

The Veterinary Nurse as one of the UAM team

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Abstract

Historically, members of the public often turn to the local veterinary clinic for all things “animal” - especially those that are not animal owners and so have little experience of the processes involved. The local vet practice can be the hub of local animal related events - pet shows, school talks, depositing and collecting stray animals and wildlife.

At the centre of this hub is the Veterinary Nurse. On any busy Saturday morning she/he can be found:

- juggling lost and found pet phone and in-person enquiries,
- admitting lost and/or injured animals to the hospital and performing triage
- searching the computer and noticeboard for lost and found pets,
- scanning admissions for microchips and contacting the relevant register,
- contacting owners of stray animals she may recognise as “serial offenders”
- checking a multitude of tags or alternatively, becoming frustrated by the absence of any means of identification whatsoever!

Who's who in the local veterinary practice

Student Veterinary Nurse

Enrolled into the Animal Care and Management Training Package with a Registered Training Organisation. Starting at Certificate II in Animal Studies and moving on to Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing over approx. 2 years. Learning is competency-based and mostly takes place in the veterinary practice with a nominated mentor.

Subjects covered include working in the animal care industry, follow OHS procedures, assist with general animal care, provide food and water for animals, participate in workplace communications, carry out veterinary reception duties, carry out daily clinic routines and assist with surgery preparations

Qualified Veterinary Nurse

Has achieved Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing and is competent to coordinate patient admission and discharge, apply radiographic routines, perform clinical pathology procedures, perform clinic office procedures, carry out surgical nursing routines, nurse animals, carry out medical nursing routines, coordinate and perform theatre routines, provide specific animal care advice and carry out dental nursing procedures. May have additional competencies in business, training others, human resources and retail.

Diplomaed Veterinary Nurse

Has achieved Diploma of Veterinary Nursing in Surgical, Dental or Emergency/Critical Care. These competencies will have been attained through access to a specialised veterinary environment and require the highest standards of nursing procedures and routines.

Accredited Veterinary Nurse

Has achieved recognition of competence, currency and dedication to the veterinary nursing profession. The highest accolade bestowed by veterinarian and vet nurse peers.

Qualified IV and above veterinary nurses have been trained to competency standards that have been endorsed by the Australian National Training Authority and the Veterinary industry (RUV04). The breakdown of units can be found at Appendix 1.

Many practices now also employ dedicated veterinary receptionists (there is no qualification for this just yet) and of course, the veterinarians. The owner of the practice is known as the principle veterinarian and there may also be any number of Associates or employed veterinarians. With the exception of Victoria, veterinary practices must be owned by a veterinarian/s.

The scope of UAM tasks

A veterinary nurse performs a number of tasks specifically relevant to urban animal management.

1. Giving advice

1.1. primary emergency advice given in response to dog attack situations: dog vs cat/dog/human

Vet nurses are trained to respond to initial telephone contact from an accident scene. Gathering information at this point is vital and the questions asked need to be carefully phrased to ensure that accurate and useful details are ascertained:

- are people injured and have the emergency services been called
- what and how bad are the injuries to the animal,
- when did the accident happen,
- where is the patient now and what are they doing
- how do they look
- age, sex, breed
- name of patient
- known medication
- how far away from the clinic
- caller's name, address and phone number

People present at the accident need to be alerted to the increased risk of bites and scratches from injured animals - even from their own pets.

On arrival at the practice, the veterinary team uses triage to evaluate the patient's condition and the severity of the situation. Nurses are trained to confidently support the veterinarian's actions and direction in critical situations. Nurses ensure that accurate and detailed records are made of animal attack incidents and these may be required as evidence should legal action ensue or council wish to take the matter further.

1.2. advice to owners and their neighbours about nuisance pets

The Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing competencies include Unit RUV4609A “Provide Specific Animal Care Advice”, Element 4 “Provide Animal Behaviour Advice” and ensure the veterinary nurse is competent to deliver information to clients about the normal and abnormal behaviour of pets. Elements of the RUV4203A (Identify and Respond to Animal Behaviour) from the Certificate IV Animal Care and Regulation are closely aligned and this is obviously an area where the roles of officers and nurses are mutually compatible.

All too often (as urban animal managers know only too well) misunderstanding and ignorance about animal behaviour can lead to neighbour disputes and sometimes legal action. The role of the veterinary nurse here is to work alongside the neighbourhood services personnel in reinforcing the local pet ownership laws.

The nurse is often approached by non-owners who look to the practice as being the “animal” focus of the community. Nurses are familiar with the multitude of options available in assisting both owners and non-owners to identify the cause of problems and seek solutions regarding undesirable pet behaviour.

It may be that simple environmental enrichment, basic training, regular walks and playtime are all that may be needed to resolve a conflict. A consultation with a veterinarian may be advised, with a diagnosis and treatment ensuing. And at the far end of the scale for more complex problems, the local practitioner may refer a case to an animal behaviour specialist for a resolution.

1.3. advice regarding obedience and society's expectations of owners and their pets

The veterinary team members endeavour to make pets' lives healthy and enjoyable, to encourage pet ownership and most critically, to recognise the importance of pet ownership in society. Young couples nests remain empty longer; older people live away from families and living alone is projected to be an increasingly common living arrangement in Australia. It is inevitable that a dog or a cat will be the companion needed to fill the void and dote upon.

The veterinary nurse is first and foremost an advocate for his/her patients. Every working day he/she witnesses the extremities of joy, worry and sadness that owning a pet brings. It's important to the veterinary nurse that people understand the human animal bond and learn how to enjoy the pleasures and richness of pet companionship. With this in mind, the veterinary nurse takes on the responsibility of ensuring that the needs and wants of pets are factored into the advice given to clients. This includes explaining the fundamentals of why pets behave as they do:

- Sexual - inappropriate wandering, mounting, incessant meowing
- Territorial - inappropriate marking, aggression, other pets
- Dominance - on-lead/off lead, small children,
- Fear - fight or flight,
- Pain - often undetected until provoked

2. Microchipping

2.1. advice to clients regarding the benefits of microchipping – effectively “selling” the concept

There is no better salesperson than the veterinary nurse who has tried to trace the owner of a non-chipped pet! He/she will be totally committed to the micro-chipping scheme and will encourage all new pet owners to have their pet chipped - usually when anaesthetised for desexing.

2.2. implanting and recording of information

The implanting of a microchip is usually performed by the nurse, under veterinary supervision, immediately after desexing (along with the “desexed” tattoo earmark) whilst the animal is still anaesthetised.

2.3. scanning found and/or deceased animals and tracing their owners

People phoning that they have found a lost pet are encouraged to attend the local practice so that the animal can be scanned for a microchip. Most practices are well equipped with an ISO scanner (and some also have a variety of scanners for detecting older chips).

3. Lost and found animals

3.1. advice and assistance regarding best methods of recovering a lost pet

Distraught and panicking owners need a calm and reassuring adviser to devise and initiate a plan to find a lost pet. This person is the veterinary nurse, he/she has broad-based local knowledge and will have a policy and procedure to tackle this common occurrence.

Suggestions are:

1. Call the council
2. Call the pound

3. Call other local veterinary practices
4. Visit neighbours
5. Put up posters
6. Access the web and go to <http://www.petalert.com.au>

3.2. admission and triage of injured found and stray animals

The local veterinary practitioners have a legal and ethical obligation to reduced suffering of any animal presented, including native animals. This means that any found or stray animal will receive basic first aid and pain relief. By using the initial history-taking phone call and triage evaluation, the veterinarian can perform an examination and create a patient care plan.

The veterinary nurse will respond to the plan and initiate nursing care, which could include setting up fluid therapy, taking radiographs, obtaining blood samples and creating an appropriate microenvironment.

3.3. advice and assistance regarding best methods of reuniting pet with owner

Veterinary nurses often reunite found pets with their owners in a simple, single process - involving personal recognition of the animal or recent information regarding the pet becoming lost. Habitual offenders are common, dogs recently seen at the practice and dogs with a predisposition to separation anxiety are easily recalled to memory. Cats that are receiving medication or suffering injuries and unable to return home, usually seek a hiding place - possibly in someone's shed or under decking.

Someone finding a pet may need to be informed about the council/pound system, may be unable to capture the pet or may even want to keep it indefinitely. It is the role of the vet nurse to help the finder seek an appropriate method of tracing the owner.

4. Educating the public

4.1. presenting PetPEP and other responsible pet ownership programs in schools

The importance of educating children about responsible pet ownership and also their own safety is obvious and extensively documented. At the coalface, it is veterinary nurses who take on the role of representing their practice in the delivery of PetPEP etc to primary schools. The PetPEP program is an Australian Veterinary Association initiative structured to assist teachers and school councils educate about all aspects of pet ownership. It provides the perfect opportunity for veterinary nurses to enter schools and build relationships with the pupils.

After-school care programs include visitors from community-based groups and businesses who teach the children weekly over a term for example. Again, a great opportunity to establish an easy rapport with the pupils - so much so that they feel comfortable phoning the nurse at work to ask her advice.

4.2. continuously in contact with the public in an advisory role

As noted in the performance criteria for Certificate IV veterinary nurses (Appendix 1) veterinary nurses spend much of their working day with people. Every interaction is utilised as an opportunity to educate. Phone calls, handouts, brochures, company product leaflets, reception information boards, websites, newsletters, mailouts are all distributed, often by the veterinary nurse to reinforce her verbal message.

New owners and existing clients use the local practice and their qualified veterinary nurse as an information source.

4.3. presenting puppy and puppy owner socialisation programs from the practice

Most practices now run puppy socialisation programs, often conducted by veterinary nurses. A gap has been identified in the socialisation of newly acquired puppies and kittens - this is the time when, in a natural setting, a puppy or kitten learns about pack behaviour, how to play, when to dominate and when to be dominated. Initial information, including local pet registration requirements, preventative healthcare, and nutrition and desexing is introduced. Basic obedience training begins and owners start to learn about how to ensure their relationship with their pet is enjoyable and long lasting.

4.4. presenting client information sessions either within the practice or at external venues

There is growing involvement in practices delivering client seminars about specific aspects of pet ownership - "Your Senior Pet" and "Pet First Aid" for example. Nurses are involved in the delivery of these seminars, both to existing clients and to the public generally. RUV 4207A (Conduct Community Awareness Programs) from RUV40104 Certificate IV in Animal Control and Regulation aligns closely with RUV4611A (Prepare, deliver and review animal care education programs) from RUV40404 Certificate IV in Veterinary Nursing.

Summary

There are so many opportunities for the Animal Control and Regulation Officers and Veterinary Nurses from a Shire to join together in promoting responsible pet ownership. Individuals, Councils and Veterinary Practices should actively seek to establish relationships and effective lines of communication. Together, officers and veterinary nurses can plan, budget and implement community activities. Some examples of joint local ventures are:

- Barks in the Park - evening dog walkers are invited to stop at a refreshment station and chat with nurses and rangers
- Responsible Pet Ownership Competition - owners are rewarded for having their dog under effective control, practices provide financial support
- Client Seminars - officers, nurses and veterinarians deliver evening/ weekend seminars on responsible pet ownership
- Vet Practice Open Day/Council Festivals - officers and nurses attend a joint stand where owners and potential owners can discuss the joys and difficulties of pet ownership.
- Tracing Owners - officers and nurses can develop a closer understanding of the difficulties each group experiences with reuniting pets and their owners
- Wildlife rehabilitation - nurses often provide emergency care for local wildlife, officers and nurses can work together to restore animals to their original territory

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Jane Bindloss

Born in UK, Jane began nursing in New Zealand in 1975. She qualified as a Veterinary Nurse with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in 1982 and was awarded the BSAVA's "Veterinary Nursing Award" in the same year. She is a Listed Veterinary Nurse with the RCVS. Following work as Nursing Manager for 2 years in Devon UK, Jane and her veterinarian husband set up practice in Cornwall in 1983. The couple immigrated to Australia in 1987.

Jane became committed to raising the standards, professionalism and self-esteem of Australian veterinary nurses in 1992 when she was elected onto the committee of the Veterinary Nurses Association of Victoria. Jane has held a variety of positions on the national Executive of the Veterinary Nurses Council of Australia since 1994, currently she is National President and Chairman of the Education portfolio. She was a Finalist in the Telstra Business Women's Awards in 1997 and received the AVA's Meritorious Service Award the same year.

Jane chaired the National Industry Advisory Group for Veterinary Nursing from 1996-2004, sits on the Australian Veterinary Practice Management Association committee and is consultant to a variety of veterinary nurse training and practice management concerns. She is business partner to Pets at the Vets Hospital, which has recently undergone extensive renovations to become a model veterinary workplace.