

Fitness to Practise
A Guide for UK Providers
of Veterinary Nursing
Education and Student
Veterinary Nurses



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Introduction

Veterinary nurses play a fundamental role in the provision of veterinary services. They are committed to the nursing care of animals and ensure that welfare needs are met. They are also relied upon to perform a range of diagnostic tests and carry out medical treatments and minor surgical procedures under veterinary direction.

Good technical skills are essential, but the role of the veterinary nurse encompasses much more; it is a role that requires compassion, confidence and resilience. The veterinary nurse must be a strong team player and a good communicator. Veterinary surgeons will trust the veterinary nurse to perform delegated tasks and adhere to instructions, and will rely on them to have the awareness to know when to seek their help. Clients will trust the veterinary nurse to take care of their animals and will look to the veterinary nurse for guidance on maintaining the health of their animals. In short, do not underestimate the vital role that veterinary nurses perform.

In February 2015, a new Royal Charter was granted to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). This brought professional recognition to the veterinary nursing profession and confirms the RCVS as its regulator. A registered veterinary nurse commits to following the RCVS *Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses* (the *Code*) and keeping their skills and knowledge up-to-date. If they fall short of their professional responsibilities, veterinary nurses may be subject to the RCVS disciplinary process.

Student veterinary nurses need to be prepared for life as a registered professional in a public-facing role with responsibilities for animal welfare. This guide discusses the concept of being 'fit to practise' and can sit alongside the relevant course modules.

Being fit to practise is a fundamental requirement of any professional. Fitness to practise is not just about achieving academic qualifications; it is about being of good character, being responsible and being worthy of the trust and confidence of the public and your peers. Those found not fit to practise may face sanctions, possibly even removal from their professional register.

Training providers have a responsibility to address any potential fitness to practise concerns in their students. This is because student veterinary nurses are the future of the profession and they work with animals and the public during the course of their training.

A note on this guide

This guide has been produced by a Working Party of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and representatives from a variety of training providers and the British Veterinary Nursing Association.

The guide is split into two parts. Part one provides guidance for training providers on recognising and addressing fitness to practise concerns. It is accepted that each training provider will have in place its own specific guidelines and procedures for dealing with fitness to practise cases, but we encourage training providers to have regard to this guidance as an example of good practice.

Part two sets out broad principles of fitness to practise which student veterinary nurses should follow and which training providers should expect and uphold. The RCVS has no powers to regulate student veterinary nurses but hopes that its future members are prepared for being a member of a regulated profession and abiding by the *Code*.

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Part one

Recognising fitness to practise concerns and addressing them appropriately

This section provides guidance for providers of veterinary nursing education on recognising and addressing fitness to practise concerns.

What is fitness to practise?

Professionals hold a position of trust and responsibility. The public expects professionals to conduct themselves in a way that justifies this trust and fellow professionals rely on their peers to uphold their profession's good reputation. Fitness to practise is about demonstrating, in both professional and private life, that one can practise their profession properly, safely and with respect for the trust and responsibility placed upon them.

Recognising fitness to practise concerns

Providers of veterinary nursing education have a responsibility to recognise fitness to practise concerns amongst their students and investigate accordingly. Their students will one day apply for registration with the RCVS, which effectively gives them a licence to practise as a veterinary nurse. As such, the RCVS relies on the confirmation of the training providers that the incoming members of the profession are of good character and that any concerns have been properly investigated and addressed.

It is important that fitness to practise processes are used fairly and sensibly.

Training providers may have academic procedures, disciplinary procedures and fitness to study / health protocols, as well as fitness to practise procedures. Consideration will need to be given to which is appropriate in a particular situation. For example, it is possible for a matter to amount to a disciplinary issue without raising fitness to practise concerns, and vice versa. In some circumstances, an issue may look like a disciplinary matter, but investigations could reveal wider fitness to practise concerns and the case may need to progress as such.

The concept of fitness to practise is not easily defined, and it can be difficult to know when something could be a fitness

to practise concern. It can help to consider whether any one or more of the following is compromised by a student's behaviour:

- Protection of animal welfare
- Protection of the public
- Proper standards of conduct
- Compliance with relevant legislation eg animal welfare legislation, equality and discrimination legislation.
- Public confidence in the profession, as represented by its student members
- The reputation of the profession, as represented by its student members
- The wider public interest

With reference to these principles, where there is a serious or repeated concern about a student's ability to continue their course or their ability to practise after graduation, it is advisable for the training provider to consider instigating a fitness to practise investigation.

Before a final decision is made, however, training providers should have regard to what it is they are trying to achieve. Promotion of the above principles should be the aim of fitness to practise proceedings; fitness to practise proceedings are not about punishment.

It is also helpful to consider the following before deciding whether to commence fitness to practise proceedings:

- **Fitness to practise is about minimum standards**

Fitness to practise is about meeting the minimum standards required to practise safely and effectively. When we talk about fitness to practise concerns in the context of students, we mean something that is fundamentally incompatible with one day being a registered professional who has certain responsibilities and who works in the public eye.

- **A student is not a fully-fledged professional**

While students should be encouraged to reach high standards, there does also need to be allowances for

learning, mistakes and errors of judgement. Consideration of the student's age and year of study may also be relevant. In some circumstances, what may be of significant concern in a student approaching graduation may be more excusable and of less concern in a first-year student.

- **Insight**

When conduct or behaviour raises potential fitness to practise concerns, the student in question may not understand or accept the implications of what they have done. In other words, they may have little or no insight into their actions. A failure to understand why something calls fitness to practise into question can be of concern in itself, as it may indicate an inability to appreciate risk and, in turn, a potential for repetition of the behaviour.

Insight goes beyond showing remorse and regret; it is about understanding why certain behaviour calls fitness to practise into question and what steps are required to remedy any shortcomings, as well as a willingness to engage with such steps. Insight may be demonstrated by self-reporting of concerns and engaging with any investigations.

The training provider may consider that the student's insight is relevant to the response to the concern. Insight must not, however, distract from investigating serious concerns. In some cases, despite the student having insight, the public interest may require a thorough investigation into potential fitness to practise concerns. In all cases, insight may be taken into account as a mitigating factor at the stage when sanctions are considered.

- **The public element**

Public trust and confidence is a key part of professional regulation. When considering whether a particular matter raises fitness to practise concerns, it can be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

What would the ordinary member of the public think about what student X has done?

What would the ordinary member of the public think if we decided not to investigate the concerns? Could we defend that decision?

What would the ordinary member of the public think if we did decide to treat this as a fitness to practise matter? Would they think that was a fair decision?

- **Deliberate or reckless behaviour**

Deliberate or reckless behaviour, whether or not it causes harm or adverse consequences, is perhaps more likely to undermine the public's trust and confidence than an incident that simply involves an accident. In cases of deliberate or

reckless behaviour, it may be difficult to justify not instigating a fitness to practise investigation, especially where the behaviour is serious or repeated.

Reporting concerns

All those who are involved in the student's education need to know who is responsible for addressing any fitness to practise concerns and to whom a report should be made.

Concerns or allegations may be raised by:

- The student themselves – a 'self-referral'
- Fellow students
- Members of staff at the training provider
- The training practice
- The awarding organisation
- Other paraprofessionals
- Members of the public
- The police
- Anonymous sources

Most likely, concerns or allegations will be raised with the training provider, the training practice or the awarding organisation. There must be certainty between all parties as to who will deal with concerns, rather than assuming that it is someone else's responsibility. Information may need to be shared and each party should have processes in place to ensure this is done efficiently, sensitively and in accordance with data protection legislation.

It can be sensible for training providers to share their codes of conduct and fitness to practise policies with training practices and be clear about what should happen in the event of concerns. It is important to maintain good communication links. Students should be informed that the policies of their training provider apply when they are on placement or when employed.

Managing risk

A fair and proper fitness to practise process cannot be rushed and will take time. In some cases, however, the concerns will be very serious and there may be a real risk that the behaviour will be repeated, perhaps with the potential to cause harm to animals or the public. In these cases, provided that fitness to practise policies permit, it may be necessary to consider whether interim measures are required to minimise any risks, for example, temporary suspension from the course or training practice.

If it is considered that interim measures are required, these should be proportionate to the level of risk and should be periodically assessed for suitability as the substantive investigation progresses. Full and proper reasons should be given if a decision is made to invoke interim measures. The student should also have the opportunity to appeal the decision.

This is a very serious step to take and can have significant implications for the student. It is therefore suggested that interim measures are reserved for the most exceptional cases and carried out in accordance with the relevant protocol.

Providing support

Training providers should recognise that being subject to a fitness to practise investigation can be a daunting and stressful experience. As such, students should be offered independent support. A referral to counselling or a peer support programme, for example, could be considered.

Training providers should also bear in mind that students raising concerns about their peers may well have worries and concerns, and support should also be offered to these students.

Fair process

The RCVS does not prescribe a specific fitness to practise process to be followed by the providers of veterinary nursing education. Training providers are responsible for devising their own procedures and rules, and these may differ from one institution to another. The RCVS encourages training providers to ensure that their procedures are fair and well-considered.

To question a student's fitness to practise is a serious matter; the consequences for the student could be significant. It is therefore important that training providers have a fair and proper process for addressing such concerns. This should be clearly outlined and available to students so that they understand what may happen if a concern is raised about them and are informed of their rights. Fitness to practise policies should outline in sufficient detail the procedures to be followed and the powers available to those responsible for making decisions. It is important that policies and procedures are adhered to and that investigations and hearings are conducted fairly and appropriately.

Depending on the training provider, student veterinary nurses may be subject to a discipline-specific fitness to practise process, or they may be subject to a process that serves a number of different programmes which all lead to a licence to practise. Those operating with the former, and perhaps where the course is quite small, should make sure there is sufficient independence and separation of functions – for example, the same people should not be involved in both investigating and determining a case, and those determining the case should not be members of staff who have had significant previous involvement with the student. Those operating with the latter should give special thought to issues relevant or unique to veterinary nursing and ensure that, where appropriate, recourse can be made to members of staff with the appropriate expertise.

The flowchart on page 16 outlines a generic fitness to practise process. There are two main parts to the process – the investigation and the adjudication. It is important that these two stages are treated separately to avoid bias – real or perceived.

The investigation is the evidence-gathering stage and the investigator may need to interview the student, the person raising the concerns and any other witnesses. The investigator should make accurate and detailed records and produce a report. There should be a clear threshold for when a case proceeds from the initial investigation to the formal consideration of a fitness to practise allegation and reasons must be given for that decision. If the case is to be referred for adjudication, the student should be given written notice of the allegation and a copy of the evidence against them in good time. They should be informed how they may respond to the allegation and by when, and should be given reasonable time to do this. It is sensible to remind the student of their rights and sources of support.

The adjudication stage is the point at which an allegation is formally put to the student and they are given the opportunity to respond. All of the evidence should be reviewed and witnesses may need to be called. A decision is then made as to whether the facts of the allegation are proven, whether the student's fitness to practise is impaired and, if so, what sanction is required. It is advisable for these decisions to be made by a 'panel' rather than by one person acting alone – fitness to practise cases can be difficult and can have significant implications for a student so it is preferable to have more than one view on any given case. This goes some way to ensuring the soundness of decisions but regard will need to be had to what happens in the event of a split decision.

The decision as to the appropriate sanction should follow the decision on impairment. The decision-makers should have regard to the relevant protocol to see what sanctions are available to them. These could include:

- No sanction
- Accepting undertakings from the student
- Imposing conditions on the student
- Requiring the student to re-take part of the course
- Suspending the student from the course
- Terminating the student's place on the course

Conditions and undertakings may require assistance from, and the student's cooperation with, occupational health, GPs, coaches or supervisors etc. It needs to be considered therefore whether conditions and undertakings are practical and whether the student is willing to cooperate. There should be regular reviews to check on the student's compliance with any conditions and undertakings.

Sanctions should be imposed not to punish the student but on the principle of what is the minimum required to meet the aims of the fitness to practise process. Sanctions should therefore be considered in ascending order. Each case should be considered on its own merits. It can be helpful to have guidance on 'indicative sanctions' provided that this is not used as an inflexible tariff.

Providers of veterinary nursing education should be aware that students with concerns about how their case has been investigated, or how the decision has been made, may bring an appeal. Beyond that, they may also raise concerns with the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for students in higher education (OIA).

There is further guidance on running a fair process on the OIA's website (www.oiahe.org.uk)

Summarised below is what the RCVS considers to be fundamental to a fair process.

Fairness in fitness to practise processes – the fundamentals

- Notify the student of the concerns raised, that an investigation will be conducted and who will be investigating.
- Provide the student with a copy of the fitness to practise procedure and direct them to sources of support.
- Make sure the student is aware of their rights.
- Draft clear and unambiguous allegations, use plain English – the student needs to understand exactly what it is they are accused of and must be able to properly respond to the allegation. If they are accused of dishonesty, make that clear.
- Avoid bias or the perception of bias when appointing an investigator and decision-makers.
- Conduct meetings and interviews with appropriate notice for the student and make and retain accurate records.
- Ensure policies and protocols are consulted and followed.
- Proceed in a timely manner.
- Keep the student updated throughout the investigation.
- Make decisions based on relevant and credible evidence – beware of hearsay evidence (eg third-hand information) and assumptions.
- Make decisions on the basis of one standard of proof – 'on the balance of probabilities'.
- Be mindful that the burden of proof is on the training provider – it is not for the student to disprove the allegation.
- Have a decision-making 'panel' rather than entrusting decisions to one person.
- Make a decision on whether fitness to practise is

impaired before considering the appropriate sanction.

- Consider good character evidence and any aggravating or mitigating factors in line with policies and procedures.
- Provide full reasons for decisions and sanctions, with clear written determinations and/or outcome letters.
- Impose sanctions with regard to the principle of proportionality and consider sanctions in ascending order – impose the minimum required to achieve your aims and do not seek to punish.
- Have a fair and transparent appeals process and inform the student about this.

Graduation

Academic achievement and practical competence do not guarantee the award of a veterinary nursing qualification; a student must be able to demonstrate fitness to practise in all respects at the point of graduation. It is not possible to award a veterinary nursing qualification with caveats or restrictions. A student may not be able to graduate until the conclusion of any fitness to practise investigation.

Health concerns

The RCVS cannot provide advice on health and disability and the following guidance is intended as an overview only. Training providers should consider taking dedicated advice on such issues, for example, from occupational health professionals and legal advisors.

In many cases, a student's health condition or disability will have been disclosed and carefully considered at the stage of initial application and selection for the course, with regard to the RCVS Day-one Competences. The following guidance focuses primarily on concerns that arise after the student veterinary nurse has started their course.

Student veterinary nurses should take responsibility for their own physical and mental health; part of being fit to practise is recognising when your own health has the potential to jeopardise your ability to practise safely and effectively. Registered veterinary nurses have a similar obligation. The *Code* requires veterinary nurses to take reasonable steps to address adverse physical or mental health or performance that could impair fitness to practise; or, that results in harm, or a risk of harm, to animal health or welfare, public health or the public interest. In addition, veterinary nurses who are concerned about a professional colleague's fitness to practise must take steps to ensure that animals are not put at risk and that the interests of the public are protected.

Concerns may arise from matters related to a student's physical or mental health, and may involve substance abuse. Ideally, such matters will be identified and addressed before they become fitness to practise concerns, with

appropriate input and support from the training provider, which may include occupational health, student support and personal tutors.

Concerns about health are likely to require sensitive management throughout the student's progression along the course, with regular discussions, reviews and evaluations of any adjustments made. Students should ensure that they attend their medical appointments and keep their training provider informed of any significant developments that may affect the adjustments put in place, or their ability to continue the course safely. In addition, students should be willing to engage in any assessments that may reasonably be required to ensure effective monitoring of their health and the suitability of any adjustments.

It is anticipated and understood that in most cases, health matters will not raise formal fitness to practise concerns. Concerns may need to be pursued as a fitness to practise matter where the student shows minimal insight into their health and its implications, and/or where they fail to engage with their training provider in the management of their health.

Disclosure to the RCVS

Student veterinary nurses who successfully complete their course and who wish to practise in the UK as veterinary nurses must apply to be registered with the RCVS.

Since January 2014, veterinary nurses and those applying to be registered as veterinary nurses must disclose to the RCVS any caution or conviction, including absolute and conditional discharges, or adverse finding which may affect registration, whether in the UK or overseas (except for spent convictions and minor offences excluded from disclosure by the RCVS). See the *RCVS Protocol on Handling Convictions* for more details (www.rcvs.org.uk/convictions).

An 'adverse finding' includes any finding within a training provider's fitness to practise procedures. To clarify, the RCVS requires disclosure where a case against a student is found proven and that fitness to practise is impaired. Cases that do not reach a fitness to practise panel or those that are dismissed by a panel do not need to be declared.

When a disclosure is made to the RCVS, the Registrar will decide whether the student is suitable for registration. The

Registrar may seek additional information from the training provider in order to consider the matter declared by the student, and may refer the matter for the decision of the Veterinary Nurse Preliminary Investigation Committee. For these reasons, training providers should make accurate records of their investigations and decisions and cooperate with reasonable requests for information from the RCVS in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Student veterinary nurses should be aware of this disclosure obligation and the potential significance of the outcomes of student fitness to practise investigations. They should also understand that to fail to make a declaration may be an issue in itself, particularly as adverse findings may come to light at a later stage. It would be advisable to make this clear on outcome letters or statements of decisions.

The current rules only require self-declaration by the applicant; the training provider does not have a duty to notify the RCVS if a student has been subject to a fitness to practise investigation. However, training providers who have made a serious finding in relation to a student may wish to inform the RCVS. It is therefore sensible to set out in policies and protocols who might be informed at the conclusion of proceedings. All disclosures should be well-considered and justified and training providers may wish to take independent advice.

Disclosure of concerns related to health

The RCVS has a Health Protocol (see www.rcvs.org.uk/health/). The RCVS recognises that sometimes it will be in the public interest to deal with registered veterinary nurses suffering from adverse health without referring a case to the Veterinary Nurse Disciplinary Committee (VN DC) for a formal hearing. Generally, it is more appropriate to take a medical approach in cases involving medical problems.

In line with the procedures of other professional regulators, the RCVS Health Protocol is designed to allow the RCVS to protect the public interest by dealing appropriately with health-related cases. This Protocol provides that registered veterinary nurses whose cases are not referred to the DC can be invited to give undertakings which may, for example, limit the extent to which they may practise. Cases may also be monitored by the RCVS through workplace and medical supervisors.

Part two

Principles of behaviour for student veterinary nurses

This section is first and foremost for student veterinary nurses and sets out broad principles of fitness to practise that you should follow and which training providers should expect and uphold.

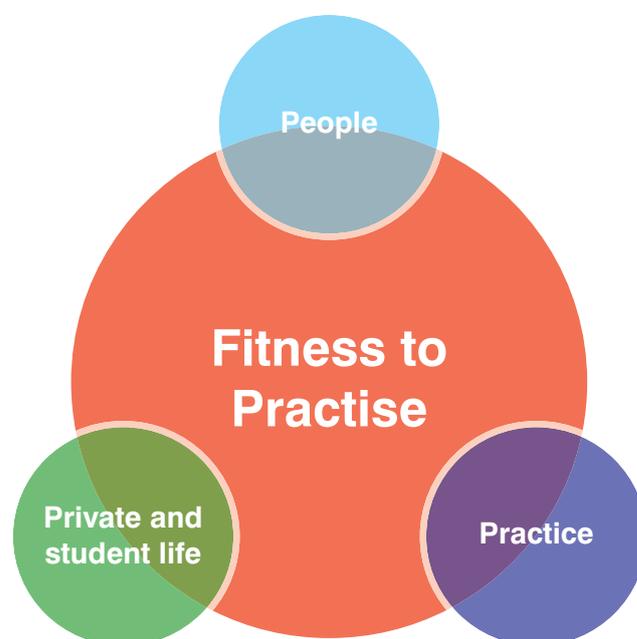
It is not possible or desirable to provide an exhaustive list of behaviours expected of you as a student veterinary nurse, or which could call your fitness to practise into question. This guide therefore sets out broad principles and example behaviours expected of you in the context of three key areas – people, private and student life, and practice.

The principles set out in this guide are informed by some of the key principles of the RCVS *Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Nurses* (see page 14). The *Code* sets out veterinary nurses' professional responsibilities. RCVS supporting guidance provides further advice on the proper standards of professional practice. The *Code* and supporting guidance are essential for veterinary nurses in their professional lives and are fundamental to the RCVS regulatory process (www.rcvs.org.uk/vncode)

The *Code* will apply to you when you register as a veterinary nurse with the RCVS. Although you are not yet qualified or registered as a veterinary nurse (and so not yet subject to RCVS jurisdiction) you should familiarise yourself with the *Code* and aim to follow its general principles. You should also familiarise yourself with the RCVS Day-one Competences. These set out the minimum level of knowledge, skills and attitudes that all student veterinary nurses are expected to have met upon registration with the RCVS.

People

You will come into contact with a range of people in the course of your education and training. Maintaining working relationships is vital for practice and this will require effective communication skills and teamwork. You should practise these skills with your fellow students, academic staff and colleagues and clients at your training practice.



Principles

- Honesty and integrity
- Independence and impartiality
- Client confidence and trust

Behaviours

You can demonstrate you are fit to practise by:

- ✓ Communicating effectively with clients, the public and professional colleagues; listening carefully and responding appropriately, using language appropriate to the audience and the context.
- ✓ Being open and honest, including with clients, and respect clients' needs and requirements.
- ✓ Ensuring that you do not disclose information about a client to a third party, unless the client gives permission or there is an appropriate justification.
- ✓ Working effectively as a member of a multi-disciplinary team in the delivery of services to clients.

- ✓ Respecting the skills and experience of your qualified colleagues and working under their direction and supervision as required by Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966.
- ✓ Understanding and respecting that clients must be free to give or withhold consent to treatment.
- ✓ Recognising diversity and respecting the cultural differences, values and beliefs of others, including fellow students, colleagues and staff at your training provider.
- ✓ Treating others courteously, with consideration and respect.
- ✓ Recognising that other people may question your fitness to practise, and demonstrating insight and engagement with associated investigations.

Concerns

Failing to demonstrate the above behaviours may raise questions about your fitness to practise. In addition, the following are examples of particular concerns that may affect your fitness to practise:

- ✗ Breaching client confidentiality without proper justification, including the posting of comments, pictures, x-rays and videos on social media.
- ✗ Persistent rudeness and general lack of courtesy when dealing with clients, colleagues and staff at your training provider/ training practice.
- ✗ Inappropriate or offensive behaviour towards fellow students, colleagues or clients, including bullying.
- ✗ Making disparaging comments about fellow students, colleagues or clients.
- ✗ Aggressive, threatening or violent behaviour.
- ✗ Failure to follow a colleague's instructions or client's requests.
- ✗ Going beyond the scope of client consent.
- ✗ Dishonesty, including dishonesty outside the professional role.

Private and student life

Fitness to practise encompasses not only your professional competence and practical skills, but also the way in which you conduct yourself outside the professional environment. This includes your private life and student life.

The *Code* states that veterinary nurses must not engage in any activity or behaviour that would be likely to bring the profession into disrepute or undermine public confidence in the profession. As a student veterinary nurse, you should also uphold the reputation of the profession at all times and consider how your behaviour and conduct could affect the trust that the public places in the veterinary nursing profession.

Remember that wherever you are, you are representing the

veterinary nursing profession, your training provider and your training practice.

Principles

- Honesty and integrity
- Professional accountability

Behaviours

You can demonstrate that you are fit to practise by:

- ✓ Taking responsibility for your own physical and mental health, seeking treatment and limiting practice if necessary, and communicating with your training provider.
- ✓ Abiding by the rules and regulations of your training provider and other organisations linked to your studies.
- ✓ Honouring commitments and taking responsibility for your work.
- ✓ Attending mandatory teaching sessions or making alternative arrangements with your training provider.
- ✓ Submitting academic work on time.
- ✓ Co-operating with formal investigations about you or others.

Concerns

Failing to demonstrate the above behaviours may raise questions about your fitness to practise. In addition, the following are examples of particular concerns that may affect your fitness to practise:

- ✗ Substance misuse eg drugs and alcohol.
- ✗ Criminal convictions or cautions.
- ✗ Cheating in examinations, plagiarising coursework and assessments, and passing off other people's work as your own.
- ✗ Forging a clinical coach's signature on clinical assessments or online logs.
- ✗ Forging a veterinary surgeon's signature on registration documents.
- ✗ Submitting fraudulent CVs, application forms and employment references.
- ✗ Misuse of social media (see page 13 section below for more detail.)
- ✗ Failure to seek medical treatment or other support.
- ✗ Refusal to follow medical advice or treatment plans.

Practice

Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 permits student veterinary nurses to undertake medical treatments and minor surgical procedures, not involving entry into a body cavity. There are some important conditions, however:

- The medical treatment or minor surgery can only be carried out on animals under the care of a veterinary surgeon.
- The veterinary surgeon is the employer or acting on behalf of the employer of the student veterinary nurse.
- The medical treatment or minor surgery is carried out in

- the course of the student veterinary nurse's training.
- The medical treatment or minor surgery is carried out at the veterinary surgeon's direction.
 - The medical treatment or minor surgery is supervised by a veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse and, in the case of minor surgery, the supervision is direct, continuous and personal.

'Direction' means that the veterinary surgeon instructs the student veterinary nurse as to the tasks to be performed, but is not necessarily present.

'Supervision' means that the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse is present on the premises and able to respond to a request for assistance if needed.

'Direct, continuous and personal supervision' means that the veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse is present and giving the student veterinary nurse his or her undivided personal attention.

Failure to comply with these conditions not only renders your actions illegal, but may also have implications for animal welfare. Compliance with these conditions is therefore absolutely paramount to demonstrating that you are fit to practise.

In addition, you must respect the fact that in delegating medical treatments and minor surgical procedures to you, your qualified colleagues have responsibilities and could be held to account to their decisions. The RCVS supporting guidance on delegation to veterinary nurses (chapter 18) states:

In considering whether to direct a veterinary nurse or student veterinary nurse to carry out 'Schedule 3 procedures', a veterinary surgeon must consider how difficult the procedure is in the light of any associated risks, whether the nurse is qualified to treat the species concerned, understands the associated risks and has the necessary experience and good sense to react appropriately if any problem should arise. The veterinary surgeon must also be sure that he or she will be available to answer any call for assistance, and finally, should be satisfied that the nurse feels capable of carrying out the procedure competently and successfully.

Principles

- Professional competence
- Honesty and integrity
- Client confidence and trust
- Professional accountability

Behaviours

You can demonstrate you are fit to practise by:

- ✓ Working under direction and supervision as required by Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966.
- ✓ Making sure that colleagues and clients know that you are a student.
- ✓ Making animal health and welfare your primary consideration when attending to animals.
- ✓ Taking responsibility for your working practices.
- ✓ Understanding the professional responsibilities and legal obligations relevant to veterinary practice, including the legislation relevant to the welfare of animals and legislation related to veterinary medicines.
- ✓ Working within the limits of your competence and being aware of personal limitations; demonstrating awareness of when and from where to seek advice, assistance and support.
- ✓ Ensuring that you are appropriately supervised.
- ✓ Providing care that is appropriate and adequate.
- ✓ Reporting any concerns about patients.
- ✓ Reporting errors or mistakes (including your own) to an appropriate senior member of staff.
- ✓ Having the confidence to speak up when you have concerns about matters affecting patients, clients, staff and the practice – recognising that speaking up and taking advice from your superiors is generally more appropriate than taking matters into your own hands.
- ✓ Ensuring that infection control protocols are adhered to and maintain high standards of cleanliness, hygiene and asepsis.

Concerns

Failing to demonstrate the above behaviours may raise questions about your fitness to practise. In addition, the following are examples of particular concerns that may affect your fitness to practise:

- ✗ Undertaking medical treatment or minor surgery independently, without direction or supervision.
- ✗ Undertaking acts of veterinary surgery beyond the scope of Schedule 3 eg non-minor surgical procedures and surgical procedures that involve entry into a body cavity.
- ✗ Lacking insight into your limitations and lack of experience.
- ✗ Deliberately ignoring instructions or advice.
- ✗ Taking unnecessary risks and compromising animal welfare.
- ✗ Independently prescribing, supplying or administering medicines.
- ✗ Accessing the controlled drugs cabinet without permission.
- ✗ Purporting to have qualifications you do not have.
- ✗ Falsely completing / signing documentation.

Use of social media

'Social media' is the term used to describe websites and online applications that encourage social interaction between users and content creators. It encompasses all technology that can be used to share opinions and insights, information, knowledge, ideas and interests, and enables the building of communities and networks. Examples include media sites that allow public posts and comments (eg Twitter), content sharing websites (eg YouTube, Instagram and Flickr), professional and social networking sites (eg LinkedIn and Facebook), internet forums (eg vetnurse.co.uk), discussion boards, blogs (Tumblr and Wordpress) and instant messaging.

It is recognised that social media are likely to form part of your everyday student life. They can be valuable communication tools and can enhance your personal and academic life. However, the use of social media is not without risk and you should be mindful of the consequences that may arise from its misuse.

You have a responsibility to behave professionally and responsibly when offline, online as yourself and online in a virtual capacity (perhaps as an avatar or under an alias). Veterinary nurses may put their registration at risk if they demonstrate inappropriate behaviour when using social media and the same principles apply to student veterinary nurses. You must uphold the reputation of the profession at all times. You should be mindful that you may jeopardise your position at your training provider and your subsequent ability to join the RCVS Register if you misuse social media.

When using social media, you should:

- ✓ Remember that the *Code* must be followed at all times, even under the anonymity of social media, for example, do not make disparaging comments about another person or practice.
- ✓ Maintain and protect client confidentiality by not disclosing information about a client or a client's animal that could identify them on social media, unless the client gives explicit consent (NB in certain circumstances, it may be possible to have online discussions about anonymised cases.)
- ✓ Be respectful of and protect the privacy of others.
- ✓ Be proactive in removing content that could be viewed as unprofessional.
- ✓ Comply with any internet or social media policy set out by your training provider or employer.

When using social media you should avoid making, posting or facilitating statements, images or videos that:

- ✗ Contravene any internet or social media policy set out by your training provider (remember that comments or statements made or facilitated by you may reflect on your

training provider and the wider profession as a whole.)

- ✗ Cause undue distress or provoke anti-social or violent behaviour.
- ✗ Are offensive, false, inaccurate or unjustified (remember that comments which are damaging to an individual's reputation could result in a civil claim for defamation for which you could be personally liable.)
- ✗ Abuse, bully, victimise, harass, threaten or intimidate fellow students, colleagues, staff or others.
- ✗ Discriminate against an individual based on his or her race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, religion or beliefs, or national origin.

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list. There are many different types of social media misuse.

Protecting your privacy

You should consider how to protect your privacy when using social media. It should be remembered that online information can readily be accessed by others and once it is published online, the information can be difficult, if not impossible, to remove. Added to this are the risks that other users may comment on the information, or circulate or copy this to others. For that reason, it is sensible to presume that everything shared online will be there permanently. You should also be mindful that content uploaded on an anonymous basis can, in many cases, be traced back to the original author.

You should read, understand and use appropriate privacy settings in order to maintain control over access to your personal information. It is advisable to review your privacy settings on a regular basis to ensure that the information is not available to unintended users. However, you should remember that this does not guarantee that your information will be kept private and personal information could potentially be viewed by anyone including fellow students, staff at your training provider and clients and potential employers.

RCVS *Code of Professional Conduct* for Veterinary Nurses

Principles of practice

Veterinary nurses seek to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to their care and to fulfil their professional responsibilities, by maintaining five principles of practice:

1. **Professional competence**
2. **Honesty and integrity**
3. **Independence and impartiality**
4. **Client confidentiality and trust**
5. **Professional accountability**

Professional responsibilities

Veterinary nurses have professional responsibilities in the following areas:

1. Veterinary nurses and animals

- 1.1 Veterinary nurses must make animal health and welfare their first consideration when attending to animals.
- 1.2 Veterinary nurses must keep within their own area of competence and refer cases responsibly.
- 1.3 Veterinary nurses must provide veterinary nursing care that is appropriate and adequate.
- 1.4 Veterinary nurses in practice must take steps to provide emergency first aid and pain relief to animals according to their skills and the specific situation.
- 1.5 Veterinary nurses who supply and administer medicines must do so responsibly.
- 1.6 Veterinary nurses must communicate with veterinary surgeons and each other to ensure the health and welfare of the animal or group of animals.
- 1.7 Veterinary nurses must ensure that clinical governance forms part of their professional activities.

2. Veterinary nurses and clients

- 2.1 Veterinary nurses must be open and honest with clients and respect their needs and requirements.
- 2.2 Veterinary nurses must provide independent and impartial advice and inform a client of any conflict of interest.
- 2.3 Veterinary nurses must provide appropriate information to clients about the practice, including the costs of services and medicines.
- 2.4 Veterinary nurses must communicate effectively, including in written and spoken English, with clients and ensure informed consent is obtained before treatments or procedures are carried out.
- 2.5 Veterinary nurses must keep clear, accurate and detailed clinical nursing and client records.
- 2.6 Veterinary nurses must not disclose information about a client or the client's animals to a third party, unless the client gives permission or animal welfare or the public interest may be compromised.
- 2.7 Veterinary nurses must respond promptly, fully and courteously to clients' complaints and criticism.

3. Veterinary nurses and the profession

- 3.1 Veterinary nurses must take reasonable steps to address adverse physical or mental health or performance that could impair fitness to practise; or, that results in harm, or a risk of harm, to animal health or welfare, public health or the public interest.
- 3.2 Veterinary nurses who are concerned about a professional colleague's fitness to practise must take steps to ensure that animals are not put at risk and that the interests of the public are protected.
- 3.3 Veterinary nurses must maintain and develop the knowledge and skills relevant to their professional practice and competence and comply with RCVS requirements on the Period of Supervised Practice (PSP) and continuing professional development (CPD).
- 3.4 Veterinary nurses must ensure that all their professional activities are covered by professional indemnity insurance or equivalent arrangements.
- 3.5 Veterinary nurses must not: hold out themselves or others as having expertise they cannot substantiate; hold out others as specialists or advanced practitioners unless appropriately listed with the RCVS; or, hold out others as veterinary nurses unless appropriately registered with the RCVS.

4. Veterinary nurses and the veterinary team

- 4.1 Veterinary nurses must work together and with others in the veterinary team and business, to co-ordinate the care of animals and the delivery of services.
- 4.2 Veterinary nurses must ensure that tasks are delegated only to those who have the appropriate competence and registration.
- 4.3 Veterinary nurses must maintain minimum practice standards equivalent to the Core Standards of the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme.
- 4.4 Veterinary nurses must not impede professional colleagues seeking to comply with legislation and these standards or with the *RCVS Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons*.
- 4.5 Veterinary nurses must communicate effectively, including in written and spoken English, with the veterinary team and other veterinary professionals in the UK.

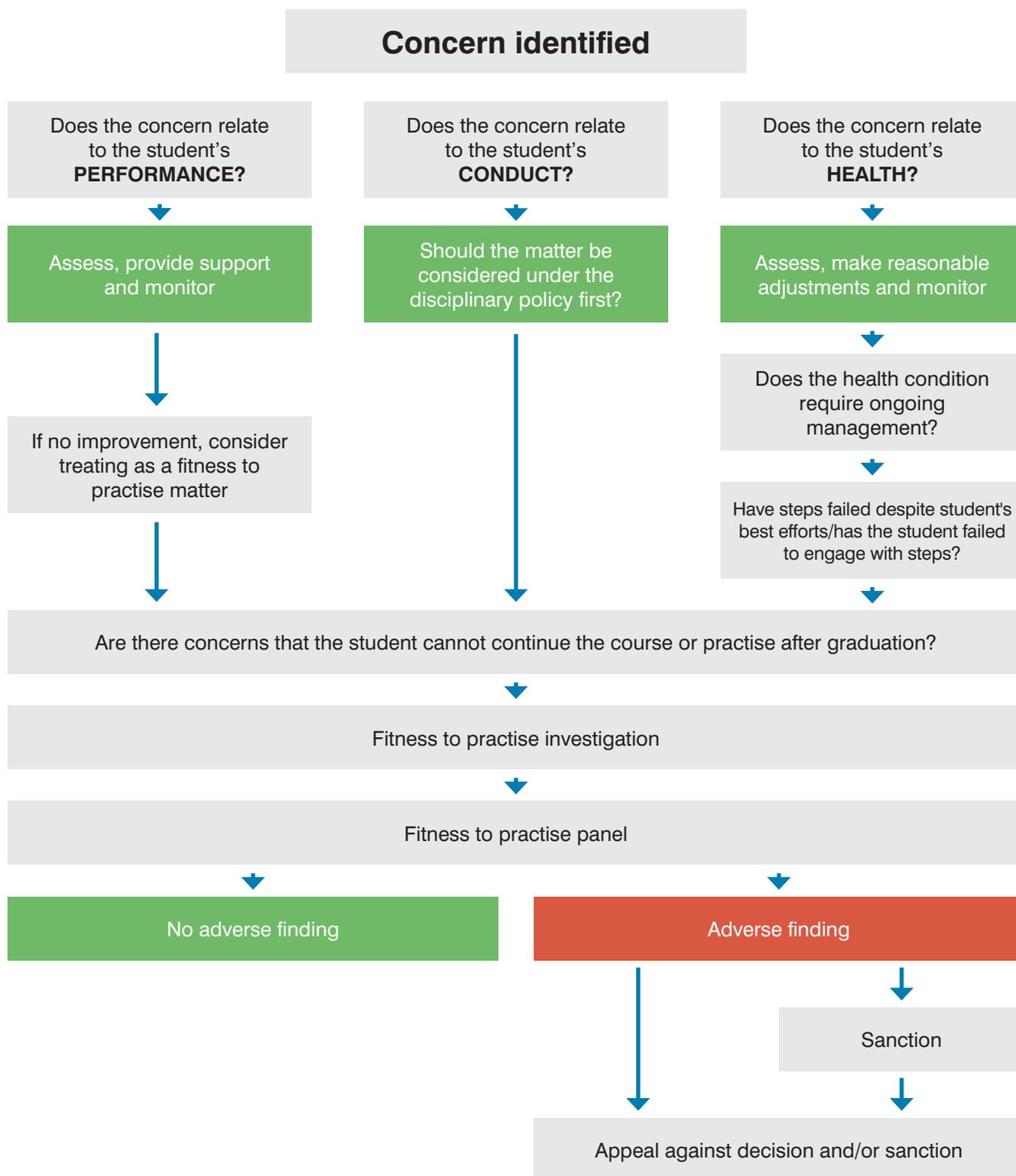
5. Veterinary nurses and the RCVS

- 5.1 Veterinary nurses other than student veterinary nurses must be entered in the Register of Veterinary Nurses.
- 5.2 Veterinary nurses must provide the RCVS with their PSP and CPD records when requested to do so.
- 5.3 Veterinary nurses and those applying to be registered as veterinary nurses must disclose to the RCVS any caution or conviction, including absolute and conditional discharges, or adverse finding which may affect registration, whether in the UK or overseas (except for spent convictions and minor offences excluded from disclosure by the RCVS).
- 5.4 Veterinary nurses and those applying to be registered as veterinary nurses must comply with reasonable requests from the RCVS as part of the regulation of the profession, and comply with any undertakings they give to the RCVS.
- 5.5 Veterinary nurses must report to the RCVS those veterinary nurses removed from the RCVS Register at the direction of the VN Disciplinary Committee who nevertheless continue to give medical treatment or carry out minor surgery unlawfully.

6. Veterinary nurses and the public

- 6.1 Veterinary nurses must seek to ensure the protection of public health and animal health and welfare, and must consider the impact of their actions on the environment.
- 6.2 Veterinary nurses must report facts and opinions honestly and with due care, taking into account the 12 Principles of Certification.
- 6.3 Veterinary nurses promoting and advertising products and services must do so in a professional manner.
- 6.4 Veterinary nurses must comply with legislation relevant to the provision of veterinary services.
- 6.5 Veterinary nurses must not engage in any activity or behaviour that would be likely to bring the profession into disrepute or undermine public confidence in the profession.

Managing different types of concern



■ Finding that may affect registration and which the student must disclose to the RCVS on registration

