



## Telemedicine – Professional Standard

### Background

ABVMA Council recognizes value in the use of technologies that connect veterinary professionals with clients that facilitate access to professional veterinary services.

Use of telemedicine will reinforce the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR), augment the patient visit and lead to improved animal health and welfare.

This policy supports use of telemedicine by Alberta veterinary professionals and does not alter the scope of practice of any veterinarian or veterinary technologist or permit delivery of veterinary medical services in manner that is not authorized by existing legislation. This includes the requirement that all veterinary medical services be delivered out of or in conjunction with a certified and inspected veterinary practice entity.

This policy supports a consistent standard of care and scope of practice notwithstanding whether tools used to deliver veterinary medical services are physically or virtually based.

A veterinarian using telemedicine for provision of veterinary services to a patient (whether existing or new) must take appropriate steps to establish the VCPR consistent with traditional standards of care for the particular case and circumstances.

As such, some situations and patient presentations are appropriate for use of telemedicine as a component of, or in lieu of, in-person provision of medical care, while others are not. Veterinarians will need to use their professional judgement to determine where use of telemedicine is appropriate. This policy is intended to support professional judgment.

### Definitions

**Telemedicine:** Telemedicine is the provision of specific veterinary medical advice and veterinary treatment of an animal(s) based on remote diagnosis of disease and injury by means of telecommunications technology where, in some specific situations, no physical examination of the animal(s) by the veterinarian takes place. It does not include consultation between veterinarians, including communication between an attending veterinarian and a consulting veterinarian, in different locations regarding a specific case or general, non-specific, advice.

**Telehealth** is the overarching term that encompasses all uses of technology geared to remotely deliver health information or education. Telehealth encompasses a broad variety of technologies and tactics to deliver virtual medical, health and education services. Telehealth is not a specific service, but a collection of tools that allow veterinarians to enhance care and education delivery. Telehealth encompasses both Telemedicine and general advice.

**Teletriage** is the safe, appropriate, and timely assessment and management (immediate referral to a veterinarian or not) of animal patients via electronic consultation with their owners. In assessing patient condition electronically, the assessor determines urgency and the need for immediate referral to a veterinarian, based on the owner's (or responsible party's) report of history and clinical signs, sometimes supplemented by visual (e.g., photographs, video) information. A diagnosis is not rendered. The essence of teletriage is to make good and safe decisions regarding a patient's disposition (immediate referral to a veterinarian or not), under conditions of uncertainty and urgency. Teletriage constitutes the practice of veterinary medicine.

**Telesupervision** is the supervision of individuals using mediums such as audio or audio/video conference, text messaging and email. It does not replace existing defined levels of supervision (indirect, direct and immediate) and is a new means of supervision for use only in certain narrow scope applications as set out in this policy.

## General

Telemedicine is a method or tool where technology is used by an attending veterinarian to communicate with animal owners and deliver veterinary medical services in cases where the veterinarian and the animal being treated are located in different physical locations.

Telemedicine augments the patient visit and will rarely suffice to meet the professional standard for diagnosis and treatment when used alone.

Telemedicine does not diminish the professional standard for delivery of veterinary medical services.

Telemedicine may be used for initial consultation with a follow-up, in-person examination or to increase compliance with follow up.

Certain aspects of delivering veterinary medical care through use of telemedicine may be delegated by a veterinarian to a registered veterinary technologist in accordance with the legislation and under appropriate supervision.

Telemedicine is not an appropriate model for stand-alone delivery of any veterinary medical services to the public by registered members including online platforms that are independent of certified and approved veterinary practice entities.

## Professional Responsibilities

All veterinary medicine is delivered by appropriately registered veterinarians or delegated by the veterinarian to a registered veterinary technologist under supervision of an unrestricted veterinarian through a contractual or employment agreement with the veterinarian or permit holder operating the veterinary practice.

All veterinary medicine including telemedicine is delivered through a certified and inspected veterinary practice entity. Registered members must only practice out of a certified and inspected veterinary practice entity.

There are limitations on when telemedicine may be used to deliver veterinary medical services. The veterinarian must employ sound professional judgement to determine if use of telemedicine is appropriate and suitable each time veterinary services are provided and only use telemedicine when appropriate in a particular case given the circumstances.

It is up to the veterinarian to determine if use of telemedicine will meet applicable legal and professional obligations and provide appropriate standard of care in any given case.

The veterinarian must appropriately determine to what extent veterinary medicine may be performed in absence of a physical examination.

Some patient presentations are appropriate for use of telemedicine as a component of, or in lieu of, in person veterinary medical care, while others are not.

Telemedicine may not be practiced in circumstances where the expected professional standard is that a physical examination is required to arrive at an appropriate diagnosis or treatment plan.

### Veterinarian-Client-Patient Relationship (VCPR)

All veterinary medicine must be delivered in context of a valid VCPR. Refer to the Veterinarian-Client Patient relationship (VCPR) – Professional Standard.

When telemedicine is used to contribute to the development of a VCPR, the veterinarian must meet the same professional obligations as when a VCPR is established in person.

Telemedicine is used to augment the development of the VCPR; **a VCPR may not be established using telemedicine alone.**

Telemedicine is most appropriately used to support or augment veterinary medicine in conjunction with a VCPR established in person and in conjunction with a physical examination of the animal(s).

Telemedicine is a method of delivering veterinary medical services and is not a novel or stand-alone model of practice.

### Certified and Inspected Veterinary Practice Entity (VPE)

The ABVMA Practice Inspection and Practice Standards (PIPS) Bylaw set standards for facilities, equipment, personnel and operational procedures.

According to the PIPS Bylaw, all veterinary medicine performed must be out of or in conjunction with a certified and inspected VPE.

Telemedicine services must only be provided out of or in conjunction with an ABVMA certified and inspected VPE.

The public can be assured of quality veterinary medicine when accessing veterinary medicine, including telemedicine from ABVMA certified and inspected veterinary practices.

## Prescribing

The expected professional standard is that in every instance when a prescription is issued, the veterinarian has established a VCPR and has relevant medical knowledge to support establishment of medical need.

The most common investigation used when prescribing drugs in veterinary medicine is receiving a pertinent medical history and conducting a physical examination of an animal or group of animals and/or visits to production sites.

Investigation required in order for the veterinarian to establish the medical need of a drug and subsequently issue a prescription will depend on circumstances of a specific case.

A registered veterinarian may use other forms of investigation and information related to the particular case at hand to make or support an evidence-based diagnosis and decision on treatment. These include culture and sensitivity testing, laboratory reports, production data, necropsy results, histology, bacteriology and virology results.

This policy and use of telemedicine does not alter requirements to be met by the registered veterinarian in order to appropriately prescribe a drug. These include:

1. Establish and meet conditions of a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) in regards to a specific animal or group of animals
2. Make an evidence-based determination of medical need
3. Complete appropriate documentation in the medical record
4. Provide oversight of use and follow-up

Once a valid VCPR has been established and is maintained, a veterinarian may determine medical need for a drug using investigation other than an in-person examination of either animal(s) or site visit. An examination of an animal or group of animals is not required in every case where a drug is prescribed.

## Informed Consent

The veterinarian must obtain the client's informed consent for use of telemedicine.

The veterinarian must inform the client of the veterinarian's location and registration with the ABVMA.

The veterinarian must disclose privacy and security issues involved in accessing veterinary care via telemedicine.

## Confidentiality

Veterinarians must safeguard a client's privacy when using telemedicine.

The veterinarian must take appropriate precautions and confirm that the technology and physical setting being used by the veterinarian and client have adequate security protocols in place.

The veterinarian must ensure compliance with legal and professional obligations to protect clients' privacy and confidentiality.

## Medical Records

When undertaking telemedicine, the veterinary professional must meet the professional expectation of their peers as with conventional delivery of veterinary medicine in person.

The minimum professional standards related to the creation and maintenance of appropriate medical records as outlined in the *Practice Inspection and Practice Standards (PIPS) Bylaw, Universal Standard US – 7: Medical Records* and further described in the *ABVMA Medical Records Handbook* must be met by veterinarians using telemedicine.

Medical records must be provided to the client in a timely manner and available to ensure continuity of care.

## Telemedicine Delivered to Animals in Alberta by Veterinarians Outside the Province

The ABVMA undertakes to caution the public about accessing telemedicine services from providers that are not certified and inspected by the ABVMA.

ABVMA's position is that telemedicine alone does not provide appropriate veterinary care that safeguards animal health and welfare. Animal owners are encouraged to develop a relationship with a veterinarian with whom an in-person examination may be performed.

Veterinary professionals engaged in the delivery of veterinary medical services in Alberta must be registered with the ABVMA and practicing out of or in conjunction with an ABVMA certified and inspected VPE.

Unregistered individuals who are providing veterinary medical services including telemedicine to animal(s) located in Alberta may be considered to be engaged in unauthorized practice. The ABVMA may take action in individual cases where there is risk to the public interest.

## Teletriage

It is common practice that a veterinary practice may receive a call from a client or member of the public and there is communication about a medical condition and the client is advised whether an appointment is required or if the condition is emergent. This communication is ideally performed by a veterinary professional, though Council recognizes that this is also undertaken by unregistered auxiliaries.

Reasonably, this communication frequently occurs in the absence of an established VCPR.

Veterinary practices are advised that any advice being provided by a veterinary practice on the nature of a veterinary medical condition and urgency of having the patient examined is considered veterinary medicine. Teletriage of patients is preferably performed by a registered veterinary professional, either a registered veterinarian or registered veterinary technologist under appropriate supervision.

Such communication with an animal owner or client places certain responsibilities on the veterinary professional and permit holder, including documentation.

## Telesupervision

ABVMA legislations sets out the requirement for supervision of technologists, restricted registered veterinarians and supervised limited practice registered veterinarians.

The minimum level of supervision is “indirect” which is defined as once daily in person communication. In person communication is not achieved through use of telecommunications. In person communication means “face to face” and “sharing the same air.”

Notwithstanding the legislation requiring a minimum of indirect supervision as appropriate, Council approves the use of telesupervision in the following circumstances:

- 1) Telesupervision of a registered veterinary technologist providing teletriage/telemedicine services for the veterinary practice entity where the supervising veterinarian is employed and providing after-hours or emergency services. Such telesupervision is appropriate on the condition that:
  - a. The veterinarian is readily available to attend in person with the animal if necessary;
  - b. The veterinarian is readily available by electronic communication for consultation by the veterinary technologist;
  - c. The veterinarian is available prior to and following the period of telesupervision to review veterinary medical services provided; and
  - d. The veterinary technologist creates a medical record of the teletriage/telemedicine services provided which is incorporated into the veterinary practice’s medical record.

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