

Veterinary Students – Standards of medical fitness to train

Introduction

This document has been drafted by HEOPS, following wide consultation, as guidance for those providing occupational health (OH) advice to Veterinary Schools on students' fitness to train and meet the required standards on graduation. All veterinary students should complete health screening within their first term of training. The standards for training in veterinary science are defined by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). The RCVS states that the safety of patients, the public and other colleagues must always take priority over adjustments for student's disabilities³. Students should only be admitted if they are physically and mentally able to carry out all the tasks normally done by veterinary surgeons³. If this is in doubt, such applicants will need to be assessed on an individual basis for their capability, and whether reasonable adjustments can enable them to demonstrate the required competencies by graduation. In some cases it may be appropriate to seek medical advice on the possibility of improvement in an applicant's condition, so that deferred admission can be considered³. These standards meet the criteria in the Equality Act in that they are a proportionate means of achieving the legitimate aim of ensuring the safety of the public, colleagues, practitioners and animals.

Prospective students who have serious concerns that a medical condition may have implications for future fitness to train should, at an early stage, and even before making a formal application, contact the School and if appropriate, be offered professional advice. However, any formal assessment should take place after offer of a place in the relevant school, to comply with equality legislation. There is an obligation on Veterinary Schools to make reasonable adjustments for students with disabilities where the disability would not prevent the student from fulfilling the required competencies to graduate.⁴ There is no requirement to make adjustments to the competence standards themselves.

Medical and personal information disclosed during the assessment processes should be held "in confidence" by the OH service. Medical details should only be given to staff outside the OH service in so far as it is necessary for them to discharge their management, educational and pastoral responsibilities, in accordance with the Data Protection Act. Explicit informed consent should be obtained from the student if it is necessary for medical information to be shared more widely. The appropriate staff in Veterinary Schools should be informed of the nature of any relevant impairment, its effect on function, and adjustments necessary to allow the student to fulfil the required competencies for graduation and professional practice. Specific information about underlying causes should not be disclosed, except where this serves a specific purpose to protect patients or benefit the student, and only with explicit, informed consent. Such information, and any other disclosures by a student, should be held "in confidence" by the Veterinary School.

The criteria for fitness to train on health grounds are:

1. **Testing for immunity and infection** should be in accordance with current Department of Health (DH) guidance or an equivalent evidence based standard. Students should protect patients, colleagues and themselves by being immunised against serious communicable diseases where vaccines are available and effective. Current DH guidance recommends that veterinary staff who handle animal species known to be susceptible to TB, Anthrax or Rabies should be offered immunisation.⁵ However, these immunisations are currently only offered to veterinary staff at increased risk. Core veterinary training, in the UK, does not necessarily involve a high risk of exposure to these or other transmissible zoonotic diseases. Vocational vaccinations may be necessary for specific pathogens unique to each training course. These vaccinations may be necessary for the protection of the student and the non-human patient. A decision about whether to make such vaccinations mandatory or voluntary must be based on local risk assessments of risks and benefits.
2. **RCVS mandatory fitness to train criteria include the following:**
 - a. The ability to communicate effectively with clients, the public, colleagues and responsible authorities.¹
 - b. The ability to use information technology effectively to communicate, share, collect and analyse information.¹
 - c. Awareness of personal limitations, when and from where to seek professional advice, assistance and support.¹
 - d. The ability to obtain an accurate and relevant history of the individual animal or animal group, and its/their environment.¹
 - e. The ability to perform a complete clinical examination and undertake appropriate clinical procedures.¹

- f. The ability to handle and restrain an animal safely and humanely.¹
- g. The ability to know and apply the RCVS twelve Principles of Certification correctly.^{1,2}

3. **Assessment of functional capacity.** Examples of impairment needing careful assessment to ensure safe veterinary practice:

- a. **Learning disorders** - Whilst many students are able to cope with some degree of learning disorder, these can present particular difficulties for veterinary students who must be able to manage a heavy study load to keep up with the academic standards of the course. It may be advisable before an offer is made to a student with a learning disorder, to refer the student to an independent specialist to determine the level and degree of impairment. Assessment reports that are more than two years old should not be used as the basis on which to make a decision as an individual's condition may change over time. Students with learning disorders who are admitted to the course may need support from the university's special needs specialists. Where there is a clinical competency assessment in the course, students will need to demonstrate that they are able to read, interpret and communicate text and numerical data unaided, and communicate effectively with clients, the public, colleagues and responsible authorities, under conditions appropriate to veterinary practice. By the end of the course, students will need to be able to demonstrate that they are able to practise unaided.³
- b. **Literacy and Numeracy** – This refers to the student's ability rather than educational attainment. All students must be able to prescribe drugs safely and effectively, calculate accurate drug doses and keep accurate, legible and complete clinical records.
- c. **Visual impairment** - A veterinary surgeon may be able to practise with some limited visual impairments (e.g. colour blindness or monocular vision), although the extent of impairment would need to be assessed against the requirements of the Day One Competences. It should be noted that students will have to perform surgery during their course in order to meet the Day One Competences, and a judgement will need to be made in this context. A severe visual impairment would render the individual unable to practise as a veterinary surgeon.³
- d. **Hearing impairment** - Individuals with a hearing impairment are not necessarily ruled out for admission to the veterinary degree, as long as they have the appropriate coping strategies and make use of appropriate aids (e.g. cochlear implants and the use of amplified stethoscope). Issues to be taken into account will include the individual's ability to communicate with others, as well as their ability to cope in a range of practice and clinical-based contexts so as not to be a danger to themselves, colleagues, clients and animals.³
- e. **Mental health impairments** - When considering applicants with mental health problems, it must be borne in mind that studying on the veterinary course and working in the veterinary profession is a stressful undertaking. Although a history of mental illness would not necessarily preclude admission, it is advisable for such candidates to be the subject of a risk assessment. Students with mental impairments may need support from the university's special needs specialist. Where there is a clinical competency assessment in the course, however, students will need to demonstrate that they are able to perform unaided under conditions appropriate to veterinary practice. In the context of the ready availability of drugs to a veterinary surgeon, and in a profession with a higher than average suicide rate, a history of mental illness could be grounds for not admitting an applicant onto the course where they could be a danger to themselves.³
- f. **Loss or partial loss of a limb** - On its own, loss or partial loss of a limb would not necessarily preclude an individual from consideration for admission. The effects of the individual's disability with reference to the Day One Competences should be considered. In particular, any impairment of the individual's ability to handle and restrain animals safely, and to handle equipment will need to be assessed by the OH professional and a veterinary surgeon with experience of that species, and considered.³
- g. **Wheelchair users** - An individual who is permanently based in a wheelchair would be unable to demonstrate the full range of Day One Competences, and would not therefore be able to graduate with the registerable veterinary degree.³
- h. **Allergy** - Asthma and allergies to animal dander and other allergens - In the interests of the individual's safety, self-disclosure of such conditions is important at the point of entry to the course. Generally, such conditions are controllable and students can cope well. In some severe cases, however, an allergy may prove to be uncontrollable and life threatening and thus could be grounds for non-admission. Exposure to a wide range of species on the veterinary course is an inevitable and integral part of veterinary training, and applicants need to be advised that the requirements of the Day One Competences mean that they will not be able to avoid contact with certain species on the grounds of an allergy, or to request dispensation from parts of the course.³

4. **The OH process** to assess fitness of students who declare specific functional impairments will usually require referral to an accredited specialist in occupational medicine. Screening and assessment should only be undertaken by qualified OH professionals or practitioners working under the clinical governance of specialist OH professionals, with knowledge of, or training in, the requirements of a veterinary course. OH opinions should always be provided by a suitably qualified practitioner, evidence based, logical and reasoned and should lie within a reasonable range of professional opinion^{6,7}. Depending on the nature of the condition being assessed, this process may involve:
- Taking a full, relevant medical history.
 - Physical examination and functional assessment.
 - Full mental state examination.
 - Seeking targeted, specific medical evidence, with consent, from treating NHS doctors, Educational Psychologists or other specialists, to confirm diagnosis, severity, treatment and prognosis.
 - Referral for physical or psychiatric assessment by medical specialists without a therapeutic conflict of interest.
 - Reporting to the training School in a timely manner, in accordance with current data protection legislation and rules of medical confidentiality.
5. **The format of health screening** should be in accordance with current equality and data protection legislation and should include the following steps:
- A health questionnaire completed and submitted to an occupational health service as soon as possible after an offer of a training place is issued. GP certification of accurate declaration is desirable. Dishonest submissions in health declarations are more likely to be a barrier to entry than disclosure of a relevant disability.⁸
 - An interview with an OH nurse to clarify any answers on the health questionnaire and to undertake specific tests and vaccinations where appropriate.
 - Onward referral to an Occupational Physician if this is appropriate.
 - A health clearance certificate stating whether the student is fit to train and any adjustments necessary to allow the student to fulfil the required competencies for graduation and professional practice. This should be issued to appropriate managers or the head of course. This will not include any clinical information, is sufficient proof of health clearance for all UK universities, and should prevent the need for repeat screening for all placements and electives, in accordance with DH guidance.

References

- Essential Competences Required of the Veterinary Surgeon – RCVS
- www.rcvs.org.uk
- Guidance on the admission of students with disabilities to the professional veterinary degree course - RCVS 2004
- Tynan A. Time to take stock: Disability and Professional Competence – RCVS 2005
- Immunisation against infectious disease – Department of Health 2010
- Jones v Post Office [2001] EWCA Civ 558, [2001] IRLR 384, Court of Appeal
- Kloss D. Occupational Health Law ISBN 978-1405185905
- Direct Communication from RCVS Advisory Committee 2012