

# Health and safety and the veterinary nurse

*In today's work environment, health and safety is an important legal requirement for any business. Common health and safety standards and policies can be applied to all businesses, but the veterinary environment has its own unique challenges in the area of health and safety, writes Ciara O'Kelly RVN, Irish Veterinary Nurses Association Committee*

Recently, I attended a health and safety course developed specifically to address health and safety in the veterinary workplace. It was very detailed, educational, practical and addressed the many areas of health and safety, including legislation. It was delivered by Gerry Gilligan MVB, MRCVS, in collaboration with Veterinary Ireland, and covered the following areas:

- Legislation
- Hazards particular to the veterinary work environment
- Risk assessment and control measures
- Hazard spotting
- General principles of the 'safety statement'
- Preparing a safety statement
- Promotion of a health and safety culture
- Occupational health.<sup>1</sup>

In Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) oversees the implementation of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005.<sup>2</sup> The act outlines the employer's and employee's duties to manage health and safety at work. Health and safety is everyone's responsibility, but it is the employer's responsibility to identify hazards, perform risk assessments and provide a health and safety statement. The employee must comply with the relevant legislation to protect their own health and safety as well as that of others who might be affected by their acts or errors at work. Other legislation that impacts the veterinary environment and the management of health and safety include the Animal Health and Welfare Act, 2013,<sup>3</sup> and the Veterinary Practice Acts (as amended), 2005 and 2012.<sup>4</sup> The three main areas of health and safety management are hazards, risks and the safety statement. According to the HSA, the difference between a hazard and a risk is: "A hazard, in general, refers to anything with the potential to cause harm in terms of human injury or ill-health,

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damage to property, damage to the environment or a combination of these, eg. chemical substances, machinery or methods of work, whereas risk means the likelihood, great or small, that an undesired event will occur due to the realisation of a hazard. Risk is dependent on the likelihood that a hazard may occur, together with the severity of the harm suffered/consequences, risk is also dependent on the number of people who might be exposed to the hazard.”<sup>5</sup>

### IDENTIFYING THE HAZARD

The HSA website ([www.hsa.ie](http://www.hsa.ie)) identifies a list of hazards which may be found in veterinary environments, eg. access to drugs and medicines, small animal and large animal handling. The site also has the tools you need to address, manage and educate yourself and co-workers on health and safety.

### IDENTIFYING THE RISK

Risk assessment is looking carefully at your workplace and its activities that could cause harm to employees, clients, independent contractors, visitors, and animals in the care of the practice. Featured on the HSA website is an excellent tool called BeSmart.ie. It is a user-friendly way to evaluate risks and assess them, and it caters to all types of businesses, including veterinary practices. Simply register for free, then follow the simple steps to conduct a risk assessment and it will provide the level of risk and action needed for your particular work environment. It will provide you with a comprehensive risk assessment which you can use in your safety statement.

### THE SAFETY STATEMENT

The safety statement should include how health and safety will be managed, the hazards specific to your workplace that have been identified and also the risk assessment. Review the HSA website for a more comprehensive look at the statement and how to create one. Personally, I think that the health and safety of the animals in our care should be included in the safety statement.

### SOME PRACTICAL IDEAS FOR HEALTH AND SAFETY

A copy of the safety statement with all the relevant information should be kept in a common area. All new employees, students, independent contractors, etc. should be required to review the safety statement and sign-off indicating that they have read it and understood it, before starting work.

All employees should be required to review the safety statement annually. Employees should be encouraged to address safety issues and be rewarded for safe thinking and safe attitudes.

Health and safety crosses over into other policies and protocols within the practice, eg. cleaning.

Veterinary, nursing and transition students have a greater need for health and safety to be covered due to their inexperience, and in most cases their youth leaves them at greater risk. By providing a student code of conduct, which is a list of rules and practice policies in relation to students, the practice may address some common risks, and should be reviewed with them and signed off by them before they commence.

The practice should require that all students be educated on basic health and safety by their school/college prior to embarking on work experience.

### CONCLUSION

Veterinary nurses in all veterinary environments, but particularly those in a management, supervisory or senior position, are key stakeholders in health and safety in their work environment. This position will benefit them, their co-workers, students, visitors, clients, independent contractors and the animals in their care. It is key for nurses to have a good understanding of health and safety by educating themselves and leading by example to promote a safety culture. Compliance is an area of health and safety that everyone needs to pay more attention to, eg. an employer provides lead aprons and dosimeters but are they always used? Do staff know how to use the fire extinguishers? Does the practice have a policy on the removal of in-hospital animals in the case of an emergency? Are there annual training/meetings on health and safety? The key to having good health and safety practices is to develop a good health and safety culture by understanding what it is, how it works and what is required by legislation.

### REFERENCES

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