



VETERINARY SURGEONS BOARD OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Guideline: Operating Veterinary Services in the Event of a Government Directed COVID-19 Shut Down of Non-Essential Businesses

Veterinary services are an essential service and can continue to operate in the event of a Government directed shut down of all non-essential businesses so long as they operate in a way that limits or eliminates the risk of spreading COVID-19. This means not operating business as usual and actively triaging cases to avoid physical spreading of COVID-19.

This is an unprecedented and fast-moving situation where we all have to play our part to keep each other safe.

Veterinary surgeons are urged to consider the wider societal picture and ensure that they only operate as an essential service if satisfied that it is necessary to do so in the circumstances.

Even when operating as an essential service, veterinary surgeons must do so in a way that limits or eliminates the risk of spreading COVID-19. More information can be found on the SA Health website: <https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au>

The COVID-19 global pandemic is a challenge facing society, which is first and foremost a public health emergency. The veterinary profession plays a vital role in maintaining primary production food supply and animal welfare, and it must work in a way that does not undermine efforts to control COVID-19.

Operating as an essential service during a Government mandated shut down of non-essential businesses is a privileged position for veterinary surgeons. There are high public expectations around the conduct of veterinary surgeons during this time. Veterinary surgeons must all act to protect and uphold this position. This means only carrying out essential services.

Principles

When making decisions about whether to continue your work during a Government mandated shut down of non-essential businesses, and what work you will perform, you will need to apply professional judgement to your situation. What is truly essential and what can be postponed until the risk level is lower will often be case-specific.

Triage, through veterinary telemedicine, should be used before seeing clients or animals face to face. This is crucial to limiting services to those that are essential and stopping the spread of COVID-19.

Key questions to consider when deciding whether to see a client and/or patient in person are:

- Am I able to prevent or manage the risks of exposure of my colleagues, staff and myself to COVID-19?
- Is immediate action necessary to prevent or alleviate unreasonable or unnecessary pain or distress?
- Is immediate action crucial for protecting biosecurity and surveillance or food safety?



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- What are the client's views, and does the client fully understand the risks (including the wider societal risks around COVID-19)? Is the client fully informed and do they consent to the action? Note that this is about understanding the client's view, not necessarily doing what they want.
- Can I delay treatment without unduly compromising animal welfare?
- Can I initiate a treatment protocol which can be safely completed in the circumstances?
- Is it possible to examine the animal without having physical contact with the owner?
- In my professional opinion, is it reasonable to provide the service in all the circumstances? Could treatment be safely administered by the owner after appropriate advice and directions have been provided?
- Can I justify my decision to the public, and could my decision be justified to and by my peers?

In situations that do not involve emergency care, a high-level qualitative risk assessment is necessary, weighing the potential animal health and welfare risks against the significant risks to staff and the public posed by COVID-19.

Maintaining activities that are crucial to public and animal health

Veterinary surgeons are an integral part of the national and global health community. Beyond the activities linked to the health and welfare of animals, they have a key role to play in disease prevention and management, including those transmissible to humans, and where appropriate to ensure food safety for the population.

In the current situation, it is important that veterinary surgeons continue to provide those services that are essential to ensure that:

- only healthy animals and their by-products enter the food supply to guarantee food safety for the population
- animal welfare is protected and that emergency situations that cannot be postponed or cancelled without risking unnecessary pain or distress to the animal can be addressed
- biosecurity and surveillance operate and preventative measures for diseases with a significant public health or economic impact are maintained
- research activities which are crucial to maintain public health and/or animal health are undertaken
- human mental health and wellbeing (linked to animal ownership) is appropriately addressed

Production animals and food safety

Veterinary surgeons working in food production and food safety are considered to be an essential service. This includes:

- production animal veterinary surgeons
- veterinary surgeons working in the food chain, including abattoir, meat processing, and other related inspection and certification work

Production animal veterinary surgeons must take steps to protect themselves and others from the risk of COVID-19 infection, including using physical distancing and appropriate personal protective equipment



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(PPE). All veterinary surgeons must consider what aspects of their work are essential and what can be postponed. Not all services will be essential for all clients.

For example, some non-emergency care may require on-farm veterinary care after careful triage. A risk assessment of the farm/herd/flock might make it clear that a visit is needed now, or it might show that a visit can be safely delayed

Companion animal and equine practice

Companion animal and equine animal practices will need to rationalize their work and ultimately this is a decision for individual veterinary surgeons and veterinary practices.

Companion animal and equine veterinary surgeons will be critical in maintaining the health and welfare of animals that are providing vital companionship to those in self-isolation, and in turn supporting the mental health of members of society. **Maintaining animal welfare, in the current global pandemic, however, does not equate to business as usual.**

In the context of a Government mandated shut down of all non-essential businesses, the VSBSA anticipates this means that:

- veterinary surgeons cannot justify continuing with routine and preventative health care procedures
- all efforts should be made to reduce contact with clients and manage veterinary care by assessing the patient in the absence of the client and attending to communication, consent and payment by remote means
- non-critical patient care that, if left unaddressed, may progress to more serious conditions or that may require progressive reassessment when working through a diagnostic process should be done through veterinary telemedicine where possible
- some non-emergency situations may require face to face veterinary care after careful triage
- for emergencies, when thorough appropriate barrier-healthcare systems are applied, veterinary care should be given

Emergency services

Veterinary practices should continue providing emergency services work where possible. Veterinary surgeons who are providing this critical emergency are essential service providers.

If veterinary clinics cannot provide emergency services in the current COVID-19 situation, they must actively try to make arrangements with other colleagues in the area for the purpose of referral. They must also comply with section 3(1)(f) of the VSBSA's Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons with respect to the re-direction of telephone calls and the display of signage on the premises.

Referral medicine services

Special care should be exercised when considering whether referral services are justified whilst operating during a COVID-19 mandated non-essential business shut down, because of the distances that many



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clients must travel to see a specialist. In these circumstances animal health and welfare considerations should be carefully balanced against the risks of translocation of COVID-19 between regions.

Referral care, in cases of emergency care, would be considered acceptable where appropriate barrier-health care can be provided, and risks safely managed, in the opinion of the referral veterinary surgeon.

Summary

In order to protect the privileged position that the profession has been placed in as essential service providers, it is imperative that veterinary surgeons, both individually and collectively:

- provide only essential services
- operate in a way that restricts the spread of COVID-19

Useful links

<https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers>

<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/health+topics/health+topics+a+-+z/COVID+2019>

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/covid-19-information-workplaces>

<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/wps/wcm/connect/public+content/sa+health+internet/health+topics/health+topics+a+-+z/covid+2019/community/covid-19+mental+health+support>

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/looking-after-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak>

<https://www.lifeline.org.au/get-help/topics/mental-health-and-wellbeing-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

Phone numbers

Coronavirus Health Information Line: 1800 020 080

Safework SA: 1300 365 255

SA Health Mental Health Hotline: 1800 632 753

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 46 36

Lifeline: 13 11 14

Ref: Veterinary Council of New Zealand, Statement on Operating Veterinary Services at COVID-19 Alert Levels 3 and 4