

Common complaints against veterinarians



Every year at Guild Insurance, the veterinary liability claims reported to us are analysed to ensure we fully understand what clients are complaining about, what's going wrong and what can be done to address this.

The information below provides a summary of what's been learnt from this process. Unfortunately, the best risk management practices can't guarantee a complaint won't occur, that's why you need insurance. However, being aware of common complaints, and how to reduce the likelihood of them, is something all vets should be aware of.

Why clients complain

Treatment has been unsuccessful – this is when the treatment hasn't gone to plan, and the outcome isn't as intended. This is most commonly seen following de-sexing procedures. Clients are often not only unhappy about a poor outcome but can also be motivated to complain due to a sense their time and money has been wasted.

Treatment was inappropriate – this means it's alleged there's been a poor outcome because the treatment shouldn't have been provided. This may be because the treatment selected was an incorrect choice or that the vet should have referred to someone else to provide treatment.

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Diagnosis issue – a client might complain if they believe the diagnosis, and therefore the treatment which followed, was incorrect. Or they might think it took too long to form the correct diagnosis. Generally in these cases the client's unhappy with the time and money spent during the diagnosis phase and the potential harm to their animal during this period.

Medication error – common medication errors include the animal receiving an incorrect dose, the animal receiving the incorrect medication, or the medication being administered incorrectly. Generally medication errors are due to human error where the vet has made a simple, but at times serious, mistake.

New injury – this is when the animal has suffered an injury during treatment. Common examples of this include an organ being damaged during surgery or an animal (horse or cattle) suffering a rectal tear during an examination.

Tips for reducing complaints

Communication – don't underestimate the importance of communication with clients and colleagues; our claims tell us that breakdowns in communication contribute to complaints.

Manage expectations – if clients have unrealistic expectations, those expectations most likely won't be met, and the client won't be satisfied. An important part of communication is ensuring clients understand what the likely and realistic outcomes of treatment will be.

Informed consent – another key part of communication is ensuring clients understand treatment options, treatment outcomes and potential risks so they can give their informed consent to treatment. Clients should also be made aware of the anticipated cost of treatment so they can give their informed financial consent.

Clinical decision-making – it's important to not rush the assessment, diagnosis and treatment selection process. When the necessary time and care isn't taken, assumptions and mistakes can be made.

Record keeping – keeping detailed records of all aspects of treatment, as well as any communication with the client, assists with the continuity of care of the animal over time. Detailed records will also assist in the defence of an allegation of wrongdoing.

Better through experience.

