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The SQP qualification explained

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In May 2013 the BVNA released a statement on C-SQPs, www.bvna.org.uk/smartweb/about-us/news-story/213.

There has been much debate about the SQP qualification and why it is not part of the veterinary nurse qualification; and in the recent BVNA survey, 89.9% of participants felt that it should be embedded in the existing Level 3 Veterinary Nursing Diploma (**Figure 1**).

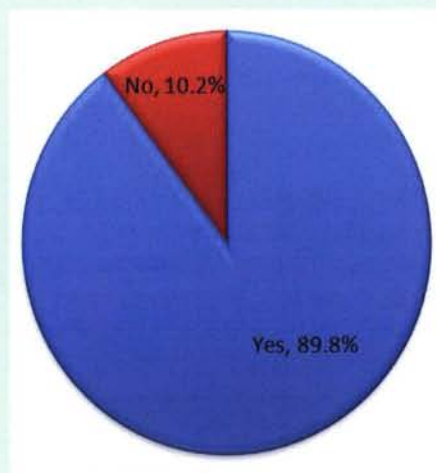


Figure 1. BVNA survey

Role of SQP Veterinary Nurse in Practice

It can be useful for nurses in small animal practice to have the SQP qualification in order to prescribe appropriate medicines for animals when there is a high demand.

The SQP qualification is regulated by the Animals Medicines Training Regulatory Authority (AMTRA) and requires annual retention fees (fees in 2013 for C-SQPs are £45), alongside continued professional development (CPD) that has been approved by AMTRA. Many anthelmintics are POM-VPS or NFA-VPS category which can, therefore, be prescribed by a veterinary nurse with the appropriate SQP qualification.

Only medications that fall into the POM-VPS and NFA-VPS can be prescribed to animals classed as companion animals (cats and dogs) by C-SQPs. Most of these medications are anthelmintics, and the NFA-VPS category will contain the majority of medications that a C-SQP can prescribe, as companion animals will be classed as non-food-producing animals.

Likewise the POM-VPS category will contain the majority of the medications that food-producing animals will require for preventive health treatments.

Currently (May 2013) the active ingredients that C-SQPs can prescribe include fipronil, pyrantel embonate, praziquantel, febantel, imidacloprid, fenbendazole, deltamethrin, and cyromazine as these ingredients are used in many products and most practices would only stock one of each – this leaves about five or six products that most veterinary practices would stock that C-SQPs could prescribe.

Why are VNs not automatically SQP Qualified?

The Veterinary Nursing qualification is at Level 3; this is a consequence of the definition of what a Level 3 qualification entails in terms of competence.

This competence is that which involves the application of knowledge in a broad range of varied work activities performed in a wide variety of contexts, most of which are complex and non-routine. There is considerable responsibility and autonomy; and control or guidance of others is often required, but work is undertaken under supervision.

In accordance with The Veterinary Surgeons Act, Schedule 3, veterinary nurses can undertake certain procedures

under the guidance and/or supervision of the veterinary surgeon. Hence our qualification as a veterinary nurse, under current legislation, can never be more than a Level 3 qualification.

The SQP qualification is a Level 4 qualification, the veterinary nurse qualification does include one Level 4 unit on professional regulation – this unit has to be at Level 4 owing to the definition of what a Level 4 qualification entails.

Level 4 qualifications require competency that involves the application of knowledge in a broad range of complex, technical or professional work activities performed in a variety of contexts and with a substantial degree of personal responsibility and autonomy.

As a SQP you are working autonomously and, therefore, this is why the qualification has to be at Level 4. It is not always a reflection of the level of knowledge within the qualification, but rather a consequence of whether you are working under guidance/supervision or not.

For the VN qualification to also include the companion animal element of the SQP qualification, extra units would need to be added into an already very full syllabus.

The C-SQP qualification is 5 credits, this equates to 50 hours additional studying on advanced pharmacology, which will mean additional pressure on an already compact syllabus. In the exam the questions to the SQP qualification would have to be set in an extra exam as they cover elements that are not currently covered in the VN qualification and at this higher level.

In the SQP exam there are large numbers of questions covering the regulations of prescribing and dispensing, storage of medications and legislation of pharmaceuticals. The current examination process includes multiple choice questions (where negative marking is utilised) and a second paper where essay style questions are set.

After the written examination, candidates are assessed for their professional competence as SQPs, which is undertaken by an AMTRA Assessor appointed for that purpose in a one-to-one, 10-15 minute oral ('viva') examination. The specific purpose of the assessment

is to establish that the candidate has competence in knowledge, understanding and interpretation of the legal and professional responsibilities of SQPs, of the relevant parts of the Veterinary Medicines Regulations and the Code of Practice or of other germane legal and professional requirements.

The current veterinary nurse syllabus does cover the health care issues of parasite control and preventive diseases, and this is why qualified VNs can 'top-up' to the SQP qualification rather than have to take the full examination. Qualified veterinary nurses have already demonstrated knowledge of anatomy and physiology, healthcare, nutrition and other elements, and are therefore not as rigorously examined on these aspects.

The conversion course enables veterinary nurses to become C-SQP (companion animals only); if veterinary nurses wish to be SQPs for other species they will need to take the SQP modules for these species.

Not all qualified veterinary nurses require the use of a SQP qualification, it is more of a minority of VNs that do and, therefore, it would be unfair for the majority of VNs to undergo the extra examinations and enforced SQP specific CPD when it is not relevant to their role. The SQP qualification is something to aspire to post qualification if your job role requires it – similar to post qualification certificates in specialised areas.

For those that undertake a related Degree then there is a potential that the University or College can't apply for accreditation from AMTRA for modules undertaken in the relevant subjects that make up the SQP qualification. The SQP qualification will only be awarded post VN qualification, as it is a top-up course from the VN qualification.

CPD for C-SQP Veterinary Nurses

There have been problems in the past where veterinary nurses find it difficult to achieve the amount of relevant AMTRA-approved CPD for the SQP qualification, and this was reflected in the BVNA SQP survey.

When asked how easy nurses found maintaining their SQP status with approved CPD the results were as shown in **Figure 2**.



Figure 2. Ease of maintaining SQP status

Veterinary nurses undertake a great deal of CPD, but most is not relevant to the SQP role, or at a sufficient taught level. In recognition of the special circumstances of vet nurse SQPs, veterinary nurses can claim half of their AMTRA CPD points obligation from VN CPD provided it meets the following criteria:

- a copy of a certificate of attendance is provided, and
- the SQP confirms that in their view the CPD was supportive of their SQP role.

AMTRA informed all VN SQPs of this in May 2012, and supply VNs with a yellow/orange CPD card where this CPD can be recorded.

There are still instances where C-SQPs are undertaking CPD not relevant to the role (e.g. liver fluke in cattle), and these points are being counted towards the C-SQP AMTRA requirements. There are more opportunities for C-SQPs to gain good quality CPD points with the BVNA having more AMTRA-approved CPD at congress each year, and with more journals and publications having AMTRA points for completing multiple choice questions (MCQs) on read articles.

Codes of Practice

The final reason why VNs cannot automatically become SQPs relates to the Codes of Practice. AMTRA is the awarding body for the SQP qualification and, therefore, SQPs have to follow the SQP Code of Practice, whereas RVNs have to follow the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct. If the qualifications were 'merged' into one, there would be conflict over which code to follow. 