



**SASKATCHEWAN
VETERINARY MEDICAL
ASSOCIATION**

**VETERINARY TELEMEDICINE
POLICY**

July 2020

PREAMBLE

What is telehealth?

Telehealth is a broad term that encompasses all uses of technology to deliver health and medical services by remote means. Different branches of telehealth include teletriage, teleconsultation, and telemedicine.

What is teletriage?

Teletriage is the provision of general medical information, using some form of electronic communication (e.g., telephone, email, video-communication), by a veterinarian, registered veterinary technologist, or auxiliary staff member to a client. This information is not for the purpose of diagnosing or treating but is given instead to facilitate prudent care, such as advising a client on the need for yearly examinations or if the assessment of a health condition requires immediate attention. Such communications may occur in the absence of an established veterinarian-client-patient-relationship (VCPR).

What is teleconsultation?

A consultation between a consulting veterinarian and an attending veterinarian, who is seeking advice, using some form of electronic communication (e.g., telephone, text message, video-communication) is termed teleconsultation. With teleconsultation, the consulting veterinarian is not receiving a referral, does not become the attending veterinarian, and is not communicating directly with the animal owner.

What is telemedicine?

Telemedicine is the provision of specific veterinary medical advice or treatment by a veterinarian based on the remote diagnosis of disease or injury in an animal using some form of electronic communication but without physical examination of the animal by the veterinarian. It is used to complement, but not to replace, current veterinary medicine practice. A valid VCPR must exist and all the other regulatory requirements, such as informed consent, must be followed to allow a veterinarian to diagnose and treat a patient via telemedicine.

Why use telemedicine?

Telemedicine is a tool that expands our ability to provide care to our patients by reinforcing the VCPR, augmenting patient visits, and improving patient health and welfare. Scenarios where telemedicine may be useful include certain follow-up examinations, continued management of chronic diseases in patients, and preventative care examinations, e.g., renewing tick medication. Telemedicine can also facilitate the remote collection of information from clients through a “virtual examination” of their animal. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, telemedicine has also expanded our ability to protect public health and the health and safety of clinic staff by allowing for physical distancing, while continuing to provide veterinary medical care, and by providing veterinary services to those clients who are less likely to visit veterinary clinics due to other concerns, e.g., immunocompromised client.

POLICY

1) Professional responsibilities

The use of telemedicine by Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association (SVMA) members is currently restricted to practicing veterinarian members as defined in the SVMA's *Membership Categories and Operational Policies* document.

The veterinarian must use sound professional judgement to determine if or when the use of telemedicine is appropriate. This includes appropriately determining to what extent veterinary medicine may be performed in the absence of a physical examination.

Telemedicine must not be used in situations where the expected professional standard is that a physical examination is required to arrive at an appropriate diagnosis or treatment plan.

2) Veterinarian-client-patient-relationship (VCPR)

All veterinary medicine, including telemedicine, must be delivered in the context of a valid VCPR. From the SVMA Bylaws:

13.1. Veterinarian Client Patient Relationship:

- a. The VCPR is the basis for interaction among veterinarians and their clients and patients.
- b. No member shall diagnose, recommend a course of treatment, prescribe medications, or perform any medical or surgical procedure on an animal without the formation of a valid VCPR, defined as follows:
 - i. the veterinarian has assumed responsibility for making medical judgments regarding the health of the animal and the need for medical treatment, and the client, owner or other caretaker has agreed to follow the instructions of the veterinarian;
 - ii. the veterinarian has sufficient knowledge of the health, environment and need for care of the animal, acquired by virtue of:
 - A. personally examining the animal; or
 - B. making medically appropriate examinations and timely visits to the premises where the animal is kept, thereby obtaining sufficient knowledge to initiate a general or preliminary diagnosis of the medical condition of the animal; or
 - C. where medically appropriate, through history taking, including details of any presenting complaint and a review of previous medical records obtained as soon as possible after the first encounter; and
 - iii. the veterinarian is readily available or has arranged for emergency coverage for follow-up care in case of adverse reactions or failure of the treatment regimen.

Telemedicine may be used to support or augment veterinary medicine in conjunction with an existing VCPR established in person and in conjunction with a physical examination of the animal. Conversely, a VCPR may not be established using telemedicine alone.

A veterinarian's professional obligations are not altered when providing veterinary medicine by telemedicine. The veterinarian must meet the same professional obligations as when a VCPR is established in person.

3) Prescribing

The requirements a veterinarian must meet when prescribing a drug are not altered when providing veterinary medicine by telemedicine. These are stated in the SVMA's *Operational Policies for Prescribing, Dispensing, Compounding and Selling Pharmaceuticals in Saskatchewan* document as:

- Establish and meet conditions of a valid veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) in regard to a specific animal or group of animals;
- Make an evidence-based determination of medical need;
- Complete appropriate documentation in the medical record; and
- Provide oversight of use and follow-up.

Veterinarians must not prescribe drugs based on information acquired through telemedicine alone. The expected professional standard is that in every instance when a prescription is issued, the veterinarian has relevant medical knowledge to support establishment of medical need, e.g., pertinent medical history, data from physical examination, results from ancillary diagnostic tests.

4) Informed consent

The veterinarian must:

- Explain to the client any limitations of proceeding with telemedicine to provide the veterinary services required;
- Inform the client of the veterinarian's identity, location, and registration with the SVMA;
- Disclose privacy and security issues involved in accessing veterinary services by telemedicine; and
- Obtain the client's informed consent for use of telemedicine.

5) Confidentiality

When using telemedicine, veterinarians must comply with legal and professional obligations to protect a client's confidentiality. This includes taking appropriate precautions and confirming that the technology and physical setting being used by the veterinarian and client have adequate security protocols in place.

6) Medical records

The minimum professional standards related to the creation and maintenance of appropriate medical records as outlined in Practice Standard 5 – Medical Records of the *Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association Practice Standards* must be met when using telemedicine. Telemedicine does not change the need to thoroughly document all pertinent medical findings in the medical record.

Just as with in-person meetings, a veterinarian may wish to follow-up a telemedicine consultation with a summary document sent electronically to the client detailing exam findings, working diagnoses, treatment plan/options, and follow-up plan. This document can also be included in the medical record.

7) Inspected veterinary practice

The *Saskatchewan Veterinary Medical Association Practice Standards* establishes standards for facilities, equipment, personnel, and operational procedures. Telemedicine must only be provided out of or in conjunction with an SVMA-inspected and certified veterinary practice. Although a veterinarian does not have to be physically present at the certified practice to provide telemedicine, appropriate documentation of all telemedicine services must be recorded and maintained at the certified practice.

8) Expectations when practicing telemedicine in a jurisdiction outside of Saskatchewan

When using telemedicine for an animal that resides in another province, territory, or country, an SVMA-licensed veterinarian:

- must also comply with the licencing requirements of that jurisdiction; and
- remains accountable to the SVMA.

As the regulatory body, the SVMA has authority to investigate any complaints made about a member regardless of whether the member or animal is physically located in Saskatchewan.

9) Expectations for a veterinarian practicing telemedicine in Saskatchewan

Veterinarians who are licenced in another jurisdiction but wanting to provide veterinary telemedicine in Saskatchewan must comply with the licensing requirements of the SVMA and provide care in accordance with expected professional standards before applying telemedicine to an animal residing in Saskatchewan.

If the SVMA becomes aware of concerns about care provided via telemedicine by a non-member to an animal in Saskatchewan, it may share that information with the regulatory body that has jurisdiction over the non-member so it can take appropriate action.

REFERENCES

- Alberta Veterinary Medical Association (ABVMA) Policy – Telemedicine. August 16, 2019.
- American Association of Veterinary State Boards (AAVSB) Recommended Guidelines for the Appropriate Use of Telehealth Technologies in the Practice of Veterinary Medicine. September 2018.
- Canadian Council of Veterinary Registrars (CCVR) National Policy Statement on Telemedicine. Accessed on July 28, 2020
- Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA) – Veterinary Telemedicine. Prepared on April 6, 2020 by Dr. Serge Chalhoub, National Issues Committee member of the CVMA.
- College of Veterinarians of Ontario (CVO) Professional Practice Standard – Telemedicine. September 2018.

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