

# Getting the best out of your rural veterinary technician

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## Introduction

If you are considering employing a Rural Veterinary Technician (RVT) in your Veterinary practice I hope this article will help you see the benefits of having RVTs as part of your service team and avoid some potential issues.

## Background

I have been a RVT at Clutha Vets for 10 years and was one of the first RVTs to graduate from the Otago Polytechnic course. Since that time, the number of RVTs has increased to five.

The concept of a RVT is to have a trained person to assist veterinarians in rural practice. How this new role is introduced into your practice will determine how well it works.

## Firstly, address the potential Issues

Introducing a new staff role into a practice is a really 'change management' process.

It is understandable that some people will feel threatened by the role and have real concerns about employing a RVT.

These concerns include:

- Reduction in client contact by the veterinarian.
- Reduction in veterinarian numbers as a RVT could be employed if a veterinarian cannot be recruited into a vacant position.
- More frequent on-call if veterinarian numbers decrease.
- Veterinarian is left with difficult work as the RVT is used to do the easy repetitive work.
- Devaluing of the veterinarian role if RVT is seen to be doing work previously undertaken by a veterinarian.
- Loss of work if farmers use lay-people instead of veterinarians for some services.
- RVT taking over tasks done by other staff at present.
- RVTs being mistaken for veterinarians.

Most if not all of these issues can be pre-empted with a little planning. Practice Principals need to consider what things a RVT could do to benefit their practice and clients. They also need to have clear idea of what the position is, including **clear boundaries** around what is outside the RVT role. The draft Code of Conduct for RVTs is an essential document to review in relation to this.

Unless issues are acknowledged, discussed and sorted out at the start, you may find that the process of employing and using a RVT is subtly sabotaged. Involving all staff in brainstorming what the RVT could do, will go a long

way to addressing concerns.

## **Employ the right person for your clinic**

As with any position, it is very important to employ a person who will fit well with your business needs and culture. Do they have the skills and personality to fit with your team? Do they have the physical attributes for long days and repetitive work? Do they have the initiative to look for things to do in quiet times without constant supervision? Consider all of these when you are interviewing for your RVT position.

Each person will have differing practical skills depending on their rural animal experience. Many of the graduates from the RVT courses are mature students from diverse backgrounds who will bring a variety of additional skills with them. It is important to identify these skills and develop a training plan to maximise the use of that person. Good on the job training is essential, as is a process to assess competency in any new task.

## **RVT supervisor and mentor**

There needs to be one person responsible for organisation of the RVT's work day initially and to act as a mentor. Without this, the RVT will be left to find things to do to occupy their time in the first few months, and they and the practice will become disillusioned with the role.

## **Integration into the wider practice**

To begin with, it is useful to roster the RVT with the veterinarians in the practice on the out calls. This allows veterinarians to get to know capabilities of RVT and how they can use them to enhance their service to clients. The RVT can also be introduced to clients and brief discussion on their role is helpful.

The RVT and their role can also be introduced through the practice newsletter. This helps to avoid any confusion between the veterinarian and the RVT and those 'while you're here' requests that are outside the role of an RVT. Using different coloured uniforms, overalls and name/identification badges will help to differentiate between veterinarians and RVTs.

## **Duties for your RVT**

Our duties are many and varied, but each clinic will differ in how they use their RVT. At our clinic we assist veterinarians with lame cows, de-velvetting, metrichcking, non-cycling cows, mastitis investigations, heifer teat sealing, calvings, LA surgery, post mortems, calf disbudding and FECR.

Our solo work includes managing the Leptospirosis vaccination programme, vaccinations, condition scoring, calf weighing, blood sampling, dry cow treatment, veterinarian car stock take, FEC, growth hormone implants, cleaning and maintaining equipment, fixing things, link between clinics, stock transfer between clinics and being the general Gofer.

We set up gear and clean up so veterinarians can talk to clients, do things which are no-one else wants to do, act as PA to the veterinarians, assist with developing services, undertake trial work, drive for the veterinarians and record outcall information for billing.

We schedule work to ensure things are done on time (e.g. BVD and Lepto vaccinations, BVD blood testing, trace element blood testing and InCalf consults). In short, we help to organise the veterinarians.

RVTs perform tasks which could generally be regarded as onerous and mundane (particularly by senior veterinarians). Unlike veterinary nurses (who also assist veterinarians), RVTs are proactive in generating work and thus income. RVTs should not be underestimated in the value they can bring to a practice.

If some of these things above are not being done in your clinic now, a RVT has a role to play and will help generate income for your business.

## Remuneration

An important issue is the pay for the RVT and ability to progress on a salary scale. Once a RVT has become a useful and productive member of the team, you will not want to lose them to another employer offering better remuneration. A good RVT will generate income for the practice, assist in extending the range of services your clinic offers and enhance relations with clients; you will want to keep them!

## Summary

A RVT has a role to play in the veterinary clinic team and that role will vary according to the needs of each clinic.

Work out what you want them to do and plan for their supervision and training. Careful integration of the new role into practice will eliminate potential issues.

Employ the right person to fit your clinic needs and culture, and your business will reap the service and financial benefits of having RVTs as part of team.

