

## VETPARTNERS CODE OF ETHICS

### I. INTRODUCTION

- A) VetPartners members believe exemplary character and operations standards are paramount to leading, consulting and advising the veterinary practice profession.
- B) With these standards in mind, this VetPartners Code of Ethics is drafted to foster a better understanding by which members might have common definitions.
- C) As consultants and advisors to veterinary practices, members agree, by maintaining their membership in the VetPartners, that they have voluntarily assumed responsibility for adherence to the VetPartners code of ethics.

### II. PURPOSE

- A) As members of VetPartners a commitment is made to the following purposes of the VetPartners professional code of ethics.
- B) This commitment allows members to enhance the veterinary profession's trust in the services they deliver.
- C) The VetPartners Code of Ethics' purpose is to:
  - 1. Lead members to recognize ethical issues and choices.
  - 2. Guide members in making more informed ethical decisions.
  - 3. Increase member professional and ethical consciousness and sense of ethical responsibility.
  - 4. Provide a standard for professional judgment and conduct.
  - 5. Provide a statement of the ethical behavior that the veterinary profession may expect from members of the VetPartners.

### III. MEMBER CHARACTER STANDARDS

- A) Members agree to maintain honesty, objectivity, and competence by the following actions, when they apply to their veterinary consulting and advising work:
  - 1. Serving their clients with integrity, knowledge and fairness.
  - 2. Accepting only engagements for which they are qualified by their experience and training.
  - 3. Assigning staff to client engagements in accord with their experience, knowledge, and expertise.
  - 4. Providing service with knowledge of the veterinary profession.
  - 5. Investigating and becoming fully aware of client needs and expectations before accepting work.
  - 6. Accepting work, whereupon the members can potentially fulfill their client's specific needs and expectations, while in the light of section IV, (G) below, affirming to the client there is no guarantee of results.
  - 7. Informing clients of unrealistic expectations.
  - 8. Obtaining general business and management expertise to avoid tunnel vision.

9. Individualizing solutions to practice needs.
10. Providing clients with information necessary to make informed decisions, by encouraging their full participation in decisions and goals.
11. Developing realistic and practical solutions to client problems.
12. Developing unique solutions for each client and not providing a single approach or solution for all clients.
13. Referring clients to others, when their needs cannot be met by the member's own expertise.
14. Following up and determining the effectiveness of the member's recommended methods of solutions, to the clients' needs.
15. Pursuing continuing education to broaden expertise and awareness.
16. Acknowledging expertise of others.

B) VetPartners members shall carry out their duties and responsibilities with professional demeanor by:

1. Being supportive and not denigrating others.
2. Treating colleagues, clients, and team members with respect.
3. Keeping up to date in veterinary practice management or their field of expertise.
4. Doing what is agreed to, both in content and in time frame.
5. Informing clients immediately when events arise that might affect delivery of services (content or time).
6. Supporting the VetPartners in its mission statement.
7. Reporting violations of this Code of Ethics to the VetPartners Board of Directors or Ethics Committee.
8. Encouraging clients to adequately document healthcare delivered, needed and/or provided; including annotations of client waivers and/or deferrals, when care/procedures recommended are not followed, if medical record keeping and documentation are applicable to the member's work for client.

#### **IV. MEMBERS' PROFESSIONAL AND BUSINESS APPROACH**

A) VetPartners members must monitor the following professional and business protocols as described to maintain the quality and virtue standards of the organization.

B) Members agree to maintain Confidentiality by:

1. Safeguarding confidential information.
2. Keeping client information and records of client engagements confidential unless confidentiality is waived for personal or business uses.
3. Respecting the intellectual property rights of clients, other consulting firms, and practitioners.

C) Members agree to provide full disclosure to clients by:

1. Disclosing to every client their knowledge, skills, abilities, certification, and licensing.
2. Disclosing any use of subcontractors or team members who will be working on the project.
3. Fully disclosing conflicts of interest.

4. Disclosing all fees.
5. Disclosing a time frame in which the client can expect results.

D) Members agree to avoid conflicts of interest by:

1. Preventing competitive advantage to one client through use of confidential information from another client, who is a direct competitor without that competitor's permission.
2. Immediately disclosing and acknowledging any influences or perceived influences on the member's objectivity to clients.
3. Offering to withdraw from a consulting or advising engagement when objectivity or integrity may be impaired.
4. Rendering impartial, independent advice.

E) Members who advertise agree to uphold high integrity by:

1. Preventing any deception in advertising.
2. Preventing misrepresentation of the consulting profession or consulting firms.

F) Members agree to properly manage their fees by:

1. Independently creating their fee schedule.
2. Consulting with clients in advance about the basis for their fees and expenses.
3. Disclosing to their clients in advance, any fees or commissions that they will receive for equipment, supplies, or services they recommend to their clients and obtaining their clients' prior written consent to any such fees or commissions.
4. Detailing expense reimbursements expected prior to incurring those expenses.
5. Giving estimates of time and costs for all basic and supplemental services if possible.
6. Refusing "kick back" or finder's fees from giving referrals or otherwise recommending products or services of any third party, if accepting those fees would result in a violation of Article IV.D above or any other professional code governing the member.

G) Members agree that outcomes for specific consulting or advising results may vary so they will:

1. Define outcomes or goals that each client can expect.
2. Avoid making guarantees of success or overstating results not possible with a practice's actual resources.
3. Avoid making promises of a quick fix.
4. Avoid making false claims of success.
5. Avoid bait-and-switch tactics (promising one thing, then switching to another more expensive or complex option).

## **V. VETERINARY MEDICAL BIOETHICAL PRINCIPLES.**

A) Members shall follow accepted principles of veterinary medical ethics as outlined by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

- B) Members shall be aware of bioethics – the day-to-day problems of ethical decision-making in healthcare delivery and patient care decisions, including but not limited to: pain management, cosmetic surgery, euthanasia decisions, animal abuse/neglect, or treatment modalities for chronic diseases, conditions, and syndromes. As veterinary practice consultants and advisors, the main concern must center on patient advocacy and obtaining informed client consent, deferral, or waiver.

## **VI. ENFORCEMENT AND OVERSIGHT.**

- A) The Code will be enforced retrospectively by the VetPartners and Ethic Committee, and/or Membership Committee, Board of Directors (hereafter “Board”) and members in this order of listing by receiving and investigating complaints of violations by members and by taking disciplinary action as described herein below.
- B) Additionally, the code will be enforced prospectively by having each person applying for membership undergo a probationary period, in order to provide a window of time in which ethical complaints or objections may be submitted by the membership.
- C) All members agree for any complaint or objection to be considered actionable, it must be based on and accompanied by verifiable facts.
- D) The process for a formal ethics complaint shall be as follows:
  - 1. Ethical complaints about members or applicants shall be directed in writing only (paper or electronic) by the submission of a completed and signed VetPartners Ethics Complaint Form to the Association Administrator. In the case of applicants, complaints shall be submitted within the time frame established by the Membership Committee.
  - 2. Any member of the Ethics Committee, who is the object of a complaint, or who has a personal involvement/friendship with the person(s) being reviewed, shall step down from the committee during processing of that complaint. The Board shall appoint a temporary substitute.
  - 3. The Ethics Committee shall review the complaints and determine whether the facts are verifiable and that such facts show violation of the VetPartners Code of Ethics.
  - 4. Should no factual basis for a violation be found the complaint shall be set aside and no further action taken.
  - 5. Should factual violation(s) be found, the member or applicant shall be informed in writing of the nature of the complaint and shall be given 30 days to present a factual rebuttal or reply in writing only (paper or e-mail).
  - 6. The Ethics Committee shall review all submitted materials, including any reply or rebuttal, if one is submitted and make a final recommendation to the Board and Membership Committee.
  - 7. If necessary, a conference call or group meeting may be held among the Ethics Committee (as a whole) and the applicant/member and/or complainant in order to clarify any facts. However, under no circumstances (without specific written directives) shall conversations to discuss the proceedings or circumstances be allowed between the member/applicant and individual VetPartners members (including individuals on the Board or the Committee, complaint submitter, or other members). Such contacts shall be viewed as attempts to influence the decision of the Committee or the Board, and shall be

- considered ethical violations, unless they were directed by the Ethics Committee, Membership Committee, or Board as part of the investigation.
8. Upon the review of the complaint and input from all involved parties, the Ethics Committee shall send its recommendation to the Board for one of the following actions.
    - a) No action: Ethical violation not found.
    - b) Action taken:
      - (1) If an applicant:
        - i) Denial of application.
        - ii) Applicant may re-apply after one year, if submitting materials show improvement in ethical behavior.
        - iii) Application process is repeated at that time.
      - (2) If a current member:
        - i) Reprimand and/or directive for corrective action.
        - ii) Temporary suspension of membership (1 year), or
        - iii) Permanent suspension of membership.
        - iv) Should the Committee recommend permanent suspension of membership, such recommendation must be approved by a seventy five percent majority of the Board.
  9. Upon acceptance of the recommendation by the Board, the decision shall be binding.
  10. Members or applicants may re-submit an application for review at an interval of no less than one year following a binding action. The above process shall be repeated in its entirety.
- E) Any person (referred to as a “complainant”) who has an ethics related grievance against a member may either initiate a formal ethics complaint, as described in Article VI.D above, or a facilitation process, as described in the Ethics Complaint/Facilitation Process outline attached as Exhibit A. Any such complainant shall review the Ethics Complaint/Facilitation Process outline and shall complete, sign and submit the then-current version of the AVMPCA Ethics Complaint Form if the complainant wishes to initiate a formal ethics complaint or facilitation. Any member who wishes to initiate a formal complaint against an applicant may do so by following the procedure outlined in Article VI.D above.

## **VII. MODIFICATIONS OF CODE**

The above process/protocol may be modified only upon review by the Ethics Committee and by majority approval of the Board. Such revisions shall not alter previous decisions made by the Committee or the Board about ethical complaints.

**Ethics Complaint/Facilitation Process**

1. Complainant contacts Association Administrator, member of Ethics Committee, or member of Board of Directors regarding potential complaint.
2. Complainant is directed to Association Administrator, who provides the complainant with the VetPartners written complaint form and instructions regarding the complainant's options to either:
  - (a) file a formal ethics complaint, or
  - (b) select facilitation.

Instructions would include a statement that regardless of the option selected, any information provided by the complainant will be provided to the member who is the subject of the complaint.

3. Complainant completes and returns complaint form to Association Administrator.
4. If Complainant elects to initiate a formal ethics complaint, then the matter will be referred to the Ethics Committee Chair by the Association Administrator promptly upon receipt of the completed complaint form.
5. If Complainant elects facilitation, then the matter will be referred to the President of the Executive Committee by the Association Administrator promptly upon receipt of the completed complaint form, and the President will appoint a facilitator within 14 days of receipt of the completed complaint form.
6. Neither the complainant nor the member who is the subject of the complaint is obligated to accept the recommendations of the Facilitator or participate further in the facilitation. The facilitation is a completely voluntary process for both parties.
7. Complainant would have the option to file a formal ethics complaint at any time and bypass any further facilitation.
8. If the matter goes to facilitation, then the Association Administrator will deliver a copy of the completed complaint form to the Facilitator, and the Facilitator will communicate with the complainant and the member who is the subject of the complaint as many times as the Facilitator deems appropriate in order to achieve a facilitated resolution.
9. The Facilitator may end the facilitation at any time, if the Facilitator decides that a facilitated resolution is not likely. The Facilitator shall have no authority to bind the VetPartners and shall not indicate to either party how the Ethics Committee might respond to a related formal ethics complaint.
10. If the parties achieve a facilitated resolution, then they shall sign an agreement that documents that resolution, a copy of that agreement shall be delivered to the Association Administrator, and the complainant would then be barred from bringing a formal ethics complaint relating to the matter that was resolved through the facilitation. In the event of a facilitated resolution, no announcement of the dispute or its resolution would be made to the rest of the VetPartners membership.

11. The Facilitator may not directly or indirectly communicate with any members of the Ethics Committee prior to the execution of a resolution agreement, since the Ethics Committee must be able to review the circumstances without being influenced by the facilitation, if a formal ethics complaint is filed relating to the same matter.
12. If the complainant elects to file a formal ethics complaint, then the Ethics Committee shall follow the complaint procedures outlined in Section VI.D of the VetPartners Code of Ethics. If an ethics complaint results in the Board of Directors finding that a member has violated the Code of Ethics, then the Board shall promptly publish in the VetPartners's newsletter the name of the member, the section(s) of the Ethics Code that were violated by that member, and the action taken by the Board against the member as a result of such violation(s).