“Veterinary occupational safety and health in veterinary practice” Survey Report

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Survey Report

BACKGROUND
For the European Union, the most important legal act in the occupational safety and health (OSH) area is the European Framework Directive 1989/391/EEC, which establishes general principles for managing safety and health, such as responsibility of the employer, rights/duties of workers, using risk assessments to continuously improve company processes, and workplace health and safety representation. The EU Framework Directive guarantees minimum safety and health requirements throughout Europe while the Member States are allowed to set more stringent measures. Furthermore, the European Agency for Safety and Health at work has guidelines which are not binding documents, but they facilitate the implementation of the European directives.

To find out what goes on in veterinary practices, the survey “Veterinary occupational safety and health in small animal practices” was sent out to the FVE (the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe) members between 28.11.2019. and 15.12.2019. Replies were received from 41 respondents from 12 European countries, namely France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Norway, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland, the Netherlands and the UK. The survey aimed to get an overview of how occupational safety and health laws for animal veterinary practitioners were implemented in different European countries and potentially discover the best OSH practices. The survey was divided into two parts: the first one was focused on the laws, regulations and guidelines on occupational safety and health in general. The second part of the survey covered specific occupational safety and health areas of interest in veterinary medicine. This summary report is based on the main findings in the survey.

MAIN FINDINGS

- In most countries, the veterinary profession does not have many specific rules regarding OSH regulations that are not included in the regulations for work safety in general or occupational safety of health professionals.
- For individual veterinary practices, the responsibility of appropriately implementing OSH regulations falls on the owner, the manager and in some cases an OSH consultant.
- The veterinary profession has a lot of work safety and health hazards that are dealt with in different ways in practice. General health and indemnity insurances are extremely important measures that ensure that veterinarians’ safety and health is prioritized.

- A lot of preventative measures against occupational hazards in veterinary medicine are very country-specific or even practice-specific. This means that they depend on the individual country OSH regulations and even further on the individual management of veterinary practices.

- Considering the fact that many hazards in the veterinary profession are exclusive for veterinarians only it would be recommended to create universal guidelines for best OSH practices.

Part I Legislation and responsibility

Most countries have general laws and rules for safety and health in workplaces, some, also, have more specific rules for health professionals. Very few have precise rules for the veterinary profession.

Enforcement of these laws is usually the responsibility of the Government while in some countries it is also under the jurisdiction of veterinary statutory bodies. Certain countries demand the appointment of a ‘health and safety officer’ at the working place.

The responsibility for the implementation of OSH regulations in individual practices falls on the director of the practice, manager and in some cases an OSH consultant. More rules apply for employed than for self-employed veterinarians.

Regular evaluations of veterinary practices’ OSH systems are in most countries mandatory and usually done every couple of years.

Failures to observe failures in OSH systems in practice can lead to financial
penalization. Depending on the country, inspections are less or more regular and fines also vary. However, in cases of accidents due to not following OSH regulations, veterinary practices are not only fined but the injunction to change practices or even jail sentences are a possibility for the culprits.

**Part II Occupational safety and health areas**

The second part of the survey was focused on the specific occupational safety and health areas and the ways they were applied in veterinary practices.

Occupational safety and health areas:
1. Animal induced injuries
2. Physical injuries from medical equipment and waste (scalpels, needles, etc.)
3. Biological hazards and zoonoses
4. Chemical hazards (medication, anaesthetic gases, etc.)
5. X-Ray exposure
6. Chemotherapy drugs exposure
7. Pregnancy and maternity leave
8. Threats related to handling clients (e.g. abuse, robberies)
9. Fire safety and electrical equipment
10. Protective clothing and hearing protection
11. Appropriate warning and identification signs
1. Animal induced injuries

Professional indemnity insurance and general employee health insurance are both obligatory in most countries for veterinary surgeons. In the case of self-employed veterinarians, there is an option to get private insurance. Health insurance for veterinary employees amongst other things covers animal induced injuries. Veterinary practices, in general, have different preventative methods for dealing with this type of injuries, from the education of their staff on the handling of aggressive animals to using muzzles and other restraining tools. But this varies and is very much specific for each veterinary practice.

2. Physical injuries from medical equipment and waste (scalpels, needles, etc.)

The company liability to employees requires veterinary practices to have health insurance that covers potential physical injuries of veterinary staff from medical waste (scalpels, needles, etc.). Most veterinary practices also have their individual policies on how they deal with the medical waste which depends on the national laws of specific countries. Most countries have strict laws on the management and disposal of medical waste. Veterinary practices follow these rules e.g. the use of dedicated containers for medical waste. In addition to this, veterinary practices usually have SOPs and training for their staff regarding the careful handling of medical tools and proper personal safety measurements to avoid injuries.
3. **Biological hazards and zoonoses**

Safety measures for biological hazards are expressed in the general rules concerning hygiene, disinfection, protective clothing, masks and gloves and the behaviour of veterinarians. Recommendations for optional vaccinations against rabies exist in some countries, while mandatory vaccinations are not common and are recommended only for certain veterinary professionals (e.g. the staff of pathology section in the specialized institution that is working with hazardous materials) or veterinary students. Vaccinations in countries that are rabies-free (e.g. Norway) are usually not recommended at all. There are some exceptions, for example, even though it is a rabies-free country, in Ireland the veterinarians working in quarantine kennels must be vaccinated against rabies. Compensations in case of work-related illnesses and zoonotic diseases are usually financial indemnities from national health services. The amount of compensation depends on the insurance premiums. In severe cases, an invalidity pension is an option.

4. **Chemical hazards (medication, anaesthetic gases, etc.)**

The health and social insurance cover chemical hazards induced injuries for veterinarians in most countries. It is a part of the mandatory general insurance, however, in some countries and for independent veterinarians, this is a matter of private insurance also. Compensations in the case of injury are usually related to the established degree of medical disability after the injury – in extreme cases: invalidity pension. There is also a matter of veterinary practice responsibility in making sure to apply all possible preventative measures, otherwise, they are considered liable if any accidents occur.
For anaesthetic gases, laws lay down the control of their waste in some countries, while others have recommendations and guidelines for best practices (ventilation, stock, etc.).

5. X-ray exposure

For the protection from X-ray exposure, most countries have laws on radioprotection and compulsory training on X-ray control and management for veterinarians that operate X-ray machines. In certain countries, there has to be at least one veterinarian that is certified to operate X-ray machines in practices where those machines are used. Protective clothing is mandatory in all countries. In some of them, the veterinary practice staff also wears dosimeters. X-ray machines, in most countries, are monitored and checked every few years.

6. Chemotherapy drugs exposure

Chemotherapy drugs are still relatively new in the veterinary medicine field so a lot of countries do not have any regulations or guidelines regarding this. In some countries where chemotherapy is used in veterinary medicine there are certain recommendations regarding chemotherapy drug exposure control and health insurance usually covers injuries due to chemotherapy exposure. Only veterinarians that are specialized in chemotherapy are allowed to work in this field.
7. Pregnancy and maternity leave

There are health laws for the protection of pregnant workers, and in our own interest, pregnant veterinarians. Maternity leaves for veterinarians are the same as for the general population and very much depend on the laws of particular countries. Pregnant veterinarians are usually recommended to avoid participation in potentially dangerous activities (X-ray scans, aggressive patients, etc.). In the case of accidents due to the negligence of veterinary practice owners, they could be legally charged.

8. Threats related to handling clients (e.g. abuse, robberies)

For the cases of abuse of veterinary staff by human clients, there are no objective preventative measures. The way these issues are handled is completely dependent on the owner of the veterinary practice. Cases of robberies of money or medicines are usually covered by company insurance. The insurance can cover both the damages to the practices and the psychological damages to the veterinarians.

9. Fire safety and electrical equipment malfunctions

In some countries, every year there is training on fire safety where veterinarians are trained to use fire extinguishers. Electrical systems must comply with safety regulations and be checked periodically. Installations and checks may only be carried out by authorized and certified personnel. Damages in the case of fire and electrical
equipment malfunctions are covered by the company insurance if the veterinary practice in question has one.

10. **Protective clothing and hearing protection**

Protective clothing for hygienic purposes is obligatory for work in veterinary practices. In case the veterinary practice uses X-ray machines then they must have adequate protective equipment for the protection against X-rays (gloves, etc.). Regarding hearing protection in some countries, there are laws on the permitted level of decibels in the workplace.

11. **Appropriate warning and identification signs**

Identification and warning signs are part of operational and facility safety regulations. There are usually signs for the danger of X-ray exposure, fire, chemical products, etc.
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