

ETHICS IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

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The public has a very high regard for veterinarians and veterinary staff members. We consistently rank at the top for the most trusted professionals or professions. It is everyone's job to uphold and maintain high ethical standards, to keep this high regard for both our profession at large and our hospital in particular. Unfortunately, veterinary team members are prone to the same lapses that people in other professions tend to have. We must all guard against unethical behavior both at and away from work.

74% of the men and 78% of the women surveyed in a recent study state they feel their families have been neglected somewhat due to workplace pressures. To curb unethical behavior, 73% believe that more open dialogue would help, and 71% say they need to see a more serious commitment by management. Hence these pages - we intend to teach you about unethical behavior and how to avoid it. We want to give you the tools to handle problems and conflicts ethically. We want you to be able to give feedback, training and support about ethical issues to those you work alongside.

A person is the sum of their life, their education and what their environment provides. Each person brings a unique set of values, ethics and attitudes to the veterinary healthcare team. The team is formed by the owner, who has his or her own set of values, ethics and attitudes; and the employees, who also each have their own core beliefs. Group and team training brings all the people working for the leader of the practice together, to blend into a greater whole.

The end result should be that if you do not share your hospital's ethics, values and standards you should seek an environment that you feel more aligned with. According to Dr. Tom Catanzaro, in healthcare another word for "competence" is "excellence." Each of us must hold ourselves to the highest standard because substandard performance at work means substandard care for the patient.

A positive mental attitude leads to more ethical behavior:

Don't blame anyone else or make excuses - whether or not you caused the problem you can certainly help to fix it

Be enthusiastic and creative

Build on strengths - yours and those of others

Improve your skills - get a little closer to excellence every day

Accept accountability for what you do - high standards help us to achieve more

Look to the future - what can we do better tomorrow?

Ask the right questions - Did the job get done? Are we on schedule? Did we do it right/well? Is everyone involved? Are we working well and satisfied?

Ethics start at the top of any organization, and the ethics the team perceives are generally due to the tone set by the owners and managers of the hospital. Seldom will these people be perceived as "leaders" if their image is of covert or unethical behavior. Because we all work so closely together in veterinary medicine and every one of us will be mentoring, training and coaching at least one other team member, we all must uphold the

highest standards in order to maintain an ethical practice. It all starts with you. Please do your best every day to uphold high ethical standards.

USA Today recently listed the Top Five Unethical Behavior Actions. We may think of ourselves as ethical people and assume none of these apply to us - but we are often wrong. If we look at these we can think of many examples of unethical behavior in our work life. Here are the **top five unethical behaviors**, with some examples of how they apply here. Which ones do you need to work to avoid?

1) Cut corners on quality

This means we don't always exert the effort to maintain high quality or high standards - we cut corners because it's easier. Unfortunately, cutting corners results in poorer customer and patient care. For example:

- *Not upholding our own standards or following our own protocols
- *Not offering services because we are afraid the client will get angry, perceive us as pushy or not like us
- *Giving up before you explained thoroughly enough for the client to make an informed decision
- *Not following checklists or task lists and thus forgetting needed items
- *Not giving advice or samples and saying "I forgot" rather than ensuring the patient is getting the best food or OTC item possible
- *Not logging phone shoppers or departing clients because "it's busy"
- *"Forgetting" to enter follow up items such as call backs

2) Covered up inappropriate incidents - just because you don't do it yourself doesn't mean it's OK to let someone else get away with it.

- *Falsifying your hours or having someone punch in for you
- *Hiding the fact that coworkers were drinking alcohol on the premises
- *Tolerating or not reporting carelessness, gossiping, poor work quality
- *Not speaking up when someone else is doing something you know isn't right, like goofing off while punched in. It is safer and easier to not say anything - but it's unethical and in the long run reduces the effectiveness of the whole team.

3) Abused or lied about sick days

- *Lying or cheating in one area ruins trust in every other aspect of your job

4) Lied to or deceived customers or clients

We know how much we hate it when companies lie to or deceive us, or when a client swears they mailed a check and you know they didn't. Don't do this yourself to others - when the truth comes out, as it usually does, they'll be just as angry as you would be if you had been lied to.

If there was a problem with patient care, a missed diagnosis or a wrong dose of medication administered, the doctor should explain to the client, not try to cover it up. Mistakes happen and all of us will make one sooner or later. However, it should also be stated that **in any matter that could result in a lawsuit against us, any involved staff**

"No man can make good during working hours who does the wrong thing outside of working hours."
William Boetcker

member should refer any questions to the doctor. Do not attempt to explain or resolve the situation yourself.

“When I do good,
I feel good. When
I do bad, I feel
bad. And that’s my
religion.”
Abraham Lincoln

5) Put inappropriate pressure on others
Do not ask or expect others to take sides in a dispute or disagreement. You are not the judge and jury. Often if someone is asking you to take sides or give your opinion on who is right or wrong it’s not your business and they are stirring up trouble. Don’t get sucked into a dispute. If you have a conflict with someone, resolve it according to the protocols in this manual. Don’t spread negativity or an argument throughout the clinic.

What triggers or fosters unethical behavior? These ten items can be reasons or excuses for unethical behavior:

- 1) Need to meet sales, profit or budget goals
- 2) Little or no recognition for achievements
- 3) Politics within the work place
- 4) Poor internal communications
- 5) Balancing work and family
- 6) Poor example by top management
- 7) Work hours/work load
- 8) Lack of management support
- 9) Personal financial worries
- 10) Insufficient resources to get the job done right

In a USA Today survey of 1324 workers, 57% said they felt more pressure to be unethical than five years ago and 40% said it has gotten worse over the past twelve months. Retail stores now “plan to lose” more from employee theft than to customer theft. Surveys show that entry-level restaurant and fast food workers admit to stealing an average of \$239 per year in cash and merchandise. Some try to explain this away because “management doesn’t care about us” or “everybody’s doing it.”

“What is moral is what
you feel good after and
what is immoral is what
you feel bad after.”
Ernest Hemingway

We all know what is right and wrong in most circumstances. If you wouldn’t want your manager or mother to find out about something, it’s probably unethical, unprofessional or both. Please always remember that what you do does matter – to the clients, patients, co-workers and others who are counting on you to be your best self at work.

ETHICS EXERCISE

Use these questions as a take off point for discussion:

- 1) You realize you're going to be late to work – again. You:
 - a. Realize you have to be late 16 times before there are any consequences, so it's no big deal
 - b. Run a red light to get there 10 seconds earlier
 - c. Sneak in and punch in in back so no one will notice
 - d. Get a license plate that says “ALWZ LAT”
 - e. Decide you need to set your alarm clock for 15 minutes earlier
 - f. Apologize to your coworkers when you get there, promise you'll try harder to get there on time
 - g. Call on your cell phone and ask someone to punch in for you
 - h. Say the computer clock was wrong, deny you were late
 - i. Change the clock on the computer before you punch in

Why is tardiness disruptive to a business?

Who picks up the slack for employees who come in late?

What does tardiness do to your reputation as a team player?

Here is an excerpt from an office manual. Do you think these provisions are fair? Do they seem unreasonable?

“Promptness in reporting to work is a basic requirement. This usually means you should arrive for work about 10 minutes ahead of time, and be punched in at least **5 minutes before your start time**. In other words if your start time is 7:30 you should be in the building by 7:20. By 7:25 you should have your coat off, your uniform on and your work station ready. If you are not punched in and ready to work by the 5 minute mark you will be counted as late. If you will be late to work due to problems such as car trouble, please notify us as soon as possible.”

How would you expect to be treated if you were tardy occasionally? Tardy on a weekly or daily basis?

Should doctors be held to higher standards than other employees? Why or why not?

Where does respect come from? Is it because of your degree? Your job position? Your knowledge? What other traits would make you respected or disrespected?

Here's another excerpt: “Because the doctors are leaders in the practice, and because they have chosen a career, not just a job, they are held to a higher standard than other members of the team. Timeliness, patient care, completion of projects and customer service

are especially important for those who are addressed as “Doctor.” Veterinarians should strive to set a good example.”

Do you agree with this? Should doctors be held to a higher standard?

“The professional atmosphere of the hospital is to be maintained by employees while present in the hospital. Employees are expected to be neat and clean and to maintain their jacket or scrubs, as well as clothes beneath their uniforms in a clean and pressed state at all times. Dress and conduct are very important. Our clients are entrusting their pets to our care and they want to know their animals will be well taken care of. A neat and clean appearance gives us a positive image and makes our clients feel secure about their pets' care.

Improper appearance distracts from our ability to communicate with clients about the care of their pets, and makes us look unprofessional. Unacceptable attire or appearance includes visible tattoos, pierced body parts other than ears, hair color that is not a normal color for natural hair, sweat pants, baggy jeans, shirts or sweatshirts with obscene words or slogans, shirt untucked, exposed abdomen, excessively long fingernails and black, purple or other lipstick that does not complement normal skin tones. Women may wear multiple earrings with restraint and discretion. No earrings are allowed for male staff members. No wrinkled or soiled clothing.

Hairstyles and make-up should be clean, neat and conservative. This means no messy ponytails or buns. Anything that distracts the client from the health care information we are trying to convey, such as unusual hair coloring, tattoos, piercings other than those in the ears, loud clothing or make-up, gum chewing or other annoying personal habits, is in and of itself a disservice to the client. Clients don't come here to see you, they come here for health care for their pets. It should be delivered without distractions.

If you are handling patients, do not wear necklaces, bracelets or dangling earrings that cats can get caught in.”

Do you think it's OK for hospitals to have dress codes? How should they be enforced?

“It is also expected that all employees will respect the privacy and integrity of clients, doctors and other staff. Any conversation, discussions or other information gathered from the hospital is to remain in the hospital. Specifically, don't talk about clients with others unless it is pertinent to your job function, and certainly don't gossip about them outside the clinic walls. Do not talk about clients where they or other clients can hear you, which includes the pharmacy area and the hallways adjacent to the front desk and exam rooms. Be careful about loud voices on the phone or up front, no matter what you are discussing. In short, professional people are discreet and realize that their opinions about others are not necessarily shared, nor are they appropriate material for conversation.

It is also not your business to gossip about your coworkers to each other, family or friends. It is not appropriate to discuss employees who no longer work here, nor can anyone but a supervisor give a reference for any employee past or present.”

Is it OK to go out for drinks after work with your coworkers? Can you be friends with people you work with?

How easy is it to forego discussing clients and coworkers in a social setting? What happens if a client overhears such a discussion?

“It is expected that all employees will maintain a cheerful and efficient demeanor at work. Personal problems do not belong in the workplace. Surliness or rudeness to other staff members or to clients is not in the best interests of this hospital and does not foster our clinic mission statement. It is extremely important to attempt to maintain a good relationship with your fellow staff members and clients.

No swearing or loud or abusive language or rude humor that can be overheard by clients will be tolerated. Negative discussion of clients is discouraged. Realize that clients may overhear discussions not intended to be heard. Be discreet and polite at all times.”

Does this mean you should never joke around or have fun at work? Does it mean you can't ever have a bad day?

How realistic is it to think people can act professionally at all times?

What do you think should happen to a surly or rude employee? What if it were you?

“These 18 things will never be acceptable or excused (please report any of these to a supervisor immediately):

1. Animal abuse
2. Stealing
3. Unexcused absence or tardiness
4. Deliberate or careless damage to hospital property
5. Use of alcohol or narcotics on hospital property
6. Use of abusive or profane language
7. Refusal to follow orders, instructions or protocols
8. Altering or falsifying time cards or other documents or reports
9. Giving false information when making application for employment
10. Fighting, whether provoked or otherwise
11. Continued inefficient or careless performance on the job
12. Personality conflicts or attitude problems
13. Any public demonstration of disloyalty to the principles of the hospital
(misconduct off the job reflects serious discredit in the community)
14. Breach or willful misuse of confidential information
15. Other behavior disruptive to our production which the team member fails to correct
16. Use of language or behavior that may be considered offensive to clients or teammates
17. Failure to follow safety rules or protect the health and well being of clients and coworkers
18. Failure to be courteous, tactful and friendly to clients”

Anything you would add to this list? Subtract from it?

Is it animal abuse to forget to give a pet its medication?

Is it “Deliberate or careless damage to hospital property” if you accidentally break an expensive piece of equipment? Who should pay for the damage?

Define “abusive or profane.”

What counts as a “personality conflict?” Some conflict is inevitable in any business or family. To what level is it OK and what would you think would be over the top?

2) The sales reps give out free heartworm and flea products just by signing up on a list. You decide to:

- a. Only get the products you really need for your own pets
- b. Put yourself down for the maximum amount of every product so you can give some away to your friends or relatives
- c. Realize these are prescription products and the doctors have to OK where they go
- d. Realize that the doctors are liable if you give away prescription medications to non-patients and something goes wrong
- e. Realize that the reps won't continue to be so generous if they find out you were cheating
- f. Figure it looks bad to your bosses and coworkers to be dishonest
- g. Are shocked to learn that someone would take advantage of the system
- h. Tell your manager or practice owner that so-and-so is cheating if you catch them
- i. Figure that if so-and-so is cheating it's all right for you to do it, too

3) You gave the wrong dose of medication to a hospitalized pet. You:

- a. Tell the doctor immediately
- b. Pretend it never happened
- c. Figure it's no big deal as long as the pet doesn't die
- d. Resolve to be much more careful next time

4) You forgot to do a treatment marked on the white board. You:

- a. Initial the box anyway and pretend you did
- b. Tell the doctor immediately
- c. Figure it's no big deal as long as the pet doesn't die
- d. Feel really guilty, never do it again
- e. Figure you got away with it this time, you won't worry if you do it again

5) You check off the wrong box on the euthanasia form and the pet's ashes never come back. You:

- a. Blame it on the cremation service
- b. Substitute ashes from another pet
- c. Call the client and confess
- d. Credit their account and tell a doctor

- e. Cry for about a month, feel terrible about it
- f. Resolve to double check every cremation from now on
- g. Feel really bad for a little while but then go back to careless habits

CHOICES & DECISIONS EXERCISE

There are just four ways that a team member can respond to a decision made by the practice owner(s) or the team itself. They are:

- 1) Agree with the decision and back it 100%
- 2) Disagree but back it 100% anyway because it's good for the team or the practice
- 3) Disagree but keep it to yourself and go along
- 4) Fight the decision. This includes bad mouthing it, undermining or sabotaging it or refusing to do it

It's acceptable for an employee in any business setting to adopt any of the first three responses. It is never OK for a person employed by a company to choose the number four position. It's not a good strategy for your job security, for the company or for the team members who work with you.

Here are some examples of choices and decisions being made and the responses you might make to them. What would you do in the following situations? What should you be doing instead?

- 1) You don't like the scrub tops that were chosen. You:
 - a. Tell 6 of your closest friends you hate the new scrub tops
 - b. Decide to order your own and wear them even though they aren't the ones chosen
 - c. Complain later to the boss
 - d. Realize it's not that big a deal and wear them with a smile

What would you say to a team member who is getting all bent out of shape over an issue you think is petty?

As a doctor, what should be your role in managing other team members? If you see poor behavior is it your job to address it? Report it?

- 2) You realize that semiannual financial charts are due next week and you already feel like there's too much to do. You:
 - a. Complain to 6 of your closest friends about how unfair it is that you have to do charts
 - b. Gripe about it to anyone who will listen, try to get sympathy because you're so busy
 - c. Get to work so you have time to start it later in the day
 - d. Refuse to do it because it's unfair
 - e. Take the EOM (end of the month reports) book home with you to work on that evening
 - f. Half complete it, then say you didn't have time

- g. Put in a callback for 10 weeks later so you remember to start earlier next time
- h. Quietly seethe and hold a grudge

Most people find it all too easy to complain and criticize. It's also easy to feel busy and fail to prioritize well. What is the purpose of participating in team and meeting activities? Are these important tasks to complete?

- 3) You don't like the schedule that's been distributed. You:
- a. Tell 6 of your closest friends about it
 - b. Quietly discuss your concerns with your manager or owner doctor
 - c. Tell the manager or doctor you hate the new schedule
 - d. Quietly seethe and hold a grudge
 - e. Realize that everyone has some late nights and it's a fair schedule
 - f. Feel persecuted
 - g. Realize that it's temporary, and the sooner you get the new associate trained the sooner it will get better
 - h. Realize that if you are nice about it and don't gripe you'll get a better job review and maybe a raise
 - i. Start making a list of who gets better hours than you do so you have more ammunition

People get very attached to their schedules, and consequently get upset when they are changed. People also want to make everything "equal" and "fair." Is it realistic to expect fairness in all things always? If not, when does it rise to the level of being worth fighting for or against?

- 4) You don't like the new checklists that the manager made. You:
- a. Decide to give them a try
 - b. Complain to 6 of your closest friends
 - c. Refuse to use them
 - d. Pout
 - e. Figure it's no big deal
 - f. Wait to see what everyone else will do
 - g. Pretend you don't know how, refuse to learn how

Whenever a change is introduced, it's natural to resist it. At least 20% of people are against any change proposed. 20-30% will support it and possibly help implement the change and 50% will sit on the fence waiting to see who will win. It's wise to think carefully before taking a position but it's also essential to honestly evaluate your first knee-jerk reaction. Do you tend to be a change supporter or a change resistor? How will you be regarded by your boss or your team?

- 5) You don't like the new person much. You:
- a. Tell 6 of your closest friends you don't like the new person much
 - b. Complain to your manager that you don't think the new person is going to work out

- c. Decide to make the new person's life miserable so they'll quit
- d. Think about whether your dislike is because you feel threatened or uncomfortable about them for some reason
- e. Realize you don't have to like someone to work with them
- f. Decide you'll reserve judgment until you get to know them better
- g. Quietly hate them
- h. Quit

Is it possible to work professionally with a person you don't like?

Does everyone on any team like and get along well with everyone else all the time?

How will a new associate doctor tend to change team dynamics?

Who has political power in a practice?

- 6) Your boss said something at a meeting that you disagree with. You:
- a. Speak up right away and loudly disagree
 - b. Quietly hate her
 - c. Gripe about it to 6 of your closest friends later
 - d. Decide that she's the business owner, she gets to make the decisions
 - e. Try to figure out if there is something you could do that would improve on her decision, then bring it up again at the next meeting
 - f. Tell her later that she sucks
 - g. Decide you just aren't going to do what she wants
 - h. Quit

Are you likely to always agree? What are constructive ways to handle disagreements?

“Veterinarians are responsible for generating income for the practice. They must be able to produce enough income to support both themselves and their support team. They must work efficiently and utilize staff well. This means they are accountable for staff training and effectiveness. In other words, as leaders and role models of the practice they must ensure that staff members on their team are not engaging in idle chit chat, remain productive while punched in and are utilizing their time well. They should not engage any staff member in idle activities if the person is punched in. Part of a veterinarian's job is to supervise and mentor the staff. Everyone here should be involved with staff training and familiar with the goals and skills that team members are working on or learning.”

Do you agree with this paragraph? Why or why not?