

## **Ethical and Professional Utilization of the Credentialed Veterinary Technician and Assistant**

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Veterinary technicians play a vital role in the clinic operations of a modern veterinary practice, as do assistants. As support staff working under the supervision of a licensed veterinarian, veterinary technicians can perform or assist with a wide variety of tasks; however, they cannot diagnose, prescribe, perform surgery, or engage in any activity prohibited by a state's veterinary practice act. Understanding the roles and resources this professional support can offer requires an understanding of the education and regulations.

### **Clearing up confusion over credentials**

The term veterinary technician has many applications, and there is confusion as to the definition and regulations. Veterinary technicians have been educated in the care and handling of animals, the basic principles of normal and abnormal life processes, and in many laboratory and clinical procedures. A certified, licensed, or registered (the term used varies by state) veterinary technician is a graduate from a two-year, American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) accredited program from a community college, college, or university. Almost every state requires a veterinary technician to take and pass a credentialing exam. Passage assures the public that the veterinary technician has entry-level knowledge of the duties they are asked to perform in the veterinary clinic or hospital.

The following definitions will help differentiate the various titles held by veterinary technicians:

*Certification* is the recognition by the private sector of voluntarily achieved standards. Certification is usually bestowed by a private sector, nonprofit, professional association or independent board on those members who achieve specified standards. Certification is therefore distinguished from licensure because it is generally non-governmental and voluntary. Confusion can result when the title "certified" is used for a licensed profession, such as Certified Public Accountant.

*Registration* refers to the keeping of lists of practitioners by a governmental agency. It can be equivalent to licensure but may also be distinguished from licensure in that criteria for registration may not exist, and registration may not be required for practice.

*Licensure/Licensing* is understood as the permission to do something as given by an authority, with the implication that one would not be permitted to do this thing without permission. To be licensed is more than a statement of qualification, as certification is. It is a statement of qualification *and* the right to do something otherwise not permitted by a given authority.

Both certification and licensure carry the connotation of trust, belief, and confidence, for without these attributes, the certification or the license would have little worth. Multiple titles, however, can be confusing for the public. To simplify this, the AVMA now recommends use of the term credentialed veterinary technician.

Many states delineate between what credentialed veterinary technicians can do and what assistants can do. Veterinary assistants support the veterinarian and/or the veterinary technician in their daily tasks. The assistant may be asked to perform kennel work, assist in the restraint and handling of animals, feed and exercise the animals, or spend time on clerical duties. However, in large animal and equine practices, these roles are not clearly defined, as most employees in an equine or mixed animal practice are assistants or on-the-job trained. The terms veterinary technician, assistant, and nurse are often used interchangeably, and yet each term describes the role of the veterinary technician in an equine practice.

Some veterinary technicians decide to specialize in a certain area. According to the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA), an academy is a group of veterinary technicians who have received formal, specialized training, testing, and certification in an area. The 16 currently approved Academies include specialties in dental technology, anesthesia, internal medicine, emergency and critical care, behavior, zoological medicine, diagnostic imaging, nutrition, and equine veterinary nursing, among others.

### **Ramifications for practices**

So, what are the implications for the practice owner and the DVM employing and supervising veterinary technicians and assistants? Know the laws in your state. Regardless of the rules and regulations currently in place, always strive for the ethical and best practice for utilization of staff:

- Employ a qualified credentialed veterinary technician
- Continue to train and educate your assistants; support them to strive for more
- Wherever possible and feasible, designate your credentialed veterinary technicians to:
  - Perform anesthesia (pre-exam, induce, monitor, recover)
  - Perform catheter placement and monitor
  - Assist in surgery or with critical procedures
  - Perform ICU and critical care/regulated drug treatments
  - Communicate with clients/telemedicine

And if a case or procedure requires utilization of a credentialed veterinary technician and you do not have one:

- Know the rules and regulations in your state
- Qualify the staff you do have available
- Do not ask them to perform a task they are not qualified or skilled to do
- Advise your client if necessary/consent
- Know when to refer

- Ensure the health and welfare of the horse/animal is first and foremost

Your technician staff can take on the responsibility of ensuring they are contributing to the practice as well. As in most successful operations, it is a two-way street. Some areas where a technician can assume responsibility for providing value to the practice are:

- Seeking out CE and advanced training and education in a specific area
- Sharing it with other staff members, technicians, and doctors
- Heading up client education in the practice
- Undertaking marketing of the practice to the community
- Taking on the title of business assistant and learning aspects of accounting, business tools, budgeting, and cash flow
- Being proactive by anticipating the needs of both the doctor and the practice, and then finding means to fulfill them
- Having a positive attitude
- Approaching problems or challenges creatively
- Forming superior skills in time management and competency (synergism)
- Adapting by being flexible; open to new ideas, techniques, and products; and embracing change
- Establishing worth by participating and contributing; and looking for ways to improve on a process, technique, or system
- Treating the job as a professional career by participating in professional associations and in the community, such as speaking at high school career days; visiting technician schools; and attending local, state, and national veterinary conferences.

### **The increasing value of veterinary technicians**

As technology becomes more important in the medical services offered in both small and large animal practice, the role of the veterinary technician will become even more valuable. The veterinarian will need to rely increasingly on their support staff to understand, implement, and use new equipment, new software, and new diagnostic tools and technology. Digital radiology, ultrasound and the ability to archive digital images on the web or into medical records is becoming a standard of care. The days of the solo equine veterinarian doing it all are becoming a tradition of the past. Clients are more educated and aware of new medical advances, and they are beginning to demand that their horses receive the very best medical care available—and that includes staff. The veterinary technician plays an important role in an equine practice being able to offer that level of care and medical expertise to clients.

The veterinary technician in an equine practice is a valuable investment. They can save you time, which saves you money; they can perform laboratory and other diagnostic procedures that increase income centers; they can allow you to concentrate on the aspects of veterinary medicine that you enjoy and should focus on such as diagnosing, prescribing, performing surgery, and communicating with clients so you experience less burnout; and they can be your partner, teammate, and support system in addition to being your veterinary assistant, nurse,

and technician. It may take investment of time, money, guidance, and professional mentoring, but the rewards and the possibilities are many.

You may ask, where do I find a technician who has all of these qualities? You may only need to cultivate and encourage one of your present support staff, or you may need to search outside your practice for a technician who is qualified in the areas your practice needs.

Consider what your day would be like if your technician was allowed, encouraged, and shown how to do all of these tasks for you so you didn't have to do it all: You arrive at 9:00 a.m. and all of your hospitalized patients have been examined, their treatments (per your instructions) have been completed, their records updated, and an overview of their status is ready for your review. You order the lab work and the diagnostic procedures. While you are making phone calls and checking the appointment book, the procedures are carried out. Your appointments arrive and your technician makes sure the client paperwork is correct and has anticipated your needs by gathering all the equipment, medications, and supplies needed for the procedures. You visit with the client, while the technician performs the physical exam and takes a brief history. The technician takes the X-rays, assists with the lameness exams or the ultrasounds, and you are free to visit with the client further or start your next appointment. You then have your first surgery and the technician has prepared the patient for surgery, all records and X-rays are ready for your review, the pre-surgical lab work has been done, the surgical packs and anesthesia equipment are ready and the horse is on the table ready for you to perform surgery. Upon completion, you leave to talk to the client, and the horse is bandaged, recovered, and monitored.

For your farm call, the technician drives so you can make calls and review records. At the farm, the technician gets all the medications and equipment ready, assists you, puts everything back in its place, and then prepares the invoice and collects the bill. On the way home, the technician enters all the data into the medical records or on your day log, updates your appointment book, and schedules recalls. Once back at the clinic, the technician develops the X-rays, and then restocks the truck for the next call. It is 4:00 p.m. and after checking on all the hospitalized cases, you leave for the day, knowing the technician will take care of the treatments, monitor the status of the surgery patient, call you with an update, and prepare for the next day.

Now imagine what your day would be like if you did not have a technician doing all or most of these tasks for you. Surveys have shown that employing and utilizing a credentialed veterinary technician can increase your bottom line by about \$50,000.

### **Challenges to overcome**

There is a shortage of certified technicians in the equine and large animal field, mainly due to the lack of professional recognition and because the accredited veterinary technician schools do not emphasize equine-related courses. Of the 120 AVMA-accredited veterinary technology programs in the United States, 15 offer 4-year degrees and five offer distance learning. In many of these programs, the equine courses are optional or encompass only a portion of a semester. For some, it does not make economic sense to quit working in an equine practice to attend a

technician school for two years where they will probably not learn any more than they already know and have no guarantee of an increase in salary. For a technician who has pursued certification, the lack of recognition and pay in equine practice is often a professional disappointment. They have pursued two years of veterinary technology training, received a degree, and have passed state and national board exams. It is difficult to justify that commitment to a profession or career that often deems your worth to the practice as a few dollars above minimum wage. There is also a lack of trust from the equine veterinary community that the technician schools will teach or train their assistants better than they can do in their own practice. The trend, however, toward supporting and assisting in offering more education and training for equine technicians and support staff is changing.

Challenges facing the veterinary technician profession include:

*Pay:* A November 2016 survey by NAVTA reported that members averaged \$15–\$20 per hour, for full time employment. This is much lower for equine and large animal, where the range is more \$10–\$18 full time. Technologists and technicians are not exempt under Section 13(a)(1) from the minimum wage and overtime requirements of the FLSA because they generally do not meet the requirements for the learned professional exemption. As such, you cannot pay credentialed veterinary technicians on salary vs. per hour unless they are in a supervisory position, supervising 75% of the time and supervising at least 3 to 5 other employees.

*Reciprocity:* Each state has its own rules, regulation, and state exam. Even if you have passed the VTNE, not all states recognize that status and may require you to sit for another state exam or even retake the VTNE. This severely hampers veterinary technicians from moving to other states to find work, or if their spouse or family members are relocating.

*Lack of Standardization:* We do not have the same title in all states, the same level of job responsibility or level of supervision, nor title protection. This is confusing and cumbersome for the profession.

*The Veterinary Nurse Initiative:* NAVTA created this initiative two years ago to try to address some of these issues; however, the focus became more of changing the name to veterinary nurse. The title nurse is protected in 39 states, and the ANA is opposed to our using this title when we do not have standards of education and levels of responsibility in place.

There are changes and challenges facing our industry: a shortage of veterinarians entering large animal practice; a new millennium demanding more life balance (no weekends, no emergency, 4-day work weeks, time off for family and vacation, etc.); wellness issues (suicide); student debt; and movement towards more telemedicine—what does that do to the VCPR? There is an ever-increasing number of veterinary technicians leaving the field, with the average being five years in the profession. We need to work together to bring solutions to these challenges and have open communication. Veterinarians cannot weather this by themselves—they need support staff and a veterinary team partner who is there for the long run. Just as technicians cannot go through this profession without a veterinarian.