

Veterinary Board of the Northern Territory

As the COVID-19 situation develops, the Veterinary Board of the NT advises that it is important that veterinary practitioners in the Northern Territory review their current practices and protocols and taking necessary steps to ensure the wellbeing of their staff and clients.

The Board encourages Northern Territory Veterinarians to continue to provide quality care to animals by making necessary and sensible adjustments to the way they provide services to the public so as to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Remote or teleconferenced consultations

While direct physical examination of a patient by a veterinary practitioner is both central to quality veterinary care and required for establishing a bona fide veterinary-client-patient relationship, the Board takes the view that, **for the period of the pandemic emergency and in order to promote social distancing, remote consultations may provide an adequate alternative to face-to-face consultations for limited scenarios e.g. people who are actually in compulsory isolation, or those who are self-isolating for a valid reason of being high risk. An example are geriatric or immunocompromised clients under the following constraints:**

- the client is an existing/returning client of the veterinary clinic
- the animal has previously been examined at/by the veterinary clinic
- the owner is provided with options which include access to a hands-on patient consultation
- the veterinarian conducting the consult can assure themselves that the history and subjective information provided by the owner, by telephone or video, is sufficient to implement a therapeutic plan
- a full veterinary medical record is maintained for each remote consultation, which includes all information about the case including those aspects that cannot be determined remotely, and all points of discussion with the owner about treatment options, recommendations and decisions.

The decision to provide a remote consultation is the responsibility of the individual veterinary practitioner exercising their professional judgement:

- Have I, or my colleagues, examined and made appropriate records about this animal recently enough to allow sufficient understanding of its health and management status?
- Is this a condition or complaint that can be adequately assessed remotely?
- Is a physical examination of the animal needed?
- Is a blood test or other diagnostic test required? Can any of these samples be safely and feasibly collected and submitted by the owner/agent, without compromising animal wellbeing?
- What is the scope of the advice I can appropriately provide, given the limited contact/inability to physically examine the animal?

It is the Board's view that remote consultations may be used to provide general advice or health information and to undertake some general triage to determine the urgency or need for immediate referral to a veterinary practitioner for direct care. The Board reminds practitioners that they must exercise caution in offering any presumptive diagnoses, prognoses and therapeutic recommendations remotely, and must clearly communicate any limitations in doing so and alternative options to the owner. Veterinarians deciding to provide such services during the pandemic must continue to maintain professional standards as expected by their peers and the public.

If prescribing or supplying medications during a remote consultation, practitioners must ensure that, they comply with Board Guideline on supplying drugs and other medications. Requirements include ensuring that:

1. the client is a bona fide client (or the agent of a bona fide client)
2. the animal/property is under the care of the veterinary practitioner

3. a therapeutic need for the drug or medication has been established (and for scheduled medications, that all reasonable steps have been taken to establish a therapeutic need)
4. side effects and precautions for the use of the medication have been discussed with the owner
5. appropriate clinical records are kept, and
6. provision is made for after-care if needed.

Considerations for continuity of care for animals

If a practice becomes unable to open because of illness or insufficient staff, veterinarians are reminded that they must have arranged for:

- emergency referral for their clients
- access to veterinary medical records where needed for continuity of care

Therefore, the Board advises veterinarians to plan in collaboration with neighbouring practices to ensure continuity of care for their animal patients.

Due to the rapidly changing situation, the Board is continuing to monitor the NT Government and Australian Government websites and any directions made by the Northern Territory Government.

Precautions to minimize the risk of transmission during consultations

When consulting with clients, veterinary practitioners must take precautions to minimise the risk of becoming infected with or spreading COVID-19.

The latest advice, information and resources on precautions to minimise risk of infection are available at the Northern Territory Department of Health: <https://health.nt.gov.au/> and the Australian Government Department of Health: <https://www.health.gov.au/>

Current common advice includes maintaining a distance of 1.5 metres from clients, practice good sneeze/cough hygiene and practise good hand hygiene, e.g. washing your hands with soap and water.

Other means of limiting contact or limiting opportunities for viral transmission may include measures such as:

- Incorporating the following into new booking procedures, and telephoning each client up to 24 hours before an appointment; and
 - Firmly establishing ownership of each animal and the most appropriate communication channel for the owner during the treatment period, as this may not be able to occur in person.
 - Discussing your approach to the consultation, particularly ensuring that any client with cold or flu like symptoms does not enter your premises (they could get a friend to bring the animal in)
 - The likely outcomes from this preliminary phone call could include normal admission, car admission, drop-off point, asking them to have someone else bring the animal or rescheduling.
- Where appropriate and safe, implementing “carpark consultations” to limit the number of people in waiting rooms and minimise interaction between clients and clinic staff
- Wearing PPE (particularly masks and goggles) be considered for relatively high-risk interactions e.g. clients who are ill or borderline for quarantine requirements.
- Postponing provision of non-essential services that will not affect an animal’s health or welfare if delayed, e.g. grooming or other services.