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She has lectured nationally and internationally and has written articles for veterinary nursing journals for many years. Her main interests are emergency nursing and teaching.

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What it means to be professional – a personal viewpoint

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ABSTRACT: Being a professional can mean a variety of things to an individual, such as conveying a caring attitude whilst at the same time providing a top quality service to clients and their pets. It is likely that more mundane issues also come to mind, for example, attitude, personal hygiene and appearance – particularly the wearing of a uniform.

This article offers a personal perspective as to what constitutes the key attributes of a true 'professional'.

I think the following statement is very true... 'The context-specific nature of professionalism means that further work in this area should address the development of professionalism as a dynamic judgement, rather than a discreet skill set' (Health & Care Professions Council 2010).

I believe that there is a transition when the individual believes and invests in becoming a professional.

Veterinary nursing has come a long way with respect to recognition of the diverse roles that we undertake, as well as the key function that the RvN plays in modern practice. With this in mind, the spotlight has naturally focused upon regulation of our role within a professional context.

Registered VNs have agreed to abide by the RvN *Code of Professional Conduct*, which is the benchmark of professional standards, www.rcvs.org.uk/vncode. The following is the declaration that RvNs make when registering with the RCVS:

"I promise and solemnly declare that I will pursue the work of my profession with integrity and accept my responsibilities to the public, my clients, the profession and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and that, above all, my constant endeavour will be to ensure the health and welfare of animals committed to my care."

The changes to the *Code of Professional Conduct for RvNs* (2012) have brought some clarification and are designed to

provide guidance as to our professional obligations. This can be challenging in the 'cold light of day' as we have a responsibility to many different parties, including the RCVS (as outlined in the Code), our employer (by contract), as well as our patients and their owners.

There will be situations when our personal beliefs – or what we consider to be ethically 'correct' – will not necessarily correlate with what is legally binding.

The Code of Conduct also contains five principles of practice in the context of supportive documentation and these are:

- professional competence
- honesty and integrity
- independence and impartiality
- client confidentiality and trust
- professional accountability.

It is worthwhile reflecting upon how these principles translate into practice on a daily basis.

Professional competence

Professional competence must be maintained by undertaking continued professional development (CPD), on the basis of 45 hours over a three-year period, in order to keep our skills up-to-date. This not only serves to benefit our clients and their pets, it also adds value to the profession as a whole. We should take pride in maintaining a broad skill base.

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If the RVN has had a 'significant' career break, then a period of supervised practice (PSP) with a named, registered mentor is required on the basis of full-time employment for 17 weeks. This is simply to ensure that the veterinary nurse is up-to-date with respect to both knowledge and skills, and is competent to be fully accountable again for her or his actions.

Honesty and integrity

Honesty and integrity, by definition, implies strong moral principles and ethics, which as I pointed out earlier, may not always marry well with what the RVN is allowed legally to do. The need for cohesion and solidarity as characteristics are also highly desirable within the veterinary team, especially as we work so closely alongside one another.

RVNs are professionally bound to facilitate communication between the veterinary surgeon and the client. We support and enhance the veterinary team, but we also need to know our boundaries.

Independence and impartiality

Our personal lives and time away from work are something that we hold dear and we may admit to being a 'different' person when away from the workplace. It can be difficult for us to 'compartmentalise' this owing to the nature of the job, which can be stressful with long and unsociable hours.

However, if we place value on being a professional and belonging to a professional body (BVNA, RCVS), then we need to remember to remain impartial in our opinions, particularly when entering 'conversations' on social media forums, such as Twitter or Facebook.

Inappropriate comments in these media can be damaging to the image of the profession as a whole or to your employer in particular; because your opinion could be interpreted as that of the practice. Some practices may have a policy in place which states that matters relating to the workplace, including the use of images of patients or reference to clients or their pets, must not be discussed externally.

Client confidentiality and trust

Client confidentiality and trust should be at the forefront of our minds when

Figure 1. Respect from other staff members is gained by adopting a 'good work ethic' in everything you do



it comes to record keeping, protection of records and obtaining consent for procedures.

The client may often be more willing to approach the RVN to ask questions or to discuss concerns – rather than the vet – and we are required to communicate clearly to the client and provide factual information, whilst still being respectful of the decisions the client is making for their pet. Even if we disagree with their decisions, it is not appropriate to voice this to the client.

It is also helpful to have an ability to 'read' a client in order to pitch your behaviour correctly. The majority of clients may prefer a very formal approach to discussing their pet's health needs; but there may be situations where a less formal approach is more appropriate to convey empathy and reassurance to the client. I'm not suggesting making light of a situation – and we cannot always get it right – but we can consider our approach before we jump in with both feet!

Respect from other staff members, as well as members of the public, is gained by adopting a 'good work ethic' in everything you do (Figure 1). Professional behaviour must be polite, appropriate and respectful. With this in mind, even when we are away from the workplace, we must behave appropriately.

In the human medical context it has been shown that when senior colleagues display unprofessional behaviour, this can act as a source of emotional stress for students, causing upset and confusion (Paice, Heard & Moss, 2002). Examples of this include discussing patients inappropriately or allowing students to practise on patients without obtaining valid consent first.

Professional accountability

'Accountability is integral to professional practice. Nurses and midwives make judgements in a wide variety of circumstances, and use their professional knowledge and skills to make a decision based on evidence for best practice and the person's best interests. Nurses and midwives need to be able to justify the decisions they make.' (Nursing & Midwifery Council 2010).

Professional accountability is essentially thinking before we act or looking before we leap!


Summary

The Health & Care Professions Council (2010) states that professions which are newly 'professionalised' may find it harder to gain support and recognition than more established ones'.

Personally, I feel that we have made good progress since the non-statutory register was introduced, because our nursing team have a much greater awareness of their actions.

Our team of RVNs are utilised to their fullest abilities within the *RVN Code of Conduct* and they do take on board the responsibilities that come with it, with the knowledge that they are fully supported by the veterinary team.

As head nurse, I do feel a responsibility to lead 'by example' and am always aware of my image in the public eye, even down to the little details, such as a 'ladder' in my tights! Sending out the right impression is a vital part of recognition for us all and we must support and guide each other in this regard.

The author feels that it would be an interesting exercise to put together a study to examine the perception of professionalism in veterinary nursing and present it as something more 'tangible'. 

References and Further Reading

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