

News & Reports

RCVS may relax guidance due to Covid-19

By Josh Loeb

SAFEGUARDING human life must be prioritised over helping animals, the RCVS has said.

Amid the coronavirus (Covid-19) crisis, the college's guiding principle will be that 'human health and safety must come first', its chief executive has informed council members.

The comments came as the RCVS acknowledged that vets and registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) may be required to depart from normal veterinary guidance because of the 'exceptional circumstances' engendered by the outbreak.

As the situation progresses, the college may opt to relax its expectations of vets and RVNs.

It could take a more charitable view if, for example, they refuse to provide care to animals in the homes of people who are self-isolating.

College president Niall Connell last week wrote to all vets and vet nurses to make clear that, while animal health was always 'the first concern when attending to animals', ultimately safeguarding human health must take precedence.

In his letter, Connell said he wanted to reassure veterinary colleagues that the college would take into account the 'context' if and when concerns were raised about any decisions that individual vets or RVNs had taken during a time of crisis.

He said the RCVS did understand that 'in these exceptional circumstances, you may need to depart from the best practice advice set out in the guidance, in order to safeguard yourself and your colleagues, as well as public health.'

He also reassured veterinary colleagues that 'if you act reasonably in the light of all available information and evidence, and are able to justify the decisions you have

made, it is hard to see circumstances where we would find you had acted in any way that would be a major cause for concern.'

The college is planning to publish a list of frequently asked questions relating to Covid-19's impact on the profession at <https://bit.ly/2TU46eV>. Its aim is to provide advice on 'more specific situations', with information subject to ongoing review.

RCVS chief executive Lizzie Lockett has given council members an insight into questions the college has already been asked by vets and RVNs worried about what impact the outbreak could have.

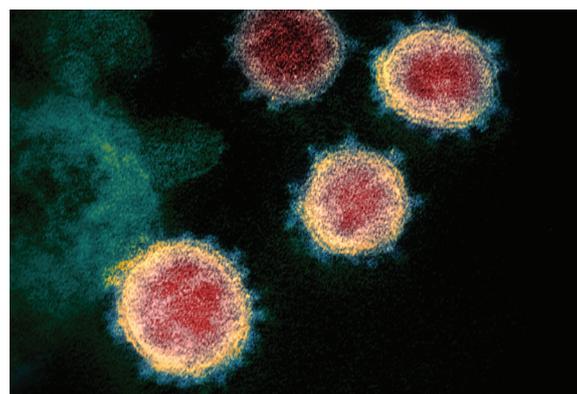
These included whether practices could 'stop students coming in for EMS if they're worried about additional people in the building' and whether the requirement for practices to make provision for 24-hour emergency care might be relaxed.

Some vets had also asked about the practicalities of providing care to animals under isolation, she added.

Last week the BVA accepted evidence that a Pomeranian dog in Hong Kong that repeatedly tested positive for the virus had a low level of Covid-19 infection. However, global animal health authorities have said this was likely to be a case of human-to-animal transmission, and the BVA has said there is no evidence that pet animals can be a source of Covid-19 for people or other animals.

At last week's RCVS council meeting Lockett said: 'Our role really is to reassure and look at areas specific to the code of conduct. What we won't be trying to do – we don't have the time, energy or resources – is business continuity planning for practices.'

The RCVS would be 'as supportive and helpful as we can be' and



Electron micrograph of SARS-CoV-2 virions

its overriding principle was that 'human health and safety must come first', she said.

In addition, council members were told about precautions that the RCVS is itself taking. These include asking all people entering the college's headquarters, Belgravia House in London, to fill out a questionnaire about recent travel.

'We've been looking at how, if necessary, we could look to do overseas registrations in a fashion which means people don't necessarily have to come into the building,' Lockett said. 'At the moment people come into the building with original documentation – it's an anti-fraud measure – but we need to look and see if there are ways around that in the short term, if we need to do it.'

Going forward, decisions about whether to cancel RCVS events will be made based on a range of criteria, including whether the event is considered business critical, the 'demographic of delegates' and the impact that cancelling might have on animal health and welfare. Disciplinary hearings will continue to go ahead but some evidence could potentially be given via Skype.

Earlier this week the government said it accepted that the virus was going to spread in the UK in a 'significant way'. ●



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