

# Establishing and Maintaining Appropriate Professional Relationship Boundaries in Practice

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## Introduction

The practice of veterinary medicine, no different than the majority of regulated professions, involves relationships. These include relationships with clients, relationships with colleagues, relationships with staff, relationships with other co-workers, and relationships with students. The delivery of safe and quality veterinary medical care to animals is fundamentally dependent on the professional boundaries established and maintained by a veterinarian within and throughout these relationships.

Within this paradigm it is of course understood that veterinarians are people, living a social, human experience. They are a part of their communities. They have families and friends. They are animal owners themselves. They participate in these encounters along a continuum from formal to informal relationships, and from social to casual to intimate interaction.

The privilege of holding a licence to practice, however, requires that every veterinarian must acknowledge and manage the inherent power imbalance that comes with their title, their role and their access to products such as drugs. The potential for abuse of this power does exist, and professional boundaries must be maintained. This position statement of the Council of the College of Veterinarians of Ontario is intended to provide direction to the profession, and clarity for the public, on professional boundary expectations.



## Definitions

**Boundary:** Defines the limit of a safe and effective professional relationship between a veterinarian and a client, colleague, staff, or other co-worker.

**Boundary Violation:** Occurs when a veterinarian does not establish and/or maintain the limits of a professional relationship with their client, colleague, staff, or other co-workers. A boundary violation is the point at which a relationship changes from professional and contextually appropriate to unprofessional and inappropriate. Relationship Boundary violations may be sexual or non-sexual in nature.

## Position

Veterinarians, as licensed professionals, are entrusted to uphold high moral and ethical standards in the practice of the profession; this includes maintaining appropriate boundaries in their relationships with clients, colleagues, staff and other co-workers that are essential and relevant to providing quality and safe care to their patients.

Council recognizes that relationship boundary issues do arise in practice. It is the position of Council that veterinarians must responsibly manage a boundary situation in accordance with the specific context and in a timely manner. Veterinarians are expected to take actions to resolve or mitigate relationship boundary situations, up to and including the transfer of a patient to another veterinarian in a separate practice location and discontinuing the veterinarian-client-patient relationship.

Veterinarians should not engage in romantic or sexual relationships of any nature with a client or with those involved directly in the practice of veterinary medicine where a power imbalance exists.

Veterinarians may provide care to an animal of a family member or friend but should do so with caution regarding the need to always maintain professional objectivity which supports clear and rational judgement.

It is understood that emergency care scenarios do arise, and the best interests of the animal must prevail.

In situations where professional relationship boundaries are clearly not maintained, the College would consider such behavior unbecoming of a professional and demeaning to the reputation of the profession so as to erode public trust.



## Legislative Authority

*Veterinarians Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. V.3

Ontario Regulation 1093 R.S.O 1990 s. 17(1)

## Resources

The following can be found at the College's website at [cvo.org](http://cvo.org):

1. Code of Ethics
2. Guidance on Professionalism for Veterinarians

## References

A full list of reference materials is available upon request.

College publications contain practice parameters and standards which should be considered by all Ontario veterinarians in the care of their patients and in the practice of the profession. College publications are developed in consultation with the profession and describe current professional expectations. It is important to note that these College publications may be used by the College or other bodies in determining whether appropriate standards of practice and professional responsibilities have been maintained. The College encourages you to refer to the website ([www.cvo.org](http://www.cvo.org)) to ensure you are referring to the most recent version of any document.