

A Dual Passion: Veterinary Medicine & Law

An Interview with Dr. Charlotte Lacroix



The legal aspect of any business can be daunting, and veterinary medicine certainly has its challenges. Charlotte Lacroix, DVM, JD, is the owner and CEO of Veterinary Business Advisors, Inc in Whitehouse Station, New Jersey. She also serves as an adjunct professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Dr. Lacroix lectures extensively both nationally and internationally, including at the NAVC, WVC, AAHA, and Veterinary Specialists in Private Practice (VSIPP) conferences and the AVMA Convention. She is also a regular contributor to the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* and other prestigious publications. In recognition of her outstanding legal expertise and contribution within the practice area of veterinary law, she was selected for a *Lawyer Monthly Women in Law 2016 Award*.

In this interview, Dr. Lacroix discusses her journey as both a veterinarian and lawyer, and provides insight into the nature of lawsuits in veterinary practice.

What led you to the legal side of the veterinary profession?

I loved being an equine ambulatory clinician and had the privilege of working in an excellent practice with some very fine equine athletes. However, business and advocacy have always been an interest of mine, and attending law school allowed me to pursue that "other calling."

After graduating from University of Pennsylvania Law School, I knew exactly what I wanted to do and how to combine my two careers. Since then, my professional career has been dedicated to helping veterinarians and other members of the industry navigate the quagmire of risks and challenges within our profession. I love helping veterinarians "issue spot" business arrangements and coaching them through negotiating the best outcome, whether it is a practice sale, a position of employment, or handling a difficult client.

How should veterinarians protect themselves, their employees, and their practices against lawsuits?

This depends on the origin of the lawsuit. For example, lawsuits based on improper standards of care are handled differently than lawsuits from disgruntled employees. Veterinarians should first understand where there is risk of a lawsuit and determine if it is a risk that can be managed with the adoption of "best practices" and insurance. Once there is a conflict, it should be managed first with communication.

What puts veterinarians at highest risk for malpractice suits?

Veterinarians are at most risk for veterinary malpractice suits when they keep incomplete medical records. A person opining on a

veterinarian's standard of care should be able to review the pet's medical record and understand why the veterinarian did or didn't take a certain action. There needs to be a justifiable "decision tree" based on science and the facts of the circumstances. If a practitioner can't provide a reason that is based on rational thinking and medical principles, then a client has plenty of room to simply make up the narrative that best supports his or her allegation of malpractice against the veterinarian.

What words of advice or encouragement would you provide to practitioners who have struggled with particularly frustrating lawsuits?

Breathe and focus on the facts. Speak to a colleague and/or a veterinary legal advisor to help you identify the issues as well as guide you in how to deal with a set of difficult circumstances. Don't panic, and don't let your emotions get the better of you.

Continuing Your Education

Dr. Lacroix encourages practitioners to educate themselves on legal matters, and recommends the book *Laws and Ethics of the Veterinary Profession* by James Wilson, DVM, JD.

Dr. Wilson also offers online courses exclusive to veterinary law and medical records through Iowa State University (vetmed.iastate.edu/about/continuing-education/veterinary-law-ethics and vetmed.iastate.edu/about/continuing-education/veterinary-medical-records-online-course). His thoughts on the value of furthering your education on these topics follow.



Learn More

For more in-depth information from Dr. Lacroix, read **Practice Building: Protecting Your Practice from Litigation** (November/December 2013), available at tvpjournal.com.

How does a course in veterinary law benefit practitioners?

Dr. Wilson: Unfortunately, too many veterinarians do not recognize the multitude of legal issues that occur on a daily basis, including employment contracts and noncompete agreements; prescribing, dispensing, and administering FDA-approved versus compounded drugs; human resource and employment law issues; laws relating to ownership of pets with or without microchips; dangerous dog laws; and recognition, and mandatory reporting, of suspected animal cruelty, to name only a few.

Sometimes continuing education in this area is required. Georgia requires 2 of its 30 hours per license renewal period to focus on veterinary law and professionalism. Florida requires that no less than 1 of its 30 hours of CE per renewal period focus on dispensing pharmaceutical products, including FDA-approved drugs, and no less than 2 hours cover the laws and rules governing the practice of veterinary medicine.

Why is this information valuable to the profession?

Dr. Wilson: The most important asset veterinarians possess is their license to practice their profession. Because damage claims for pet loss are limited to economic damages (market or replacement value), clients (and disgruntled staff members) have learned that complaints to state boards for negligence, medical records, animal cruelty, and other license violations are the most effective way to pursue their grievances. Without a knowledge of the laws pertaining to the practice of veterinary medicine and management of their veterinary businesses, veterinarians risk the huge investment they've made to obtain and retain their licenses.

How did you develop these online courses for Iowa State University?

Dr. Wilson: When my alma mater, Iowa State University's College of Veterinary Medicine, recruited me to teach a one-credit, required course in the early 2000s, I was pleased to discover that the university had a first-class distance learning center. Because of that, it became a joint vision to develop an online version of this important subject for the profession as a whole, and continue to update the content and information technology delivery of the course annually, allowing it to become a leader in both categories.

