

What do monitoring agreements consist of?

A monitoring agreement is tailored to suit each situation. It might include:

- an agreed limitation on the sort of practice the veterinarian can undertake
- the veterinarian working with a supervisor
- the veterinarian working with a mentor
- the veterinarian having regular treatment with his or her own general practitioner or specialist medical practitioner
- the veterinarian undergoing treatment in the problem area
- the veterinarian agreeing to attend support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous
- the carrying out of random urine or blood tests to check for the presence of drugs or alcohol
- restrictions on prescribing
- a practice protocol where agreement is made with the employer/ work colleagues about controlling the access by the veterinarian to abusable substances.

Confidentiality

The aim is for the process to be confidential between the veterinarian, his or her health care providers and the Council. However, where there are situations of drug or alcohol misuse or inappropriate behaviour, it is preferable that the employer is informed of any agreement. Where a practice protocol is required, this would obviously be necessary. If conditions

on the veterinarian's practice are imposed by the Council then there are notification requirements under the Veterinarians Act.

How do I contact the Council?

If you are worried about your own health, or about the health of another veterinarian you should contact the Council's Registrar, who will pass on the information promptly to the Health Committee. The Committee prefers to identify the person who has made the referral as it is very difficult for it to work with hearsay, but there are some instances where the committee may use its discretion.

Registrar: 04 473 9600 or
registrar@vetcouncil.org.nz

Other Help available

Vets in Stress

The Veterinary Council of New Zealand and the New Zealand Veterinary Association maintain a contract with Seed, which is the provider of The Vets in Stress programme. This programme is funded jointly by the two professional bodies and the Elizabeth Benevolent Fund.

The programme includes a **24-hour freephone access (0508) 664 981** to counsellors and psychologists, and access to a national network of Seed counsellors and psychologists providing confidential and professional offsite counselling. A network of regional veterinary

co-ordinators are available who may, subject to the prior approval of the referred veterinarian, provide confidential advice and collegial support. The scheme is designed to assist veterinarians with personal or health problems.

New Zealand Veterinary Association
For veterinarians who are members of the New Zealand Veterinary Association, or whose employers have VPIS insurance, help may be available in the form of personal, legal or (limited) financial support.



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The Veterinary Council of New Zealand

Veterinarians' Health

The Veterinary Council of New Zealand is responsible for protecting the public interest. Under the Veterinarians Act the Council may respond to situations where a veterinarian's health situation may be impairing his or her fitness to practise.

A veterinarian may be unfit to practise if he or she:

- is unable to make safe judgements
- is unable to demonstrate the level of skill and knowledge required for safe practice
- behaves inappropriately
- acts or omits to act in ways that impact adversely on the safety of patients, clients, colleagues or staff.

This pamphlet explains how the Council responds to such situations. It is for veterinarians and their employers or colleagues or clients, and anyone else who may be concerned about a veterinarian's health.

What causes health problems?

Veterinarians, like everyone else, are constantly exposed to stresses and hazards that can impair performance. Stresses can include the demands of work and personal relationships, as well as financial problems. Hazards include infectious diseases, accidents or injury as a result of working with animals, exposure to radiation, drugs and noxious chemicals. In addition, veterinarians are vulnerable to the

same physical and psychological disorders and addictions as the rest of the community.

It is to be expected that a small number of veterinarians in actual practice will be working under some degree of impairment. If professional help is not sought it is often just a matter of time before serious problems occur. General experience is that early intervention usually enables veterinarians with a treatable condition to keep practising while receiving treatment.

However, sometimes a complex or irreversible health problem is involved. In these cases it is vital for public safety that the veterinarian's practice is closely monitored or, if necessary that she or he stops work.

Who advises the Council about problems with a veterinarian's health?

Often veterinarians advise the Council of their health problem either when it occurs or when they renew their practising certificate. However, any person can tell the Council of their concerns about a veterinarian.

How does the Council assess and monitor the situation?

The Health Committee is a committee appointed by the Council to assess, make recommendations and monitor the health of

veterinarians. It currently consists of two Council members and a human health professional. At any one time the committee may be helping and monitoring veterinarians for a number of reasons.

Rehabilitative not punitive

The Council's assessment and monitoring process is designed to separate health issues from those of conduct and discipline. The Committee's focus is on rehabilitation, and the assumption is that with treatment the veterinarian should be able to remain in work safely or return to work as quickly as possible.

The assessment process

Initially the Health Committee will contact the veterinarian to seek their comment on the concern, and may ask for supporting medical information. The Committee's task is to recommend to the Council whether the veterinarian needs to be monitored in some way, and so an informed recommendation needs to be made. If necessary the Health Committee may recommend that the Council requires the person to undergo a medical assessment.

If it is necessary to protect the public immediately, the Council may ask the veterinarian to agree to limit his or her practice in certain ways, or temporarily suspend the

veterinarian's practising certificate or impose conditions on his or her practice. Any such suspension or conditions can be placed for up to 50 working days before a medical assessment takes place.

If a medical assessment is undertaken the veterinarian has the right to make submissions on the assessor's report and appear before the Council.

Outcomes of a medical assessment

Taking into consideration the recommendation of the Health Committee and the submissions of the veterinarian, the Council may decide on one or more of the following actions:

- that no further action is needed
- that a voluntary agreement between the Council and the veterinarian should be set in place. This agreement is aimed at supporting and monitoring the veterinarian's rehabilitation (see information on monitoring agreement overleaf)
- that conditions of practice be imposed upon the veterinarian's practice
- that the Council places a period of suspension so that treatment can occur.
- that the person's registration or practising certificate is cancelled. This could happen if attempts at rehabilitation were unsuccessful.