Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)

On October 2014 we began a trial with the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) to handle complaints involving the clinical care of small animals and horses. RCVS is the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons in the UK and deals with issues of professional misconduct, maintaining the register of veterinary surgeons eligible to practise in the UK and assuring standards of veterinary education. Only veterinary surgeons registered with the RCVS can practise veterinary medicine in the UK.

Handling RCVS complaints

The complaints we handle are provided by the RCVS, if the vet and consumer agree to take part in the trial. Volumes are currently as projected. Because of the nature of the complaints, we take a sensitive approach to the way they are handled. Issues include allegations of poor care and alleged poor customer service.

When we investigate a complaint we use evidence provided by RCVS, taking into consideration relevant law, regulatory rules, guidance and standards, codes of practice and what is accepted as good industry practice. We also have access to a veterinary advisory panel for clinical or veterinary related issues, which has proved invaluable.

It is not our role to punish veterinary practices but to decide upon an action that it must do to put matters right. Sometimes this means making a higher or lower award than has already been offered. If the practice has already made a payment to try and settle the complaint, this will be taken into account. We may also award a goodwill payment if we identify a shortfall in customer service, or recommend a non-financial award such as an apology and/or an explanation of what went wrong.

Case study

Routine operation goes wrong

A pet owner took her rabbit for a routine operation and expected to collect it later the same day. When the owner went to collect the rabbit it was evident that the rabbit had lost the use of its hind legs. It was also urinating when held. The vet examined the rabbit and concluded the symptoms indicated a parasite. The vet prescribed antibiotics and discharged the rabbit.

The complainant was concerned about the rabbit overnight and took it back the next day for a further check up. X-rays confirmed that the rabbit had a serious spinal injury that it was unlikely to recover from. It was agreed euthanasia was the kindest option.

The vet accepted that the injury had occurred while the rabbit was at the surgery but was unable to explain how it occurred. To resolve the dispute the vet had offered a goodwill gesture of £25 and to cremate the rabbit. The complainant declined this offer.

As the complaint remained unresolved, the RCVS passed the case to us for independent review. We were unable to establish the cause of the injury but were concerned that this occurred while the rabbit was in the care of the surgery and went unnoticed. We were also concerned that the veterinary surgeon had discharged the rabbit without further observation or examination.

We required the veterinary surgery to apologise for the upset which might have been caused by allowing the rabbit to return home; to refund all the costs associated with the operation and subsequent treatments; to offer to cremate the rabbit and return the ashes, without any further charges; and to make a goodwill payment.