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Ivan has recently graduated from Hong Kong Polytechnic University with the first cohort of BSc(Hons) veterinary nursing students. During the four years of study, he had placements in a number of different sectors, including private veterinary hospitals, charity organisations, rescue shelters, laboratories, a theme park, a riding school and a government department, to explore the animal industry in Hong Kong. As a result he believes that the professionalisation of veterinary nurses is essential to uphold animal welfare. Since graduation, Ivan has started working at the Hong Kong Jockey Club, in the Equine Hospital, as a Veterinary Clinical Technician.

The future of veterinary nursing in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT: Pet ownership is becoming increasingly popular in Hong Kong. With technological advancement and use of the Internet, pet owners have greater access to veterinary knowledge and as a result have higher expectations of the veterinary services that should be provided for their pets. However, the development of veterinary nursing in Hong Kong is widely considered as stagnant when compared with other advanced societies. Together with the increased awareness on the issues of animal welfare, a growing voice for professionalisation of veterinary nursing in Hong Kong has been noted. This article attempts to discuss professionalisation of veterinary nursing in Hong Kong with respect to professional attributes, statutory regulation and continuous professional development (CPD).

Keywords: animal welfare; professionalism

The veterinary nursing sector is striving for greater professionalism and recognition worldwide. In Europe, veterinary nurses have become increasingly recognized and respected in recent years, whereas the Hong Kong veterinary nursing sector is still in its early stages. The success of the European veterinary nursing industry may mirror the development pathway of Hong Kong veterinary nurses in the future.

Professional attributes

In Hong Kong, as veterinary nursing is in its infancy, in general the public interpret the role as just 'holding' the animal or translating for the veterinary surgeons, who are predominantly English speaking. Brown and Silverman (1999) stated that clients were becoming more knowledgeable and bonded with their pets. As clients are becoming more demanding on veterinary service, employers' expectations have also been raised with respect to the veterinary nurse's technical skill as well as their personal attributes. It has been suggested by Ruby and DeBowes (2007), that empathy is the most important component in building a good relationship with the client and ensuring high levels of compliance. This can be as important as technical expertise.

Professional competence for veterinary nurses is more than just being skilful in technical tasks. Clarke (2010) suggested that professional competence can be

categorised using the *cognitive, affective* and *technical* domains. The cognitive domain relates to the acquisition of knowledge and problem-solving ability, the affective domain refers to emotional intelligence; while the technical domain refers to the ability to perform technical procedures.

Professionalism

In Hong Kong, until 2012, the Code of Practice for the Guidance of Registered Veterinary Surgeons stated that 'veterinary nurses' are no more entitled to perform an act of veterinary science than any other lay person (Food and Health Bureau and Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, 2011). In 2012, the Veterinary Surgeons Registration Ordinance Order was amended. It gives a list of duties that a **person** can perform under the 'direction' or 'supervision' or 'direct and continuous supervision' whilst on veterinary premises by a registered veterinary surgeon (Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, 2012). It would appear, therefore, that the ordinance has granted the veterinary para-professional some autonomy. However, the ordinance uses the word 'person', rather than using 'veterinary assistant' or 'veterinary nurse'.

According to Hamlin (2013), although assisting the veterinary surgeon is a part of the veterinary nurse's job, the veterinary nurse is still the most qualified person in the practice to perform

veterinary nursing duties. Pullen (2006) commented that veterinary nurses previously undertook their role based on a 'medical model of nursing care'; in other words the veterinary surgeon makes a diagnosis and directs the nurse to perform tasks that will aid the patient's recovery. This approach focuses on curing the disease rather than nursing the patient's individual needs. In order to be classified as professional, Pullen (2006) commented that a professional, qualified veterinary nurse should be granted a greater level of autonomy in the provision of care which would facilitate a more 'patient orientated' approach.

Hamlin (2013) commented that veterinary nurses should be accountable for their actions. In the UK, a disciplinary system has been introduced for veterinary nurses. A veterinary nurse who has committed misconduct is potentially subject to disciplinary proceedings if there is found to be a valid case against the individual. Mahoney (2003) stated, 'Registration is not an option, it is a necessity.' Registration, a code of conduct and regulations, set standards to guide and protect veterinary nursing professionals. More importantly, ensuring a veterinary nursing standard is vitally important to protect and safeguard the welfare of animals under care.

Continuing professional development (CPD)

Hamlin (2012) stated that it is important for veterinary nurses to be motivated to update and improve skills and knowledge to maintain competency. One means of doing this may be writing scientific articles which can allow veterinary nurses to analyse current practices critically and consider new approaches to improve standards. Branscombe (2010) stated that ideally nursing intervention should be based on experience and evidence-based practice, where the methods have also been proved as theoretically valid by research. Continuing education is particularly important because veterinary nurses hold the lives of patients in their hands and they are obligated to protect the patients under their care.

Continuing education has been become mandatory in Ireland, the UK and Australia, but it is optional in Hong Kong. However, awareness of the necessity for continuing education is rising in Hong Kong and a number of organisations are committed to providing continuing education. Furthermore, the first veterinary school will come into operation in 2014 in a Hong Kong university. This will hopefully bode well for the future of the whole veterinary sector in Hong Kong.

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