risk is outweighed by the benefit, and you can justify your action if asked to do so. The factors to be considered in this respect are set out below in FAQ 4.

If you provide your own **out-of-hours emergency service for**, you should take steps to find another provider to cover the period that your practice is closed for current cases requiring after-hours access/care. If your out-of-hours cover is through a separate provider, check that they are still able to cover your service. Inform your clients of the out-of-hours arrangements in place whilst the practice is closed. See also FAQ 4.

## 2. What if we are short-staffed and cannot provide our normal level of service?

This situation may arise if members of staff have to self-isolate or test positive for the virus, but the practice is still able to remain open.

You should **review the services you provide** and, in so far as possible, continue to provide those services as best you can even if it means providing them on a more limited basis than usual.

Services that have the most impact on animal health and welfare, for example emergency care, should be prioritised.

You should **inform your clients** of the strain on your practice and that they may have to wait longer for non-urgent appointments and, when they have an appointment, to expect longer waiting times in the waiting room.

Consider the extent to which **services can be provided remotely**. This may include telephone calls directing clients to other sources of assistance or giving advice via remote means as to how to manage conditions at home.

**Remote prescribing of PARs** is less likely to be necessary in this scenario as physical examination of animals will still be possible, but the need could still arise. Again, the factors to be considered are set out below in FAQ 4.

### 3. What if one of our clients is self-isolating/tested positive for coronavirus and their animal is unwell?

Remind all **owners not to bring their pets to the surgery if they are self-isolating** because of suspected or confirmed Covid-19. Consider delaying routine treatments and consults for pets belonging to people who are self-isolating.

Draw up plans for dealing with emergency cases. These should aim to restrict any interaction with the owners and manage the risks associated with environmental contamination (eg on the fur of the animals). This may include:

- asking owners to nominate a friend/family member from outside their home to bring the animal to your practice (there is no expectation that you will undertake home visits when it's not safe to do so);
- using PPE (similar to MRSA or Parvovirus cases) when examining and treating pets from a household where Covid-19 is suspected or confirmed;
- designating a specific area of the practice for pets from a household where Covid-19 is suspected or confirmed.

Consider whether the animal could be brought to you (or you go to it) without putting your own (or someone else's) health at **unnecessary risk**.

The [current guidance from the World Health Organisation](#) is that there is no evidence that companion animals can be infected with the new coronavirus. However, if you do decide to see the animal in person, **normal biosecurity measures**, as well as additional government guidance on hand washing, should be observed.

Consider the extent to which you can **assist remotely** - this may include giving advice via remote means as to how to manage the animal's condition at home or, in exceptional circumstances, it may also include the remote prescribing of PARs medicines.

However, as there can be no physical examination of the animal, this should only be done as a last resort where you are satisfied the risk is outweighed by the benefit, and you can justify your action if asked to do so. The factors to be considered are set out below in FAQ 4.

There may be instances where, in order to ensure your own safety, an animal needs to be taken away from its owners to undergo  **euthanasia for welfare reasons**. This is likely to be particularly upsetting as most owners will want to be with their animal at the end of life. As such, you may wish to consider whether you can direct them to an appropriate source of support, for example a bereavement or counselling service.

#### 4. When making decisions that go beyond the current Legislation, Standards and Guidelines, what factors should I consider?

When making decisions of this kind, the **key questions to consider** are:

- Is immediate action necessary in the interests of animal welfare?
- Can I delay treatment until a physical examination is possible?
- Can I direct the animal/owner to another source of assistance?
- What are the client's views?
- What are the risks (including consideration of the nature and quantity of any drugs being prescribed)?
- What are the benefits?
- How, and how often, will I follow up with the owner to monitor their animal's progress?
- In my professional opinion, is it reasonable in all the circumstances?
- Can I justify my decision?

If you make decisions that deviate from the *VBT Code of Professional Conduct* or supporting guidance, you should **make detailed notes of the decision**, together with the reasons for it (taking into account the above questions) and **ensure that any consent given by the client is fully informed**, for example, the risks associated with any medication prescribed remotely may be higher because there has been no physical examination. See also FAQ 7.

#### 5. Is there anything we can do now to prepare for these scenarios?

There are a number of things you could do to prepare for the above scenarios:

- Carry out **risk assessments** for all staff to minimise exposure if they have comorbidities.
- Make a **contingency plan** for how your practice would deal with one of the above scenarios, consider reference to your business continuity plan if you have one.
- Familiarise yourself with **guidance on infection prevention and control** from the Australian and Tasmania Government (links below) and consider whether any of the suggested measures could be applicable and implemented at your practice.
- **Ask clients** if they or a member of their household are currently self-isolating or have tested positive for the virus when booking appointments and before attending any home/farm visits or offsite consultations. You could also consider sending a short questionnaire to external visitors (including clients) before they attend the practice in order to identify whether their attendance poses any particular risk to the visitor or your team. You may wish to ask about:
  - places they, members of their household or others they have come into contact with, have travelled to in recent weeks; and
  - whether they or anyone they have come into contact with is symptomatic.

- Consider whether it is necessary to **reduce the number of people attending the premises** or to limit physical contact with clients. This could be achieved by asking that only one person accompanies an animal when attending the practice, or by asking clients to wait in the waiting room, or even their cars, while you examine their animal. The consultation with the owner could then take place over the telephone. Please be mindful to ensure that directions are taken only from the animal's rightful owner or agent of the owner.
- Encourage making **prior arrangements with other local practices** in the event you need to redirect cases and agree to take on additional cases from neighbouring practices should they be in a similar position.
- Make plans as to how **practice resources could be pooled** with those of other practices in order help to ensure that veterinary services can continue to be provided to the local community in the event of staff shortages and practice closures.
- Plan for how you would issue (and ensure clients can fulfil) **'remote' prescriptions for medicines** if the need arises. See FAQ 7.

## 6. Good hygiene

Everyone must **practise good hygiene to protect against infection** and prevent the virus spreading. Good hygiene includes:

- covering your coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue;
- disposing of tissues properly;
- washing your hands often with soap and water, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet;
- hand hygiene between touching every patient - either sanitising or washing and drying hands;
- using alcohol-based hand sanitisers;
- cleaning and disinfecting surfaces; and
- if you are sick, avoiding contact with others and staying more than 1.5 metres away from people.

**Wash your hands frequently and thoroughly, with soap and warm, running water.**

Reassure family and friends that, if they are well, they do not need to wear a facemask. Facemasks are generally for people who are sick. There is no reason to wear a facemask for protection against COVID-19 unless you are directly caring for people who are suspected cases.

## 7. Using veterinary telemedicine (VTM)

VTM is not currently provided for in the Tasmanian Veterinary Standards. However, VTM may be a helpful tool to minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19. We expect veterinarians to use their professional judgment to decide whether using VTM is appropriate in particular circumstances.

The VSS4 allows that direct examination of the animals to be treated may be omitted before supply of drugs in the following circumstances:

- a) the vet has an existing relationship through having a detailed knowledge of the client and the client's animals. Detailed knowledge would include records of regular visits, clinical examinations, pathology/laboratory results, previous appropriate supply of drugs;
- b) for the immediate relief of suffering only.

In light of the risk COVID-19 poses, we believe that, if it becomes widespread in Tasmania, it may be appropriate for veterinarians to use VTM to authorise medicines where they can reasonably judge it safe to do so using patient histories and/or recent visits to the premises even without having seen the animal recently.

While this departs from the clear standard set in the Code, we consider that it may be justified in this extreme situation to protect veterinarians, their staff, and the wider public. Risk assessment and professional judgment by the veterinarian in each case is still vital. Refer to FAQ 4 regarding making these decisions.

## 8. Further guidance and resources

Tasmanian Government - [COVID-19 website](#)

Australian Government - [Department of Health website](#)

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons - [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) FAQ](#)

Veterinary Council of New Zealand – [Guidance and resources for Vets](#)

Veterinary Council of New Zealand – [Guidance and resources for Pet Owners](#)

American Veterinary Medical Association - [What do you need to know about coronavirus?](#)

British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA) - [COVID-19 and Pets](#)

British Veterinary Association (BVA) - [Coronavirus disease \(Covid-19\) – updates for the veterinary profession](#)

World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) - [The New Coronavirus and Companion Animals – Advice for WSAVA Members](#)

### Sources:

<https://www.bva.co.uk/news-and-blog/news-article/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-updates-for-the-veterinary-profession/>

<https://www.rcvs.org.uk/setting-standards/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus-covid-19/>

[https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable\\_diseases\\_prevention\\_unit/infectious\\_diseases/coronavirus](https://www.dhhs.tas.gov.au/publichealth/communicable_diseases_prevention_unit/infectious_diseases/coronavirus)

[https://vetcouncil.org.nz/Web/News/Articles/COVID-19\\_for\\_vets.aspx](https://vetcouncil.org.nz/Web/News/Articles/COVID-19_for_vets.aspx)

Document updated 26 March 2020 – to include Tasmanian Government's new COVID-19 website.