

A code of conduct for managing potential conflicts of interest

Role of RCVS Knowledge

RCVS Knowledge is an independent legal entity and the responsibilities of its Trustees are set out in its Memorandum and Articles of Association.

RCVS Knowledge's mission is to advance the quality of veterinary care for the benefit of animals, the public, and society.

RCVS Knowledge will do this by:

- championing the use of an evidence based approach to veterinary practice;
- supporting the development of a culture of continuous improvement;
- building skills and knowledge and
- opening up our world-leading knowledge, expertise and assets for a broader public benefit.

Why do conflicts of interest need to be managed?

In order to undertake its charitable purposes, it is incumbent on RCVS Knowledge Trustees to ensure that everybody elected or appointed to undertake activities on behalf of RCVS Knowledge must behave in a way that commands the respect and trust of the public and the profession. This must involve high standards.

The First Report of the Committee on Standards in Public Life (1995), known as the Nolan Committee, after its then Chair, set out clear expectations of those serving the public in whatever capacity:

Selflessness

- holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends;

Integrity

- holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties;

Objectivity

- holders of public office should be objective in carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for reward and benefits;

Accountability

- holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office;

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Openness

- holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands;

Honesty

- holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest; and

Leadership

- holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

There is both a legal and public relations imperative to look after the reputation of the profession, the RCVS and RCVS Knowledge by ensuring that business is conducted in accordance with proper procedures.

It should be borne in mind that perception may damage the reputation of an individual or an organisation irrespective of the truth of the situation. Avoiding situations that might be construed adversely is therefore advisable.

The veterinary profession

In a small profession, the potential for conflicts of interest is exacerbated. In order to utilise relevant knowledge and experience in decision making it is often necessary to involve those who have personal or professional interests. In making decisions in situations involving particular individuals (such as the award of research grants) it may be the case that those involved in the decisions know the individuals involved, directly or indirectly. In order to discharge its responsibilities RCVS Knowledge must take a pragmatic approach and take particular care in assessing the risks involved and in mitigating them, wherever possible. This Code is intended to assist in this by ensuring that all concerned are fully aware of any conflicts of interest and that those interests are managed appropriately and proportionately. This Code relates to the conduct of Members of the RCVS Knowledge Board in the way that the Code of Professional Conduct relates to the conduct of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

Who is the Code for?

The Code of Conduct should be made available to all those undertaking any governance or staff role for RCVS Knowledge, for members of any committees formed, or for those undertaking any of the activities for which the Board has decided that declarations of interest are required. The responsibilities set out in the Code should be accepted by all concerned.

Who needs to submit a declaration of interest?

Board and Staff members, and any persons undertaking similar roles on behalf of RCVS Knowledge, must submit a declaration of interest form (attached at Annex A).

When should declarations be made?

The form attached at Annex A should be completed on appointment to any RCVS Knowledge Board or Staff or related position. Wherever possible the form should be submitted electronically, on the RCVS Knowledge intranet or by e-mail to the Executive Director's office. Interests not recorded on the form, such as personal relationships or any change of circumstance, should be raised at any meeting or on-line discussion at which they may be relevant.

The form should subsequently be completed annually for the duration of the individual's appointment.

What interests need to be declared?

Any professional, business or personal interests which may impinge on the activities of RCVS Knowledge

If in doubt, disclose - or at least ask the Chair or Executive Director

NB Conflicts of interest are not just matters which you think may be a bar to objectivity, but should also include those which others, such as outsiders, may think give rise to bias. The ultimate test of when an interest needs to be declared is if it might be seen by an objective observer as something that might have influenced the decision arising from any discussion in which you participated.

The list may include current or previous employment or practice (covering at least the last 7 years); professional qualifications; memberships, fellowships and offices held in professional bodies; links with local, national and community organisations; consultancies and directorships; shareholdings, membership of the freemasons or a political party; directorships; appointments, e.g. as advisors to pet insurers; gifts and hospitality (which exceed the value of £150 in any year from a single source).

In appropriate cases it may be necessary to disclose religious beliefs or vegetarian preferences in so far as they may have a bearing on a particular discussion. These may be disclosed to the Chair at the relevant meeting.

Relevant interests relating to immediate family or people with whom you have a close association should be disclosed, in so far as they are known to you. Personal relationships would usually only be relevant in the context of a specific discussion and for that reason are not included in the attached form.

Personal or sensitive information, e.g. relating to connections with animal research institutions, need not be disclosed on the published form but should be made known internally, in writing, at least to the Chair or Executive Director.

What action to take when a conflict of interest arises

Where a conflict of interest has been identified it should be for the Chair to decide the extent to which the individual may participate in the meeting. Decisions will be informed by the circumstances of each case and the extent to which the decision renders RCVS Knowledge vulnerable to legal challenge or adverse PR. The range of options includes the following:

- i. standing down from the committee, sub-committee, etc
- ii. not attending a particular meeting
- iii. leaving the room for the duration of a particular item
- iv. staying in the meeting for the discussion but leaving the room when the decision is made or a vote taken
- v. staying in the meeting throughout to provide information and advice only
- vi. staying in the meeting throughout and participating fully.

“Err on the side of caution” is good advice in the absence of any other!

Who to consult in the event of uncertainty?

The Chair or Executive Director

Storage and Publication of declarations

The declaration of interest forms are stored electronically.

Declarations of interest for Board Members and Staff are published on the RCVS Knowledge website, and will be stored on the RCVS Knowledge intranet.

Keeping declarations up to date

Declarations of interest should be continuously kept up to date by reporting any changes when they arise, and normally within 28 days of any change in circumstances.

NB Although RCVS Knowledge Staff will undertake an annual request for declarations updates exercise, it will not be the responsibility of RCVS Knowledge staff to send more frequent reminders.

Declarations of interest will be the first substantive agenda item at relevant meetings. This should be taken as an opportunity to bring declarations generally up to date, not just in relation to interests which may be relevant to the discussion. These changes must be recorded in the minutes of the meeting and it would be helpful if the relevant Board or Staff Member could provide the Minute taker with a note of the declaration to ensure that it is accurately transcribed. Board members must take immediate steps to update the declaration forms they have previously submitted.

The electronic form, stored on the intranet, will dateline any changes to the document. It will therefore be possible to see when declarations have been added or deleted.

Enforcement

The system should be self monitoring, relying on peer pressure and the fact that declarations will be published – but Board Members will not be required to ‘blow the whistle’ on each other as this would be contrary to RCVS Knowledge’s “Collegiate” ethos.

Board membership may be suspended for breach of this Code of Conduct, and continued breach may result in a Board or Staff member being asked to resign.