



# Managing complaints in veterinary practice.

Receiving a complaint is often an unexpected part of running any business, including a veterinary practice.

No business is immune from receiving a complaint, regardless of how successful it is or how customer focused staff are. There can be a tendency to see a complaint as a personal criticism rather than constructive feedback. However there can be positive outcomes when the situation is managed appropriately.

## Why do people complain?

There are many reasons why clients might complain about your practice and the service they've received. Sometimes a complaint will almost be expected following an incident; sometimes it will take you by complete surprise. Having an understanding of why people may complain can assist with managing a complaint if it occurs and potentially reducing the likelihood of further complaints. The following are some of the reasons why people may feel the need to complain.

**High expectations** – consumer expectations are increasingly high when engaging professional services. Your clients sometimes pay a lot for your service and will most likely see you as a highly trained and qualified professional. This view can have an effect on their expectations about the service and outcomes they anticipate.

**Unrealistic expectations** – it's possible that clients may have unrealistic expectations about what they can reasonably expect from veterinary care. Their high expectations may at times surprise you. It's therefore important to remember that most clients will not have the clinical knowledge you do and what's obvious or common sense to you may not be to them. A practice must assist clients to be clear and fully informed about the treatment being provided and the outcomes they can realistically expect. This requires ongoing discussions with clients and, where possible, written information to assist their understanding.

**Belief that someone is responsible** – when something goes wrong we often try to determine who's responsible.

Sometimes someone is obviously responsible, sometimes it is hard to determine who's responsible and other times there is no one person responsible but just an unfortunate set of circumstances. However if a client thought something had gone wrong and this led to their animal being harmed, it's quite possible they may complain with the intention of holding someone responsible and possibly liable.

**Significant emotional or financial suffering** – in many veterinary cases, it is the family pet being treated. When treatment doesn't go as planned, the owner of the animal is likely to be emotionally affected. Seeing your animal unwell is quite distressing for many pet owners. In other cases the client will be someone, such as a breeder, who makes their living from their animals. Whilst they may still have an emotional connection to their animals, there is also a financial factor. If there is a poor outcome with these animals, a person's income and livelihood may be affected.

## The importance of managing complaints

There may sometimes be a temptation to ignore a complaint and hope it'll just go away. Maybe the client won't follow up. Maybe the incident won't occur again. This is a very short-sighted way to run any business as there are clear benefits to appropriately managing complaints.

- > Clients will generally expect to see their complaint dealt with quickly and fairly. When this doesn't happen it's possible that further complaints will follow and the issue or concern could become a much greater one. Complaints may also escalate to your state Veterinary Board.
- > Managing complaints should be seen as good 'customer service'. You rely on clients to keep your business afloat. When clients are unhappy with a service they've received, they can talk with their feet by not returning to the practice. Keeping clients happy and satisfied is more likely to see them continue to utilise your service and recommend your practice to others.

> Complaints can provide a practice with an opportunity to review and improve their service. Receiving a complaint may highlight an issue which the practice had not been aware of. When investigating and dealing with the complaint, the practice may wish to consider a change in a procedure to avoid that issue arising again in the future.

## How to manage complaints

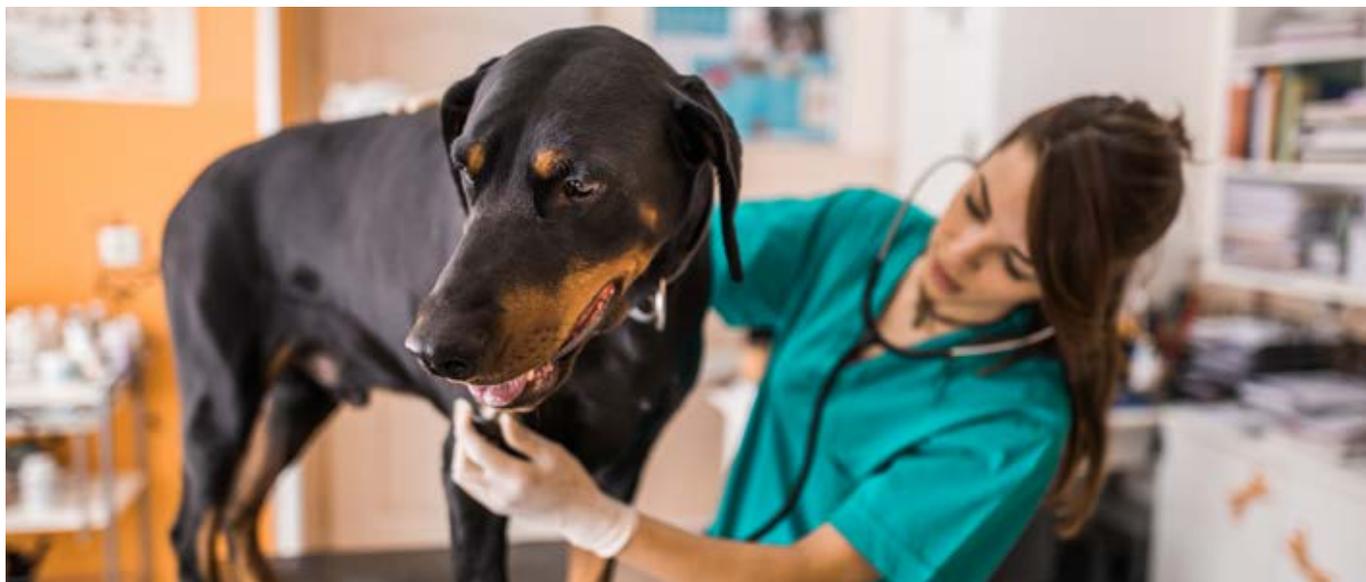
It's advisable that every veterinary practice has a complaints policy. This means that the practice will have an agreed-to process for dealing with a complaint which allows for all complaints to be dealt with in a fair and consistent manner. It also means staff know what to do which is important as managing complaints can be a challenging situation to deal with.

A key aspect in dealing with any complaint is listening to the person. Where possible, make time to sit down in a quiet space and give them time to express what their concerns are. Make the effort to hear what they have to say and take on board what they have told you. You may not agree with all they are saying, however

it helps if you can try to understand the situation from their perspective. You may wish to ask them to document their concerns so you both have an accurate record of the matter. Avoid being defensive or taking the complaint personally as this may inflame the situation.

With low level complaints you may be able to offer a solution there and then. However this won't always be the case. With more serious complaints you should provide the person with an assurance that you'll investigate the matter and get back to them with a response at a later date.

Guild Insurance expects those insured with us not to admit liability (or name someone else as being at fault), or to offer any compensation without contacting us first. Contact Guild Insurance on **1800 810 213** as soon as you've received a complaint; don't wait till it escalates to a claim for compensation. We will provide advice and support to assist you to deal appropriately and professionally with what can be a challenging and possibly upsetting situation. Utilising this support can be the difference between sorting a problem quickly and it escalating to a serious claim.



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