

Approaching professional conduct investigations constructively

For veterinary professionals



Thinking about professional conduct complaints

Receiving notification of a Veterinary Board complaint can be uncomfortable and challenging; for example, due to uncertainty of process and outcome, effects on professional and personal identity and pride, disputed facts, concern for fairness and justice and external scrutiny and feedback. It may help to consider:

- **You are not alone.** For example in 2021, over **400 professional conduct complaints** were received by Australian and New Zealand Veterinary Boards.
- Veterinary Boards recognise that **isolated mistakes don't necessarily equate to unprofessional conduct.** We know that veterinary work is complex and emotional and that perfection and gold-standards aren't helpful references.
- Receiving a complaint is not necessarily an indication of unprofessional behaviour. **Most complaints submitted to Veterinary Boards don't amount to a finding of unprofessional conduct.** Investigation of evidence commonly leads to no further action being taken. In these cases, affirmation of professional practice and suggestions for further improvements may be offered.
- Of Unprofessional Conduct findings, most are considered "not of a serious nature". **The most common outcome is direction to further education** including improved communication, and strengthened record keeping. Cancellation or suspension of registration and payment of legal costs are not possible outcomes unless serious unprofessional conduct has occurred.
- Investigations focus on **actions and rationale in a specific case**, not your whole professional self.
- Use the complaint as a valuable opportunity to receive **independent feedback** to affirm good practice and guide **continued learning and improvement.**

RESPONDING TO PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT COMPLAINTS

If you are notified of a complaint against you, we encourage you to:

- Watch the relevant videos in this series, and refer to the Factsheets and your Veterinary Board's website to better understand your regulators' approach to complaints. Feel free to ask your Veterinary Board staff about anything you're not clear on.
- Talk about what's happening and how you're feeling with family, friends and peers. You can also access support from health professionals an employee assistance provider, Beyond Blue, Lifeline, and vet counselling services. Your Veterinary Board website may have additional resources.
- notify your professional indemnity insurer, who may offer advice or practical support.
- be prompt and proactive in responding to Veterinary Board requests
- provide accurate and complete information so Veterinary Boards can make well-informed decisions
- respond to the complaint and issues in an ordered, logical way
- reflect with peers on your actions and what might be approached differently next time. Modelling a constructive response to complaints rather than dismissing them can enhance rational empathy, resilience, problem solving, continued learning and improvement in the entire team.
- outline any changes or activities you and/or your workplace have undertaken to strengthen practice and prevent recurrence. You're encouraged to initiate these while our investigation is underway and to provide details in your responses to your Veterinary Board.

To protect the public, animals, the profession and your continued contribution to these, our aim is to guide behaviours to reduce the risk of problems in future.

Further information

If you're unsure of what's required, or have questions at any stage, you're welcome to contact your Veterinary Board/Council staff. Additional information about veterinary regulation, related resources and contact details can be found on your state, territory Veterinary Board or NZ Veterinary Council website.