

PROFESSIONALISM COMPETENCIES IN VETERINARY MEDICINE: A NECESSITY FOR THE FUTURE

Gheorghe Valentin GORAN¹

¹University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, 105 Splaiul Independentei, 5th District, 050097, Bucharest, Romania

Corresponding author email: gheorghe.goran@fmvb.usamv.ro

Abstract

The rapid evolution of veterinary medicine and the implementation of the 2023 Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) by EAEVE highlight the importance of integrating professionalism competencies into the education of future veterinarians. These competencies - effective communication, professional ethics, teamwork, and critical thinking - complement technical knowledge and are essential for delivering excellent veterinary education. Professionalism competencies are mandatory as part of the Day One Competences required of veterinarians, ensuring they are prepared to meet professional standards from the very beginning of their careers. They foster adaptable and resilient professionals capable of addressing complex challenges, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration, and adhering to the highest ethical standards. Furthermore, they enhance the quality of veterinary services and strengthen public trust while supporting holistic medical care. To meet the EAEVE 2023 standards, aligning the veterinary curriculum with these competencies is crucial. Investing in their development ensures a sustainable future for veterinary medicine, animal welfare, and the profession's long-term relevance. Continuous improvement of these skills throughout one's career is a professional and social responsibility, ensuring veterinarians remain competitive and effective in a dynamic field.

Key words: professionalism competencies, veterinary education, EAEVE standards, Day One Competences, interdisciplinary collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

Veterinary medicine is a complex and multifaceted profession that requires a comprehensive skill set to address the diverse challenges encountered in the care of animals. While technical proficiency in diagnosing, treating, and preventing diseases is crucial, effective veterinary practice also demands a range of interpersonal, ethical, and leadership skills. These competencies, often referred to collectively as professionalism competencies, are increasingly recognized as essential to the practice of veterinary medicine. In the past, professionalism competencies were often referred to by other terms, such as: soft skills, non-technical skills, transversal skills or competences, key skills, core skills or life skills, transversal competencies, employability skills (MENTORTEC et al., 2017).

These terms were used interchangeably to describe the set of competencies that are essential for effective professional behaviour but are not directly related to technical or academic knowledge.

Professionalism encompasses not just the clinical aspects of veterinary care but also the ethical standards, communication strategies, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and leadership abilities that contribute to the overall effectiveness of veterinary professionals.

The foundation of veterinary practice lies in technical expertise - veterinarians must be adept at applying scientific knowledge and clinical skills to diagnose and treat a wide variety of animal conditions. However, as the field continues to evolve, there is a growing recognition that professionalism competencies are equally important. These non-technical competencies are vital for ensuring that veterinarians provide not only effective but also compassionate and ethical care to animals. As such, they play a significant role in enhancing patient care, improving the veterinarian-client relationship, and maintaining public trust in the profession (Bok, 2015; Gordon et al., 2023).

Communication, for instance, is one of the most critical components of professionalism in veterinary medicine. Veterinarians must be able to explain complex medical information clearly

and empathetically to pet owners, facilitating informed decision-making and fostering positive relationships. Empathy and emotional intelligence also enable veterinarians to navigate emotionally charged situations, such as delivering bad news or dealing with the grief of pet owners. These skills help veterinarians create an environment where clients feel heard and supported, contributing to greater client satisfaction and improved adherence to treatment plans (Bok, 2015; Gordon et al., 2023).

Teamwork and leadership are also integral aspects of professionalism in veterinary medicine. Effective teamwork ensures that all members of the veterinary care team - veterinarians, veterinary technicians, nurses, and support staff - work collaboratively toward the common goal of delivering high-quality care. Leadership, on the other hand, is essential for guiding the team, managing complex cases, and making ethical decisions, particularly when working under pressure (Bok, 2015; Gordon et al., 2021).

Ethical decision-making is another critical area of professionalism. Veterinarians regularly face difficult ethical dilemmas, such as determining the best course of action in life-threatening situations, navigating the balance between animal welfare and client resources, or handling end-of-life care decisions. Professionalism competencies help veterinarians navigate these dilemmas while considering the welfare of animals, the needs of their clients, and the broader ethical guidelines of the veterinary profession (Epstein & Hundert, 2002).

This review examines the essential role of professionalism in veterinary medicine, highlighting its increasing importance in veterinary practice. It explores how professionalism competencies - such as communication, empathy, emotional intelligence, teamwork, and ethical decision-making - are integral to maintaining the integrity of the profession and ensuring optimal care for animals. Additionally, this review will address how veterinary education can integrate these competencies into its training programs to better prepare students for the complexities of modern and global veterinary practice. By understanding and emphasizing the importance of professionalism, veterinary schools can help

shape well-rounded professionals who can provide not only excellent medical care but also compassionate and ethically responsible service to both animals and their owners.

1. PROFESSIONALISM COMPETENCIES' IMPORTANCE IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

1.1 Defining Professionalism in Veterinary Medicine

Professionalism in veterinary medicine refers to a set of values, behaviours, and attitudes that veterinarians must consistently demonstrate in their practice. While technical skills and clinical expertise are undeniably critical to effective veterinary care, professionalism extends beyond these competencies and encompasses qualities such as integrity, empathy, responsibility, communication, and a commitment to lifelong learning (Epstein & Hundert, 2002). These qualities enable veterinarians to make informed decisions, demonstrate compassion, and collaborate effectively with others, thus promoting the overall well-being of both animals and their owners.

According to Epstein & Hundert (2002), professionalism involves the judicious application of knowledge, technical skills, and emotional intelligence to ensure the welfare of patients and the satisfaction of clients. It is a guiding principle for veterinarians' decision-making processes, clinical practices, and interpersonal interactions, ensuring that the care provided is not only clinically effective but also ethically sound. Professionalism encompasses both the technical aspects of veterinary medicine, such as diagnostic proficiency and treatment, and the non-technical aspects, such as the ethical, communicative, and emotional intelligence skills required to work effectively with animal owners and other healthcare professionals.

Veterinarians must demonstrate professionalism in all aspects of their work - not just in the clinic but also in their interactions with colleagues, clients, and the broader community. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS, 2012) emphasizes that professionalism should guide not only clinical decisions but also interpersonal interactions and ethical reasoning. This guidance ensures that trust in the veterinary profession is maintained and that veterinary

professionals serve as role models for ethical and responsible behaviour within their communities.

1.2. Impact on Stakeholders

The development of professionalism competencies significantly impacts multiple stakeholders involved in veterinary practice. These stakeholders include the patients (animals), their owners, veterinary professionals, and society as a whole. By examining the effects on each of these groups, it becomes clear that professionalism is fundamental to maintaining high standards in veterinary care and fostering public confidence in the veterinary profession.

1.2.1. Impact on Patients

Professionalism directly influences the quality of veterinary care. Veterinarians who demonstrate integrity and empathy are more likely to provide accurate diagnoses, implement effective treatment plans, and deliver appropriate follow-up care. Numerous studies have shown that professionalism in veterinary practice contributes to improved patient outcomes, reduced error rates, and fewer malpractice claims (Rose, 2021). For example, in high-pressure situations such as emergency care or decisions regarding euthanasia, professionalism enables veterinarians to make ethically sound decisions that prioritize patient welfare while minimizing stress for both the animal and the owner.

In emergencies or when dealing with difficult ethical decisions, professionalism ensures that veterinarians approach situations with a calm demeanour and make decisions that align with the ethical standards of the profession. By adhering to these principles, veterinarians ensure that animals are treated with the dignity and care they deserve, and that treatment plans are designed with both animal welfare and client interests in mind (Florian et al., 2024). This level of professionalism promotes better clinical outcomes and reduces the risk of errors or oversights in patient care.

1.2.2 Impact on Animal Owners

The relationship between veterinarians and animal owners is built on trust, effective communication, and empathy. Clear

communication ensures that pet owners understand their pets' diagnoses, the treatment options available, and the associated costs. This understanding increases the likelihood of pet owners adhering to treatment protocols, which, in turn, improves treatment outcomes and enhances client satisfaction (Shaw et al., 2016). In veterinary practice, professionalism means providing clients with information in a way that is both clear and sensitive to the emotional context of the situation, especially when discussing serious diagnoses or difficult decisions such as euthanasia (Pun, 2020).

Veterinarians who demonstrate empathy and emotional intelligence foster strong, collaborative relationships with pet owners. Empathy allows veterinarians to acknowledge the emotional stress and distress that clients often feel, providing them with the support and comfort needed during difficult times (Mustăţea et al., 2024). By managing these emotional interactions with professionalism, veterinarians not only improve the client experience but also encourage long-term relationships based on trust and mutual respect (Shaw et al., 2016).

A lack of professionalism, however, can lead to misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, and even legal disputes. Miscommunication, unaddressed concerns, or a lack of empathy can cause clients to feel dissatisfied with the care their animals receive, leading to negative outcomes for both the patient and the veterinary practice. On the other hand, demonstrating professionalism fosters a positive atmosphere that encourages compliance with treatment plans and results in higher client retention rates (Pun, 2020).

1.2.3. Impact on Society

Professionalism in veterinary medicine extends beyond the individual relationships between veterinarians and their patients or clients and plays a critical role in the wider society. Veterinarians contribute to public health by preventing the spread of zoonotic diseases, promoting food safety, and advocating for animal welfare. Their professional integrity ensures that veterinary practices adhere to ethical standards, which contributes to the overall well-being of society. For example, professionalism in the use of antibiotics is crucial for combating the global issue of antimicrobial resistance. Veterinarians who

adhere to ethical guidelines regarding the use of antibiotics in animals help prevent the overuse of these critical medications, thus protecting public health (Mossop, 2012; Mossop & Cobb, 2013).

Furthermore, professionalism enhances the reputation of the veterinary profession and helps to maintain public trust in its practitioners. Ethical decision-making, effective communication, and the consistent demonstration of professional behaviour reinforce the credibility of veterinary medicine in society. When the public trusts veterinarians to act in the best interest of both animals and humans, this trust supports the role of veterinarians in public health initiatives, such as disease prevention and control (Epstein & Hundert, 2002).

Veterinarians also contribute to global health efforts through One Health initiatives, which emphasize the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. By maintaining high ethical standards and engaging in effective collaboration with other healthcare providers, veterinarians play an essential role in addressing global challenges such as zoonotic disease outbreaks and environmental sustainability. The professionalism displayed by veterinarians in these efforts helps to safeguard both animal and human health, benefiting society as a whole (Mossop & Cobb, 2013).

Professionalism competencies in veterinary medicine are integral to the success of individual practitioners, the satisfaction of clients, and the well-being of patients. These competencies go beyond clinical expertise and encompass ethical decision-making, communication, empathy, and teamwork - skills that ensure veterinarians can navigate the complexities of modern practice. The impact of professionalism extends across various stakeholders: animals' benefit from better care and ethical treatment, owners experience improved satisfaction and trust, and society as a whole gain from the contribution of veterinarians to public health and animal welfare. Therefore, the development of professionalism in veterinary education is essential for preparing veterinarians to meet the demands of the profession and to uphold the integrity and reputation of the veterinary field.

2. CORE PROFESSIONALISM COMPETENCIES IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

Professionalism in veterinary medicine encompasses both technical (hard) and non-technical (soft) competencies. While technical skills are essential to effective veterinary practice, non-technical competencies are equally crucial for providing holistic care and fostering strong relationships with patients, clients, colleagues, and authorities. These non-technical competencies enable veterinarians to navigate the emotional, ethical, and interpersonal challenges inherent in the profession. The following core professionalism competencies are fundamental for veterinarians to ensure that they are not only skilled clinicians but also compassionate, ethical, and collaborative professionals.

2.1. Communication Skills

Communication is one of the most critical competencies for veterinarians, as it directly impacts the quality of care provided to both patients and clients. Effective communication encompasses the ability to convey complex medical information in a manner that is clear, concise, and understandable to clients. Veterinarians must be able to explain diagnoses, treatment options, and prognoses in a way that clients can easily grasp, which ultimately promotes informed decision-making and adherence to treatment protocols (Shaw et al., 2016).

Communication also plays a vital role in managing difficult conversations, such as explaining terminal diagnoses or recommending euthanasia. It is important that veterinarians communicate with sensitivity and empathy in these emotionally charged situations, ensuring that clients feel supported and understood. Effective communication skills are not limited to interactions with clients; they are also crucial for fostering collaboration within the veterinary team. Clear and open communication between colleagues, technicians, and support staff ensures that care is coordinated, patient outcomes are optimized, and misunderstandings are minimized (Armitage-Chan, 2020; McMurray & Boysen, 2017). Communication with authorities requires more than just

empathy; it involves clear, precise, and efficient language that is accessible to all parties, especially when dealing with non-specialist authorities. This ensures that the information is understood correctly, meets the specific requirements of the authorities, and is conveyed with respect, ultimately fostering effective collaboration and decision-making (WHO, 2015).

In addition to verbal communication, non-verbal cues such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions also play an essential role in conveying empathy and professionalism. Veterinary schools must integrate communication training into their curricula to ensure that students are equipped to handle a wide range of communicative challenges in practice (EAEVE, 2023; Militaru et al., 2020; van Gelderen Mabin & Taylor, 2023).

2.2. Empathy and Emotional Intelligence

Empathy and emotional intelligence are key components of professionalism in numerous professions, including veterinary medicine. Empathy involves the ability to understand and share the feelings of others, which is essential for building trust with clients and creating a compassionate environment for both animals and their owners. Veterinarians often work with clients in emotionally difficult situations, such as dealing with sick or injured pets, and empathy allows them to offer support while maintaining professionalism (Bell, 2024; Stoewen, 2024).

Emotional intelligence refers to the ability to recognize, understand, and manage one's own emotions as well as the emotions of others. It involves skills such as emotional awareness, self-regulation, motivation, and social skills, all of which are necessary for managing challenging interactions with clients and colleagues. For example, a veterinarian with high emotional intelligence is better able to remain calm and composed in stressful situations, such as performing emergency surgeries or managing difficult client expectations. Additionally, emotional intelligence is critical for maintaining positive working relationships within the veterinary team, as it helps individuals navigate conflicts, manage stress, and provide constructive feedback (Bell, 2024; Laura et al., 2024).

Empathy and emotional intelligence are particularly important in fostering a positive work environment. A veterinarian who demonstrates empathy not only helps clients feel supported but also creates a workplace culture where team members feel valued and understood. The ability to handle difficult emotional situations with professionalism contributes to a healthy and productive work atmosphere, which ultimately benefits both patients and clients.

2.3. Ethical Decision-Making

Ethical decision-making is another cornerstone of professionalism in veterinary medicine. Veterinarians frequently encounter ethical dilemmas, such as whether to recommend euthanasia for a terminally ill animal or how to balance the cost of treatment with the client's financial resources. Ethical decision-making involves carefully weighing the welfare of the animal, the needs and wishes of the client, and the ethical guidelines of the profession (Epstein & Hundert, 2002).

Veterinarians must navigate these complex decisions while maintaining a commitment to animal welfare and ensuring that they act in the best interest of their patients. They must also consider the legal and moral implications of their decisions, taking into account the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. For example, in situations where an animal's prognosis is poor, a veterinarian must decide whether to pursue aggressive treatment or to recommend euthanasia, all while considering the animal's quality of life, the emotional impact on the owner, and the resources available (Mullan & Main, 2001).

Veterinary schools must teach students how to approach ethical dilemmas in a structured and thoughtful way. This includes exposing students to ethical frameworks, case-based learning, and discussions about the moral implications of veterinary practice. Additionally, professional codes of ethics, such as those provided by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), offer guidelines for navigating ethical challenges and ensuring that decisions align with the profession's ethical standards (AVMA, 2025b; RCVS, 2012).

2.4. Teamwork and Leadership

Veterinary practice is inherently collaborative, with veterinarians frequently working alongside technicians, nurses, office staff, and other healthcare professionals. Effective teamwork is essential to ensure that all members of the veterinary team contribute to patient care and that the care provided is coordinated and efficient. Veterinarians must possess the ability to work well within teams, delegating tasks appropriately, providing support, and fostering a collaborative work environment (Mellanby et al., 2011; Mills, 2019).

In addition to teamwork, leadership skills are crucial for veterinarians who are responsible for managing a clinic or leading a team of veterinary professionals. Veterinarians must be able to guide their teams through complex medical cases, inspire trust and respect, and create a positive workplace culture. Leadership involves the ability to make informed decisions, manage conflicts, and provide direction and motivation to colleagues (Mills, 2019; Nicol, 2024). Leadership is particularly important in emergency situations, where quick decision-making and clear communication are necessary to ensure optimal patient outcomes.

Veterinary schools should provide students with opportunities to develop both teamwork and leadership skills. This can be achieved through group projects, clinical rotations that involve multidisciplinary teams, and mentorship programs that allow students to observe and practice leadership within the veterinary setting. Effective leadership also involves the ability to mentor junior colleagues, fostering professional development and ensuring that team members have the support they need to excel.

The core professionalism competencies in veterinary medicine - communication skills, empathy and emotional intelligence, ethical decision-making, and teamwork and leadership - are essential for ensuring that veterinarians are not only technically proficient but also capable of navigating the interpersonal, emotional, and ethical challenges that arise in practice. These competencies are vital for fostering trust with clients, maintaining a positive work environment, and ensuring that the welfare of animals remains the central focus of veterinary care. Veterinary education must integrate these

competencies into the curriculum through case-based learning, mentorship programs, and leadership training, ensuring that students are fully equipped to meet the demands of the profession.

3. STRATEGIES FOR INTEGRATING PROFESSIONALISM INTO VETERINARY EDUCATION

Integrating professionalism into veterinary education is essential to ensure that students graduate with the necessary competencies to handle the challenges of the veterinary profession. Professionalism is not only about technical skills; it encompasses the ability to communicate effectively, make ethical decisions, work collaboratively in teams, and uphold high ethical standards. As such, veterinary education programs must prioritize the development of professionalism through various teaching strategies and assessment methods. Below, we explore several key strategies for integrating professionalism into veterinary curricula.

3.1. Case-Based Learning

Case-based learning is an educational approach that involves students working through real-world scenarios to develop problem-solving skills and apply theoretical knowledge to practical situations. This method is particularly valuable in teaching professionalism because it encourages students to consider the ethical, legal, and interpersonal dimensions of veterinary practice. By using real or simulated case studies, students can explore the complexities of clinical decision-making, client communication, and teamwork, all while considering the impact of their decisions on patients, clients, and society.

Through case-based learning, students are prompted to reflect on the moral and ethical issues inherent in veterinary practice. For example, a case might present a difficult decision regarding euthanasia, where students are required to navigate the emotional and ethical challenges associated with such decisions, all while adhering to professional standards and communicating effectively with clients. This approach fosters critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and the development of

professional behaviour, as students learn to balance technical expertise with compassion and integrity (Gates et al., 2021).

Studies have shown that case-based learning enhances students' ability to analyse complex issues and consider multiple perspectives, which is vital in veterinary medicine, where professionals often face ethical dilemmas and multifaceted challenges (Kaufman & Mann, 2010). Furthermore, case-based learning promotes the development of communication skills, as students must articulate their reasoning, justify their decisions, and collaborate with others in resolving the case.

3.2. Mentorship Programs

Mentorship is a critical strategy for the development of professionalism in veterinary students. By pairing students with experienced veterinarians, mentorship programs provide opportunities for role modelling and professional identity formation. Mentors serve as guides, offering valuable insights into the realities of veterinary practice, including how to navigate ethical challenges, communicate effectively with clients, and manage stress and burnout.

Mentorship is particularly effective in developing professionalism competencies because it allows students to observe and engage with professionals who exemplify the standards of behaviour and ethics they are expected to uphold. Mentors provide personalized feedback and guidance, helping students reflect on their own practice and identify areas for improvement. In addition to technical expertise, mentors can offer advice on handling difficult client interactions, managing conflicts, and maintaining a professional demeanour in challenging situations (Eby et al., 2008). Through these interactions, students develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a professional and how to navigate the complexities of veterinary practice.

Furthermore, mentorship programs allow students to explore the human aspects of veterinary care, including emotional intelligence and empathy, which are essential for building strong relationships with clients and colleagues. By witnessing the behaviour of professional role models, students learn not only clinical skills but

also how to embody professionalism in their daily practice (Gates et al., 2021).

3.3. Simulation-Based Training

Simulation-based training is another effective strategy for integrating professionalism into veterinary education. This approach involves role-playing exercises and simulated scenarios where students practice their communication, ethical decision-making, and teamwork skills in a controlled, supportive environment. Simulation-based training offers a safe space for students to experience real-world situations without the risks associated with live practice.

For example, veterinary students can engage in role-playing exercises where they must communicate with clients about difficult decisions, such as treatment options for terminally ill animals or dealing with emotional owners after an accident. These exercises allow students to practice empathy, active listening, and clear communication, while also considering the ethical implications of their decisions (Issenberg et al., 2005). Simulation-based training can also be used to teach conflict resolution and teamwork skills, helping students work collaboratively in high-pressure situations, such as during emergency care.

The use of simulation enhances students' preparedness for real-world practice by reinforcing professionalism in situations that may be emotionally challenging or morally complex. By allowing students to repeatedly practice these skills in a low-risk environment, simulation-based training builds confidence, reduces anxiety, and enhances their ability to handle such situations when they arise in real practice (Kaufman & Mann, 2010).

Moreover, simulation exercises provide an opportunity for feedback, allowing students to assess their communication and decision-making skills and identify areas for improvement. These exercises also help instructors assess professionalism competencies in a structured and standardized way, offering a consistent evaluation framework for all students (Gates et al., 2021).

3.4. Structured Assessments

Structured assessments are a critical tool for evaluating professionalism competencies in veterinary education. Unlike technical

knowledge, which can be assessed through exams and clinical skills evaluations, professionalism competencies require a more nuanced approach to assessment. Tools such as Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) and multi-source feedback mechanisms have been widely adopted to provide structured evaluations of students' professionalism.

Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs): OSCEs are a well-established method for assessing clinical skills, but they can also be adapted to assess professionalism. In OSCEs, students rotate through a series of stations where they must demonstrate their abilities in various clinical scenarios, including those that require professional behavior such as communicating with clients or handling ethical dilemmas. Each station is designed to evaluate specific competencies, such as communication, decision-making, and emotional intelligence, allowing for a comprehensive assessment of professionalism in practice. OSCEs offer a standardized approach to evaluating professionalism, ensuring that all students are assessed on the same criteria, regardless of their clinical rotations or instructors (Norcini & Burch, 2007).

Multi-Source Feedback: Multi-source feedback, also known as 360-degree feedback, is another effective assessment tool. It involves gathering feedback from multiple sources – such as peers, mentors, faculty, and clients – regarding a student's professionalism. This approach provides a more holistic view of a student's professional behaviour, capturing different perspectives and providing valuable insights into areas for improvement. Multi-source feedback is particularly effective in assessing interpersonal competencies like communication and teamwork, which may not be adequately captured through traditional exams or OSCEs (Eby et al., 2008).

These structured assessments provide students with clear, actionable feedback on their professionalism competencies and allow educators to identify students who may need additional support or guidance. By using consistent, evidence-based assessment tools, veterinary schools can ensure that professionalism is being effectively taught and evaluated, and that students are developing the

necessary skills to be successful in their future careers.

Integrating professionalism into veterinary education is a multifaceted process that requires the use of diverse strategies to ensure that students develop the full range of competencies needed for effective practice. Case-based learning, mentorship programs, simulation-based training, and structured assessments all contribute to fostering professionalism in veterinary students. These strategies not only teach technical skills but also promote critical thinking, ethical decision-making, and emotional intelligence, which are essential for navigating the complexities of veterinary practice (Kleinsorgen et al., 2021; MENTORTEC et al., 2017).

As veterinary education continues to evolve, it is crucial that professionalism remains a central component of the curriculum. By adopting innovative teaching strategies and assessment tools, veterinary schools can better prepare students to meet the ethical, interpersonal, and technical challenges of modern practice (EAEVE, 2023).

4. CHALLENGES IN INTEGRATING PROFESSIONALISM INTO VETERINARY CURRICULA

Integrating professionalism into veterinary curricula presents multiple challenges that can hinder the effective development of professionalism competencies in veterinary students. While technical competencies such as diagnostic skills, medical knowledge, and surgical techniques can be clearly defined, assessed, and integrated into educational programs, professionalism competencies present unique difficulties due to their subjective nature. These challenges range from a lack of consensus on how professionalism should be defined and measured to logistical constraints, such as the dense nature of veterinary curricula and the resources required to deliver comprehensive professionalism education. Addressing these challenges is crucial to ensuring that future veterinarians possess both the technical and interpersonal skills necessary to meet the complex demands of modern practice.

4.1 Lack of Consensus on What Constitutes Professionalism

One of the fundamental challenges in integrating professionalism into veterinary education is the lack of a universally accepted definition of professionalism. Professionalism encompasses a broad range of attributes, including ethical decision-making, communication skills, emotional intelligence, empathy, teamwork, and cultural sensitivity. However, what exactly constitutes professionalism can vary depending on cultural context, institutional priorities, and personal perspectives. This lack of consensus complicates the process of designing curricula that adequately address all facets of professionalism, and it makes it difficult for accreditation bodies, educators, and students to agree on the core competencies that should be developed (Vreuls et al., 2022).

Unlike technical competencies, which can be evaluated through concrete assessments such as exams, practical demonstrations, and clinical performance, professionalism is inherently more subjective. Attributes such as empathy, communication, and ethical decision-making are not easily quantifiable. While behavioural assessments, peer reviews, and self-reflection exercises are often used to gauge professionalism, these methods are less standardized and can vary widely in their effectiveness (Eby et al., 2008). The subjective nature of professionalism makes it harder to establish clear benchmarks for student progress and success, posing a significant barrier to consistent integration into veterinary curricula.

4.2. Assessment Challenges

In addition to difficulties in defining professionalism, assessing these competencies presents a considerable challenge. Traditional forms of assessment, such as written exams and clinical skills evaluations, are designed to measure technical knowledge and clinical abilities. However, professionalism competencies cannot be easily measured with objective tests. Some schools have adopted tools such as Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs), multi-source feedback, and portfolios to assess professionalism. These tools, while effective, still rely heavily on subjective interpretation and can be influenced by factors such as individual biases, varying

levels of student engagement, and inconsistent feedback from assessors (Gordon et al., 2023). Moreover, the effectiveness of these assessment tools can vary significantly across different educational contexts. For example, in large veterinary schools, OSCEs may be logistically challenging and resource-intensive to implement. Furthermore, there is no universally agreed-upon methodology for assessing professionalism across veterinary programs globally. While some institutions may incorporate structured assessments, others may rely on informal observations, making it difficult to ensure consistency and comparability across educational systems (Armitage-Chan & Whiting, 2016).

4.3. Resource Constraints

Another significant barrier to integrating professionalism into veterinary curricula is the lack of resources. Developing and implementing a comprehensive professionalism curriculum requires investment in teaching materials, faculty development, and assessment tools. Veterinary schools with limited funding or staff may struggle to integrate these elements into their existing programs. Moreover, faculty members may not always possess the necessary expertise in teaching and assessing professionalism, particularly in areas such as emotional intelligence or cultural competence. While many veterinary faculty members are experts in clinical and technical areas, they may not have received formal training in pedagogy or the teaching of soft skills, which makes it more difficult to effectively integrate professionalism into their courses (Gates et al., 2021).

Additionally, the relatively high cost and time investment associated with the development and delivery of professionalism education can deter veterinary schools from prioritizing it. For example, mentorship programs, which are an effective way to instil professionalism in students, require faculty time and commitment, making them resource-intensive (Niehoff et al., 2005). Schools that are already facing challenges in meeting the demands of their clinical and technical curricula may find it difficult to allocate sufficient time and resources to the teaching of professionalism.

4.4. Balancing Technical Training and Professionalism

Veterinary curricula are often densely packed with technical subjects, from anatomy and pharmacology to clinical skills training. As a result, finding space for the development of professionalism competencies within an already crowded curriculum can be challenging. In many veterinary schools, the primary focus remains on technical training, which is essential for ensuring that students are proficient in diagnosing and treating animal diseases. While these technical skills are critical, they are insufficient by themselves for the well-rounded veterinarian.

Professionalism competencies are often seen as secondary or supplementary to technical education, and there may be a perception that focusing too much on professionalism detracts from the essential clinical training. However, this view can undermine the importance of developing interpersonal skills, ethical reasoning, and communication abilities. In order to meet the expectations of the veterinary profession and the broader society, veterinary educators must find a way to balance the teaching of technical skills with the cultivation of professionalism competencies (Gordon et al., 2021). This requires innovative curriculum design that integrates professionalism into both clinical and preclinical training, ensuring that it is taught not only as a stand-alone subject but also in the context of real-world veterinary practice.

4.5. Time Constraints and Student Readiness

Time constraints represent another challenge in the integration of professionalism into veterinary curricula. Veterinary students often face intense workloads, with long hours spent on clinical rotations, labs, and exams. The demands of the program may leave little time for students to reflect on or engage with professionalism in a meaningful way. While many veterinary schools offer elective courses in professionalism or related topics, these may be overlooked or deprioritized by students who feel they must focus on core technical subjects to meet academic requirements and prepare for exams (EAEVE, 2023; Pohl et al., 2021).

Moreover, students may not always be ready to engage with professionalism competencies,

particularly if they view these skills as less important than technical knowledge. Early in their education, students may not fully appreciate the significance of professionalism, and they may not recognize how these skills will impact their careers. As a result, students may be less motivated to develop these competencies unless they are convinced of their importance and relevance to their future practice (Kaufman & Mann, 2010).

The integration of professionalism into veterinary curricula presents a range of challenges, from the lack of consensus on its definition and assessment to the constraints of time, resources, and curriculum design. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. By refining the assessment tools used to evaluate professionalism, investing in faculty development, and designing curricula that integrate professionalism into all aspects of veterinary training, veterinary schools can overcome these barriers. It is essential that professionalism education becomes an integral part of veterinary training to ensure that future veterinarians are equipped with the full spectrum of skills - technical, ethical, and interpersonal - needed for effective practice (EAEVE, 2023; Kleinsorgen et al., 2021).

5. THE ROLE OF ACCREDITATION BODIES IN PROMOTING PROFESSIONALISM

Accreditation bodies are central to ensuring that veterinary education programs meet specific standards of excellence, not only in technical education but also in the integration of professionalism competencies. Organizations like the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) provide accreditation guidelines that emphasize the importance of professionalism as a core component of veterinary curricula (AVMA, 2021; EAEVE, 2023). These bodies set the expectations for veterinary schools worldwide, ensuring that their graduates are well-rounded professionals capable of addressing the ethical, interpersonal, and technical challenges they will face in practice.

5.1. Accreditation as a Framework for Professionalism

Accreditation serves as a vital mechanism for ensuring that veterinary programs provide high-quality education, and its role extends beyond technical skills. Both the EAEVE and AVMA require that veterinary programs include professionalism competencies as part of their curriculum in order to achieve accreditation. The inclusion of these competencies reflects the recognition that veterinarians must possess not only strong technical skills but also the ethical, deontological, and interpersonal qualities necessary for success in the profession. By mandating professionalism as part of their accreditation criteria, these organizations underscore the importance of ethical conduct, communication, and teamwork in veterinary practice (AVMA, 2021; EAEVE, 2023).

For example, EAEVE's accreditation standards outline that veterinary programs must integrate professionalism competencies throughout the curriculum, including aspects such as communication, teamwork, ethical reasoning, and patient advocacy. These competencies are assessed through both direct observation in clinical settings and formal examinations (EAEVE, 2023). The AVMA similarly emphasizes the development of core professional attributes such as empathy, ethical decision-making, and emotional intelligence in their accreditation standards for veterinary schools in the United States (AVMA, 2021).

5.2. Ensuring Competency-Based Education and Continuous Improvement

Accreditation bodies not only provide a framework for initial education but also promote a continuous cycle of improvement within veterinary schools. By setting clear expectations for professionalism, accreditation bodies encourage schools to regularly evaluate and update their curricula to align with evolving standards and societal needs (EAEVE, 2023; Mossop & Cobb, 2013). This includes the integration of new methodologies in teaching and assessment, such as the use of simulation-based learning, reflective practice, and mentorship programs that foster the development of professionalism in students (Armitage-Chan & Whiting, 2016).

One of the key aspects of the accreditation process is the emphasis on competency-based education. This approach ensures that graduates are not only exposed to theoretical knowledge but also to practical experiences where they can demonstrate their professionalism competencies. Accreditation bodies require veterinary schools to implement systematic assessment processes, such as Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCEs) and multi-source feedback, to evaluate the professionalism of students in real-world settings (Eby et al., 2008; Gordon et al., 2023). These assessments measure students' abilities in areas such as patient communication, ethical decision-making, and teamwork, which are essential to their future practice as veterinarians.

5.3. Aligning with International Standards and Best Practices

The role of accreditation bodies extends to ensuring that veterinary education aligns with global standards and best practices. For instance, the EAEVE collaborates with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) to ensure that veterinary education programs meet international expectations for competency and professionalism. This collaboration ensures that veterinary professionals are equipped to contribute to global health issues, including zoonotic disease control, food security, and animal welfare (EAEVE, 2023).

The AVMA also participates in international discussions on veterinary education, influencing global standards through its involvement in international veterinary organizations such as the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) and the World Veterinary Association (WVA). Through these partnerships, the AVMA helps shape a shared understanding of what constitutes professionalism in veterinary medicine, facilitating the exchange of best practices and fostering mutual recognition of veterinary qualifications (AVMA, 2021).

5.4. Fostering Public Trust and Professional Integrity

One of the primary goals of accreditation is to uphold the reputation of the veterinary profession by ensuring that graduates possess the necessary competencies to meet the expectations of society. Professionalism, in this

context, is critical to maintaining public trust in veterinary services. Accreditation bodies hold veterinary schools accountable for producing graduates who not only excel in technical skills but also act with integrity, compassion, and ethical responsibility in their daily practice.

Professionalism competencies, such as the ability to communicate effectively with clients, demonstrate empathy, and make ethical decisions, are crucial for fostering trust and building strong relationships between veterinarians and their clients. For example, the AVMA's guidelines on professionalism stress the importance of veterinarians being advocates for animal welfare, acting in the best interest of their patients, and engaging in transparent communication with clients (AVMA, 2021). Accreditation bodies thus serve as gatekeepers, ensuring that veterinarians adhere to high standards of professionalism that benefit both animals and society.

5.5. Impact of Accreditation on Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Approaches

Accreditation bodies influence the design and delivery of veterinary curricula by ensuring that professionalism is not relegated to isolated courses but is woven throughout the educational experience. Both the AVMA and EAEVE advocate for the integration of professionalism training into all aspects of the veterinary curriculum, from preclinical courses to clinical rotations. This approach ensures that students develop professionalism competencies gradually and continuously throughout their training, rather than in a piecemeal fashion.

Moreover, accreditation encourages veterinary schools to adopt a range of pedagogical methods to teach professionalism. These include experiential learning, where students engage in real-world scenarios, as well as reflective practice, which helps students critically evaluate their own professional behaviour and development. Research has shown that these methods are effective in fostering the development of professionalism competencies in veterinary students, preparing them to handle the complexities and challenges of veterinary practice (Ho & Lau, 2025).

5.6. Challenges in Implementing Professionalism Standards

While accreditation bodies have made significant strides in promoting professionalism, challenges remain in implementing these

standards across veterinary education programs. One challenge is the variability in the resources and commitment of veterinary schools to meet these standards. Schools with fewer resources may struggle to implement innovative teaching methods, such as simulation-based learning or mentorship programs, which are critical for teaching professionalism.

Furthermore, there is ongoing debate about the best ways to assess professionalism competencies. While tools like OSCEs and multi-source feedback are widely used, there is no universal agreement on the most effective methods for evaluating attributes like empathy, emotional intelligence, and ethical decision-making. As a result, accreditation bodies must continue to refine their assessment methods to ensure that professionalism is accurately measured and adequately taught (AVMA, 2025a; Kareskoski, 2023).

Accreditation bodies such as the EAEVE and AVMA play a pivotal role in shaping the future of veterinary medicine by ensuring that professionalism competencies are embedded in veterinary education (AVMA, 2021; EAEVE, 2023). Through their rigorous accreditation standards, these organizations help to ensure that veterinary schools produce graduates who are not only technically competent but also ethically responsible, empathetic, and capable of working effectively within interdisciplinary teams. By continuously evolving accreditation standards and promoting best practices in education, these bodies contribute to the development of a highly skilled, professional, and ethical veterinary workforce that can meet the complex challenges of modern practice.

CONCLUSIONS

Professionalism competencies are not merely supplementary to veterinary training—they are fundamental to the success and credibility of the profession. While technical knowledge remains the foundation of veterinary medicine, communication, ethical reasoning, empathy, and teamwork are equally crucial in delivering high-quality patient care and maintaining trust with clients and society.

Veterinary education must emphasize the continuous development of professionalism by integrating real-world case studies, mentorship

programs, and structured assessments into curricula. By prioritizing professionalism alongside clinical expertise, veterinary schools can develop diverse systems to ensure that students receive comprehensive training in these competencies. Emphasis should also be placed on the continuous professional development of faculty members to enhance their ability to teach soft skills effectively, fostering the necessary environment for students to navigate ethical dilemmas, improve client relationships, and collaborate within multidisciplinary teams. Future research should focus on identifying best practices for assessing professionalism in veterinary students and examining its long-term impact on clinical effectiveness, veterinarian well-being, and client satisfaction. Additionally, accreditation bodies such as EAEVE and AVMA must continue to refine their standards, ensuring that professionalism remains a core component of veterinary education worldwide. By embedding professionalism competencies into veterinary training, the profession will continue to evolve, ensuring that veterinarians remain not only skilled veterinarians but also ethical, compassionate, and respected members of the healthcare community.

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