



## Preserving the VCPR in a Digital Age

*what to know about  
veterinary telemedicine*

THE TRADITIONAL VETERINARIAN-CLIENT-PATIENT RELATIONSHIP (VCPR) has long been the cornerstone of veterinary medicine. More than a professional courtesy, it is a legally and ethically defined relationship requiring a veterinarian to have firsthand knowledge of an animal through an in-person exam before diagnosing, prescribing, or treating. As telemedicine becomes increasingly common, however, the clinic-centered VCPR is evolving into a more hybrid model, raising questions about whether its fundamental framework is being preserved.

### The Benefits of Telehealth

Telehealth offers clear benefits when used appropriately. Teleadvice can provide pet owners with basic information and preventive-care education, while teletriage can help determine whether an animal needs veterinary attention and how urgently. Once a VCPR has been established, telemedicine can improve continuity of care through follow-up consultations, treatment monitoring, client communication, and compliance support. These tools serve to strengthen relationships between veterinarians and clients while improving practice efficiency.

### Why the In-Person Exam Matters

Federal law requires an in-person examination or premises visit to establish the VCPR, and most states have adopted similar requirements. During an in-person visit, veterinarians rely on sight, sound, touch, smell, diagnostic testing, and specialized instruments to gather critical information about the patient. They also assess the owner's relationship with the patient and ability to provide care. The result is a fully informed diagnosis and targeted treatment plan that sets the patient, client, and veterinarian on a path toward the best achievable outcomes.

### Risks of a Virtual-Only VCPR

Eliminating the in-person visit as a requirement poses significant risks, including:

- Delays in critical diagnoses
- Failure to identify co-existing conditions
- Unnecessary / inappropriate prescribing
- Incomplete or inaccurate care recommendations
- Dangerous drug interactions

Further compounding the problem is the fact that animals cannot describe their symptoms and often instinctively conceal illness or injury. Veterinarians must therefore rely heavily on subtle behavioral cues and hands-on examinations to establish the most accurate and comprehensive clinical picture.

### Public Health and Regulatory Concerns

The implications of veterinary telemedicine extend beyond patient care. Veterinary medicine carries important public health responsibilities, including identifying zoonotic diseases and monitoring highly consequential livestock diseases. Delayed or inaccurate diagnoses can have serious health and economic impacts, which is why regulators have maintained the requirement that a VCPR be established through an in-person examination.

### The Access-to-Care Debate

Proponents of telemedicine cite improved access to veterinary services, particularly in rural and underserved areas. Critics, however, argue that telemedicine is not a complete solution because animals lacking regular veterinary care often present with conditions that ultimately require an in-person examination. In such cases, telemedicine may simply add the cost of an additional visit. Moreover, areas with limited veterinary access often lack reliable internet service, making telemedicine impractical.

### An Evolving Relationship

The future of veterinary medicine is not a choice between technology and tradition. Telehealth offers clear benefits like improved access, communication, and continuity of care, but it should complement, not replace, the VCPR that begins with an in-person examination. As telemedicine continues to evolve, veterinarians must also address the legal and professional risks associated with remote care. Virtual visits should include appropriate disclaimers and liability provisions so clients understand the limitations of remote care and clinics are better protected against malpractice claims arising from the absence of a hands-on physical examination. ■

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