

REGULATIONS RELATING TO REGISTERED VETERINARY NURSES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ABSTRACT

Veterinary nursing is now a well recognised professional route in the UK. There is considerable capacity within the industry to increase the number of veterinary nurses employed. As the veterinary care sector of the economy continues to expand the role of veterinary nurses under the direction of veterinary surgeons is predicted to grow. The need to train veterinary nurses to the highest standard accredited by the RCVS at both Diploma and Degree levels will continue to increase to meet this demand.

Introduction

The gestation of veterinary nursing as a recognised and self-regulated profession in the United Kingdom can be best described as long and difficult. Caught between the twin expectations and anxieties of the well-established professions of nursing and veterinary medicine, veterinary nursing made slow progress to the point where it became a self-regulated profession in 2011 under the auspices of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). This paper describes something of the historical background of the development of the veterinary nursing profession in the United Kingdom, explores the drivers for change and examines possible future developments.

Early History of Veterinary Nursing Regulation

The benefits to animals of good care during recovery from illness has been recognised for centuries, as early as 1888 authors such as J H Steele were promoting the virtues of clean and comfortable clinical accommodation (Vivash Jones, 2011). The demand for the requirement of nurse registration appeared almost simultaneously in fields of veterinary medicine and human medicine; the first non-statutory registers of nurses was created by the British Nursing Association in 1887 (Mollet, 1888). By 1908 news about the role of canine

nurses and the need for some regulations had spread globally with the work of the Canine Nursing Institute been quoted with some amusement in the Australian press (National Library of Australia 2015). There were only three rules: "That the nurse shall faithfully attend and minister to the sick animal, behaving herself with tact, gentleness, and discretion; that she shall not divulge any facts which may come to her knowledge with reference to the private affairs of the animal owners; that the nurse's food shall be plain and good, and her meals served separately. There is an amusing similarity in these rules to those of Guy's Institution for Trained Nurses, except, of course, that the word 'animal' has been introduced." The Register, Adelaide 1908. The article, somewhat prophetically, foresees the possibility of "the equine and bovine nurse in other becoming uniforms, complicating the difficulties in distinguishing the hospital trained nurse by her dress, which are already more than sufficient".

In human nursing full statutory regulation was achieved in 1919 with the formation of the General Nursing Council but only after six parliamentary attempts failed between 1908 and 1918 (National Archives, 2015). The reticence of the United Kingdom parliament to introduce nursing registrations in human medicine was mirror and

amplified in the case of veterinary nursing with a non-statutory register not been created until 2007 (Branscombe 2011) and protecting the title “veterinary nurse” is still a work in progress. Support for nurse registration was absent from some unexpected quarters, noticeably Florence Nightingale who was very much against the principle of nurse registration. Some of the veterinary profession were also decidedly lukewarm about veterinary nurse registration (Badger, 2005). Although the first attempt at registration of animal nurses with the RCVS in 1934 failed (Vivash Jones, 2011), the occupation continued to attract public interest with the leading animal nurse of the day (Mrs Florence Bell) appearing on a cigarette card in 1938 (Turner and Turner, 2011).

Moving towards accredited training standards, registration and self-regulation

It was not until 1961 the first formal animal nursing qualification (Animal Nursing Auxiliary) was recognized by the RCVS (Branscombe 2011). The first Registered Animal Nursing Assistant qualified in 1962 (Turner and Turner 2011). The qualification title of Veterinary Nurse was first used officially by the RCVS in 1984 after protection of the title ‘Nurse’ was removed by legislation, and then in 1991 the role of the veterinary nurse was recognised in law with Schedule 3 amendment to the Veterinary Surgeons act (1966) (RCVS Knowledge 2015). The role of the RCVS as the awarding body of veterinary nursing qualification was established in 1997 and the non-statutory register of Veterinary Nurses began in 2007 (Branscombe 2011). The profession became self-regulating in 2011 with the introduction of a disciplinary system for Registered Veterinary Nurses, backup with a new Code of Professional Conduct in 2012 which included, for the first time, a declaration to be made by Registered Veterinary Nurses on professional registration (RCVS Knowledge 2015). Despite the advancement in recognised training, registration and regulation the title ‘Veterinary Nurse’ still remains unprotected, so any unqualified person can use the title (RCVS, 2015).

Drivers for change in the veterinary industry in the UK

Up until quite recently the role of animal nurse in the UK has frequently been carried out by untrained employees of the veterinary practice. Although this is still legally possible the increasing demands from clientele for properly qualified veterinary nurses has meant that is becoming much less common. Owners of some veterinary practices may regret the trend towards better training and registration of veterinary nurses, as it no doubt adds to human resource costs, however as the move towards larger multi-vet practices continues the inclusion of registered veterinary nurses on the payroll has a positive effect on balance sheets.

Veterinary nurses can add value to the veterinary practice business model by allowing veterinary surgeons to concentrate on the increasingly complex and technically demanding aspects of veterinary medicine providing a greater turnover of cases and generating more income. As the expectations of pet owners of the services and experience offered by veterinary practice increase and as the intrinsic value they place on their pets escalates, veterinary nurses are able to make an invaluable contribution to the wrap-around services offered by practices. Furthermore, the specialist training that veterinary nurses receive in peri-operative and clinical care has a significant impact on survival and recovery of patients.

Protecting professional standards and legal recognition of roles

Common concerns that Veterinary Surgeons have expressed about increased professional recognition of veterinary nurses include: An erosion of statutory protected status of the veterinary surgeon; establishment of an additional tier of animal health professionals that creates a grey area where un-suitably qualified personnel could practice; erosions of professional standards and accountability; undermining the viability of veterinary businesses; less qualified personnel doing the job of the professional.

Although these concerns may have had some basis if the trend within the veterinary profession was towards less regulation, in fact they have little foundation where the profession is moving towards tighter regulation, increased accountability and more stringent accreditation of qualifications. Registered veterinary nurses in the UK have, since 2002, had their role within practice limited by parliamentary statute (Schedule 3 of the 1966 Veterinary Surgeons Act). Since 2011, their professional conduct is regulated by the RCVS and veterinary nurses are now personally accountable for their professional actions. Moreover, all registered veterinary nurses are trained to a standard that is accredited by the RCVS. Any violation of these regulations can result in a veterinary nurse facing disciplinary procedures.

The future of veterinary nursing

Veterinary surgeons in practice in the UK outnumber Veterinary Nurses by nearly 6000, there is one veterinary surgeon to every 0.56 veterinary nurse. A similar statistic within the National Health Service is one doctor to 2.5 nurses. Veterinary practices in the UK are getting bigger and more commercially orientated, veterinary nurses are often able to provide a cost effective means of increasing the range of services offered by a practice which often allows veterinary surgeons to develop more specialist and lucrative referral services. Veterinary nurses also can provide a means of providing an effective out of hours and emergency care services. Veterinary nurses are also increasingly able to develop professional specialisms which can further diversify the activity of practices.

The role of the veterinary surgeons and the veterinary nurse is a partnership which is greatly enhanced by strong professional regulation, excellent training and statutory regulation of both professions. In the UK the growth of veterinary nursing has facilitated the expansion of veterinary practices and increased the job security of veterinary surgeons.

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