

**MEMBER ADVISORY**  
**Interpretation document for policies arising from resolutions approved**  
**at the 2019 ABVMA Annual General Meeting**

**1. ABVMA policy — Unnecessary Medical Procedures**

Effective July 1, 2019, Alberta veterinarians must not undertake the following unnecessary surgical and medical procedures:

1. **Ear Cropping:** *the surgical removal of a portion of the pinnae or auricles of the ear of a canine*
2. **Tail Docking:** *removal of all or part of the tail of dogs, horses, cattle, and includes tail blocking and tail nicking;*
3. **Tail Nicking:** *cutting any of the tail muscles; and*
4. **Tail Blocking:** *Injecting the major nerves of the tail with a substance which affect the animal's ability to move the tail*
5. **Partial Digit Amputation, (declawing or onychectomy),** *elective and non-therapeutic of any felid, including domestic cats*
6. **Cosmetic Dentistry:** *to meet show or breed standards*
7. **Tattooing:** *other than for registration and identification*
8. **Body piercing:** *except in the case of livestock animals for the purpose of identification or to protect human safety*
9. **Devocalization**
10. **Front Dew Claw Removal**
11. **Feline Tendonectomy**

The Association recognizes that there is a potential risk to the relationship between the veterinarian and client in not performing or condoning these procedures. Individual client education provides an opportunity to discuss why members of the profession in Alberta no longer perform these procedures. The education of clients about medically unnecessary procedures shows the public that veterinarians and veterinary technologists feel strongly about their role as leaders in animal welfare. Respect and sensitivity is required so that clients are not afraid to seek veterinary care for their animals.

**Scenarios for consideration and discussion:**

1. Individual puppy presented at a veterinary practice for examination and vaccination. The tail has been docked and is completely healed.
  - With the tail completely healed it is possible and likely that the puppy is not in distress. If the puppy is not in distress, then no action is required to relieve the distress.
  - It is however, possible that the puppy was in distress when the procedure was performed. If the veterinary professional has knowledge about the puppy having been in distress as a result of the surgery being performed, the veterinary professional may report that to a peace officer, who may investigate the puppy having been in distress and if appropriate, a lay person practicing veterinary medicine.
  - This is an important learning moment because the owner may not even be aware that the tail has been surgically altered.

2. Litter of puppies presented at a veterinary practice for examination and vaccination. Tails have been docked, all well healed.
  - If a veterinarian or veterinary technologist has knowledge that the puppies have had their tails docked or ears cropped by a non-veterinarian, the matter must be reported to a peace officer authorized to enforce the *Animal Protection Act (APA)*. The person is violating VPA 2(1) and perhaps APA 1(2) and 2(1) (1.1).
  - If the veterinarian or veterinary technologist has knowledge that the puppies have had their tails docked by a veterinarian in Alberta, the matter is reported to the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association.
3. What is considered acceptable regarding tattooing for identification? Can an owner ask to have their own name tattooed on their pet?
  - The tattoo is limited to the tattoo combination assigned to the practice.
4. Must veterinary professionals report producers for docking their piglets and lambs?
  - No, Pigs and lambs are not included in this policy. Tail docking is not permitted in dogs, horses and cattle.

## 2. **ABVMA Policy — Mandatory Reporting of Animal Abuse and Neglect and Addressing Animal Distress and Welfare Infractions**

Veterinarians and veterinary technologists have a professional obligation to report abuse and neglect. This is now established in Council policy.

Veterinary professionals must take action, which *may* include reporting, for animals in distress. The *Animal Protection Act (APA)* provides that a registered veterinarian that is acting reasonably and in good faith to report a case of permitting an animal to be in distress or abuse or neglect to a peace officer is protected from any action. ABVMA members will not be held professionally accountable for breaching client confidentiality required in the Veterinary Profession General Regulation section 16.1 (f).

When a case of abuse, neglect or animal in distress is reported, the peace officer will investigate the report. Peace officers normally take an evidence-based and compliance based approach. Not all reported cases result in charges being laid. Veterinary professionals have done their part by reporting animal abuse, neglect and when appropriate, distress. The investigative process itself, that is undertaken by the peace officer, provides education to the animal owner.

### **Abuse and Neglect**

Please refer to the policy for the definitions of abuse, neglect and distress.

Reporting animal abuse and neglect is part of the role of the veterinarian and veterinary technologist and has always been an ethical expectation. With this policy, reporting is now required. The earlier the peace officer receives the information the better. The peace officer needs to see the animal and interview the people involved.

### **Distress**

There is not mandatory reporting of animals in distress. Many animals presented at veterinary practices are in distress because they are ill. The owner is taking steps to alleviate the distress by

reaching out to a veterinary practice and having their animal examined by a veterinarian. If the owner follows the recommendations of the veterinarian, the owner is showing compliance. Veterinarians are expected to be reasonable when reporting clients that are non-compliant with their recommended treatments. When the attending veterinarian feels that the distress reaches the threshold of neglect, the veterinarian is expected to report. Veterinary professionals are encouraged to trust their judgement.

## Scenarios

1. If a client does not come in for a scheduled recheck and the veterinarian and/or veterinary technologist is concerned about the animal's welfare, what should they do?
  - The client should be contacted to rebook the appointment. If the client is not compliant and the veterinary professional has reason to believe that the animal is in distress, the owner should be informed that the veterinary professional is going to report the situation to a peace officer to check up on the animal's welfare.
2. What should a veterinarian or veterinary technologist do in a situation where an animal requires dental extractions and the owner is not able to afford the dental procedure?
  - The veterinarian must explore all options for treatment with the owner including:
    - staging the treatment
    - administration of pain control medications and antibiotics
    - surrender
  - These can be very difficult situations especially when the owners also cannot afford dental care for themselves.
  - Clinical judgement is required as the level of distress will be different between individual animals as well as different categories of periodontal disease.
  - Reporting the animal in distress to a peace officer must not be used as a means to gain compliance with treatment recommendations.
  - The veterinarian is encouraged to call the ABVMA office for advice if unsure on how to proceed.
3. What should a veterinary technologist or associate veterinarian do if the owner of the practice does not agree with their opinion on reporting of animal abuse, neglect or distress?
  - All registered veterinary professionals are required to take action. This includes making their opinion known and discussing the case with the supervising veterinarian including options to address the distress.
  - It is strongly suggested that veterinary practice entities develop practice strategies for identification and reporting of cases.
  - It is strongly suggested that members communicate their opinion that action should be taken with their supervisors or employers.
4. If the peace officer requests the medical record, can I release the information?
  - Although the Veterinary Profession General Regulation requires veterinarians to hold in strict confidence all information acquired in the course of professional relationships with clients, veterinarians can be confident in disclosing information to Peace Officers with respect to reporting animal abuse, animal neglect and animals in distress.

- Veterinarians may also disclose client personal and medical information to law enforcement agencies that are undertaking an investigation.
- Veterinarians must document any relevant information relating to the disclosure in the medical record.
- For more information please refer to the *Member Advisory – Disclosure of Medical Records to Law Enforcement Agencies by Veterinarians* (After Login > Legislation > ABVMA Council Policies > Policies relating to practices)