Chapter 1 Introduction to the Veterinary (or Assistant) Profession

Welcome to veterinary medicine! Congratulations on choosing one of the most rewarding and enriching professions! Veterinary medicine is a profession that involves medicine, compassion, technical skills, and teamwork. It provides care for species that cannot speak for themselves. As in human medicine, the veterinary health-care team is composed of many members, each with an important role in the proper care of patients and functioning of a veterinary hospital.

The goal of the veterinary practice should be excellent patient care and exceptional customer service. This textbook will look at the veterinary assistant's role in making this goal a reality. Veterinary practices should also provide team members with a friendly, well-organized, and safe workplace. Every veterinary health-care team member is responsible for the success of the practice.

The veterinary health-care team works together in the best interest of the patient. All team members, regardless of their role in the veterinary hospital, have the responsibility to ensure the safety and comfort of all patients. Each member of the health-care team has specific roles and responsibilities, and oftentimes these responsibilities are shared. No matter the hierarchy in the practice, all members must provide the best care to all patients at all times. The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) likewise recognizes the value of the various health-care team members: "The veterinary profession is enhanced through efficient utilization of each member of the veterinary healthcare team by appropriate delegation of tasks and responsibilities to support staff."

The various members of the health-care team include the following:
- Veterinary assistant
- Veterinarian
- Veterinary technician
- Veterinary technologist
- Veterinary technician specialist
- Receptionist
- Office managers
- Groomers
- Kennel assistants

Veterinary assistants may be approved through the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA)–approved veterinary assistant program or trained on the job (www.navta.net/assistants) The term veterinary assistant is used typically for a person who assists in the care of animals but is not a credentialed veterinary technician, laboratory animal techniciant, or veterinarian. The roles and responsibilities of veterinary assistants will be covered in detail in the forthcoming chapters. The duties of the veterinary assistant may include restraining and exercising patients, cleaning hospital and boarding premises, setting up equipment and supplies, cleaning and maintaining practice and laboratory facilities, and feeding patients. They may also be responsible for other clinical support tasks assigned by the credentialed veterinary technician and/or veterinarian. Most
veterinary assistants are trained on the job by a supervising veterinary technician or veterinarian, but some assistants complete six to twelve months of training in a formal course of study.

The veterinarian is a doctor of veterinary medicine. Veterinarians have graduated from a four-year AVMA-accredited postgraduate doctoral program culminating in a doctor of veterinary medicine (DVM) or veterinary medical doctor degree (VMD). Veterinarians must also pass the licensing board in the state or province in which they wish to practice. Veterinarians have many responsibilities in the hospital, and they are licensed to perform surgery, diagnose diseases and conditions, give a prognosis relating to the diagnosis, and prescribe medication. These skills are the veterinarians’ alone—no other health-care team member can do these tasks.

The veterinary technician is a graduate of a program in veterinary technology accredited by the AVMA Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities (CVTEA). The technician typically has received an associate’s degree and national credentialing through the Veterinary Technician National Examination (VTNE). Some states require a national as well as a state credential, verified by the state board of veterinary medicine. Only graduates of an AVMA accredited program are allowed to take the national board exam 2011. The duties of a veterinary technician are many and often include, but are not limited to, nursing care, anesthesia, surgery, dental, laboratory, radiography, etc.

A veterinary technologist is a graduate of a four-year AVMA CVTEA-accredited program who holds a bachelor’s degree from a veterinary technician school. Alternatively, a veterinary technologist may be a credentialed veterinary technician who holds a bachelor of science degree in another program with studies in supervision, leadership, management, or a scientific area. The technologist’s responsibilities are similar to but more in-depth than those of veterinary technicians. Veterinary technologists may also pursue careers in hospital management, education, or research.

Veterinary technician specialists (VTS) are veterinary technicians who have pursued further education, experience, and training in one of eleven current areas of specialization recognized by NAVTA. Credentialed technicians who choose to specialize must accumulate a specific number of hours within a particular specialty during a set number of years. VTS candidates are also expected to have a strong knowledge and skill set pertaining to their specific area of medicine and nursing as well as a minimum number of continuing education hours specific to their specialty. Their advanced education and training culminates in taking a board examination specific to their specialty showing their advanced knowledge and skills.

The following are the eleven technician specialties currently recognized by NAVTA:

1. Academy of veterinary emergency and critical care technicians
2. Academy of veterinary technician anesthetists
3. Academy of veterinary dental technicians
4. Academy of internal medicine for veterinary technicians
5. Academy of veterinary emergency and critical care technicians
6. Veterinary zoological medicine technicians
7. Equine veterinary nursing technicians
8. Veterinary surgical technicians
9. Veterinary technicians in clinical practice
10. Veterinary nutrition technicians
11. Veterinary clinical pathology technicians

For more information on veterinary technician specialties, please visit NAVTA at www.navta.net/specialties/specialties.

Like all other members of the health-care team, receptionists play a significant role in the success of a practice. Receptionists benefit the practice as the face and voice of the hospital. Receptionists greet clients, detail and clarify invoices, and receive money. They are professionals with great people skills. Receptionists answer the hospital phone and schedule appointments. They are responsible for acknowledging clients when they walk in and out of the practice. Because they typically make the first impression on clients, receptionists affect the clients’ perception of the hospital and are thus critical to the success of the hospital.

Office managers are responsible for the management of the front office staff. Their duties include training receptionists on proper and excellent customer service and communication skills. Office managers often make important decisions on behalf of the practice and supervise the running of the practice. Office managers are typically responsible for the banking needs of the practice and resolution of performance issues among the team members.

Groomers have experience and education in performing technical skills relating to the fur and dermis of the patient. Many breeds of animals require specific grooming techniques, and advanced training is necessary to acquire such skills. Training and good communication skills are important to meeting the needs of the patient and the client. Groomers must also take precautions to prevent injury to animals and to themselves. A number of courses and on-the-job training are available for groomers. Many groomers belong to the National Dog Groomers Association (NDGA). This association works in conjunction with groomers throughout the country to promote professionalism. In some states, licensing or certification is required. The NDGA educates all areas of the profession and the public with regard to the pet grooming profession. The NDGA’s goals are:

1. Unite groomers through membership
2. Promote communication with colleagues
3. Set recognized grooming standards
4. Offer those seeking a higher level of professional recognition the opportunity to have their grooming skills certified.

Kennel assistants are responsible for the cleanliness of the patient and monitoring patient status and immediately alerting the team of any changes. The majority of kennel assistants receive on-the-job training where they learn the workings of a veterinary hospital as well as procedures and protocols crucial to the patients’
health and safety. Kennel assistants are taught to interpret correct nutritional instructions, feed the diet prescribed in the right amount, and remove food from preoperative patients. Kennel assistants are responsible for reporting any and all behavior or condition changes to the immediate patient caregiver.

The veterinary health-care team comprises many positions, each with various roles and responsibilities. It is important that teamwork is emphasized, as good patient care is a result of great teamwork.

References


www.wiley.com/go/burns/textbookvetassistant

Please go to the companion website for interactive multiple-choice questions, the figures from the book in PowerPoint, teaching activities, and a sample cover letter.