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Charity work in the field of veterinary medicine: checklist for charities, veterinarians and veterinary students

Introduction:

Charity (or NGO) work in the field of veterinary medicine is very popular. It ranges from taking care of shelter dogs, neutering and vaccinating stray animals, conservation medicine, assisting with public health programmes and much more.

There are many veterinarians and veterinary students who are interested in supporting such charities in order to combine foreign travel and cultural immersion with training and the provision of services to the community.

Charities involved range from being a single person charity to large professional non-profit or profit-making businesses.

Charities can deliver valuable primary veterinary services and may support local veterinary infrastructure. They can also contribute to public awareness and understanding; and to increase local awareness of animal health and welfare and one health issues.

Unfortunately, we observe some charities operating in an unregulated ad-hoc way by not prioritising the welfare of animals, without involvement of the local veterinary authority or communities or without following the local legislation.

This is potentially dangerous for the volunteers and the animals involved. It is also disrespectful towards local colleagues, brings other professional charities into disrepute and could result in a waste of public funding.

Charities should not intentionally take over work from local veterinarians, but should work collaboratively and in partnership with local veterinary services towards sustainable solutions.

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In this document, we outline the main legal, ethical and professional considerations for charities, veterinarians, and veterinary students to consider before starting volunteer work. This to ensure the provision of high-quality services, the protection of volunteers and the animals involved. It is important to make sure these trips provide an exchange of knowledge for both the volunteers and the recipient stake holders, together with enhancing animal health and welfare.

Checklist

What should you ask yourself as a **veterinarian or veterinary student** wanting to go and provide services in another country?

- Is the charity I want to go with **legally established** and does it have all the necessary paperwork in order? Check the legality and whether the charity you go with is reliable and respectable.
- Will I be able to **legally practice veterinary medicine** in the destination country?
In the EU, veterinary degrees from other EU countries are normally automatically recognised, but in most countries, you must notify the authorities in advance of your arrival and ensure that your qualification is recognised. Most countries require you to submit a written declaration (with proof of nationality, attestation of licensing in your country of origin and professional liability insurance) in advance.
- Which **professional rules apply to me**?
As a veterinarian, you will be subject to the professional rules of a professional, statutory or administrative nature as well as the disciplinary provisions which are applicable in the host Member State. For more details, check [here](#).
- Will I be able to practice veterinary medicine according to **good veterinary practice standards**?
Check before you go whether you will be able to perform your veterinary tasks in an adequate environment and according to good standards, within the limitations of the host country's infrastructure. E.g. if you will be involved in neutering dogs, will you have a clean room, sterile materials and instruments and with appropriate veterinary medicines (e.g. regarding anaesthesia and analgesia) at your disposal? Check also cultural and legal aspects e.g. around euthanasia (euthanasia is not allowed in some countries).
- What will be my **job description**?
Make sure in advance what will be expected of you and to whom you will report, especially in case of problems.
If you are a veterinary student, ensure you will get appropriate supervision and that they do not ask you to perform veterinary tasks, which are not

allowed under local legislation, as this could lead to prosecution. Ensure you are aware of the legal requirements in the country you are working.

- Will I be able to **work together in a collegial way** with colleagues or other charities in the destination country?
A professional and successful charity will have involved and will get support from the local veterinary authority and the community. It is also vital for a campaign to have a sustainable and long-term impact. Ask your charity about it.
- Will I be working in a **risky environment**?
Traveling and working abroad can expose you to a range of health hazards (such as endemic diseases) or work related hazards (e.g. being bitten by a dog with rabies). Carefully assess these risks in advance, check the travelling advice from your ministry for the intending country/region, prepare for the risks, and make sure you know who to contact beforehand. It is always a good idea to ask for guidance from those who understand the place you're visiting and plan to work in. Find out if you need any vaccinations in plenty of time before you travel to ensure you can complete the required course. Ensure emergency contact details and any health issues are communicated to the charity before travel.
- Will I have **travel insurance** and be covered by **professional liability insurance** if something goes wrong?
Unexpected health costs abroad can be very expensive. A professional liability insurance is also a prerequisite in case things go wrong. If as a veterinarian at home you have professional liability insurance, check with your insurer to make sure this insurance will also cover you for providing your services abroad.
- Which **medicines** will I be allowed to take and/or use in the destination country? How will they be legally stored?
The general rule within the EU is that each Member State only allows veterinary medicines that have been authorised by that country to be used. Under certain conditions veterinarians working across borders can use medicines authorised in their home country, but this requires the approval of the local competent authority. For more details, check [here](#). If your destination country is outside the EU, enquire in advance which medicines will be available and whether you are authorised to use them.
- Will the service I provide be able to make a **real sustainable impact** to the local community and the health and welfare of the animals involved?
Giving up your free time, you want of course to do it for a project helping the local community. Therefore, be careful when picking your projects, to ensure you are not incentivising animal maltreatment in the country or having a negative impact on the local veterinary economy. You want to join a project making a real impact.

Basic requirements for charities doing veterinary work in other countries?

- Your charity is **legally established**, in sound financial shape and keeps **clear track of money and resources**. It is important to be able to reassure the public that funds are going where they're meant to go.
- All **projects should be well-planned**, the risks assessed and managed, and an evaluation strategy set up. Ensure all volunteers have provided you with emergency contact details and that you have an agreed way of contacting them during the time you are responsible for them.
- The **local veterinary community, including the authority, is involved** and is supporting your project.
- Preferably **work with local people**. Employing people locally can boost skills and knowledge, which may benefit the community you are working in.
- If you work with volunteers from abroad, make sure you **follow all the local working rules** and that your volunteers can work with full protection and legality.
- Make sure that all veterinary tasks are done according to **good veterinary practice**
- **Protect all your volunteers from risks working abroad** e.g. infectious diseases, work-related accidents, etc.
- Make sure all your volunteers have **travel insurance and professional liability insurance**, appropriate to the country they are working in, if they are performing veterinary tasks.
- Make sure all your volunteers have a **clear description of the tasks expected** from them, know who to report to and whom to contact in case of any difficulties.
- If you work with **local organisations**, make sure that all organisations are completely reliable and will not put your volunteers at risk.

References:

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