

ONLINE PRESCRIPTIONS

When you or another member of your family sees your local medical practice for healthcare, in many cases you will walk away with a script in your hand for a prescribed medication. It's your choice where you go to get that medication. Yet, many pet owners seem unaware that they have similar rights when their pet requires medicine. Let's take a look at how veterinary medicines are regulated and distributed.

What medications are we talking about?

The Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) is responsible for regulating veterinary medicines under the Agricultural Compounds and Veterinary Medicines (ACVM) Act 1997. When there is an intention to import to and/or supply a medication product in New Zealand, the medication must be assessed by MPI officials to determine its required registration status.

Medicines are registered as either restricted veterinary medicines (RVMs) or over-the-counter (unrestricted). For RVMs, the clinical expertise of a veterinarian is needed to ensure the medication is used safely and effectively and to manage allergic or other adverse reactions.

MPI cites the example of antibiotic medications which are all classed as RVMs because of the risks associated with their use. For example, antibiotic resistance is an issue in the animal population just as it is with the human population. The veterinarian must diagnose the animal and determine the type of infection it is suffering from before matching it to the appropriate antibiotic. If the infection fails to clear, another antibiotic or treatment regime may be required.

Veterinary practices typically stock a range of medications for sale to their customers. But, like at your local GP, they are also able to write a prescription for a medication which they are not dispensing. You then source this medication from any authorised RVM seller; sellers must have approval from MPI to conduct their business.

RVM sellers are only allowed to dispense what has been authorised in the written script and, just as at your local vet practice, they must keep records about the medications they have sold. Records are subject to MPI audit.

As at January 2020, there were 365 restricted veterinary medicines approved for companion animal use in New Zealand:

- 332 approved for dogs
- 205 approved for cats
- 10 approved for caged birds
- 8 approved for rabbits
- 4 approved for rodents

Some RVMs are approved for use in multiple species.

Bringing online supply to New Zealand

Veterinarian Stefan Walther of myvet.co.nz broke ground in New Zealand when he began selling online in 2006.



Left: Stefan Walther, from MyVet.co.nz, with a selection of the medications that pet owners may purchase online with a prescription.

At the time, Dr Walther owned the Whangamata Animal Hospital. He noticed that residents from the Auckland region, who had bought medication off him after being in the area, would ask him if he could send more medication when a refill was required because his prices were cheaper.

"I went to MPI to tell them what I was going to do (sell online) to assure them that my suppliers were the same suppliers as for my veterinary practice. I wasn't cutting corners."

He also confirmed that as long as he met the documentation requirements, selling online would be legal.

"I wouldn't say that my new business venture was welcomed with open arms. I realised I was a disruptor in the veterinary practice space, but the business model I adopted had been working successfully in the US and UK, where I had previously practised. Vet practice incomes there were primarily based on the fees gained from consultations, with a reasonable mark-up. I couldn't see why New Zealand pet owners shouldn't benefit from the same cost model."

As his business grew, so did the resistance of some veterinarians to supply the prescriptions that their customers were legally entitled to. By 2011, the Veterinary Council updated its Code of Professional Conduct to explicitly address the issue of supplying written prescriptions.

"Where there has been a consultation and a veterinarian has proposed treatment with a veterinary medicine, the client is entitled to request from the veterinarian a written authorisation to take away and have the product dispensed by a different trader. The consulting veterinarian is ethically obliged to comply with that request."

The key thing here is that you have to specifically ask for a script. One will not be provided automatically.

In the United States, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) is lobbying against a proposed change to that country's rules around scripts. The Fairness to Pet Owners Act, if passed, would require veterinarians to provide a written prescription in all cases. The AVMA contends that enough pet owners know their rights to ask for a script and, by making prescriptions mandatory, there will be an unnecessary administrative burden on vets (such as in cases where a client does not want a script).

Since its establishment, the myvet.co.nz business has seen tremendous growth – averaging 20 per cent per year. In fact, the online business became so successful that Stefan sold his Whangamata veterinary practice, which required him to provide 24/7 veterinary care to the local community, in favour of expanding the online business out of a warehouse in Tauranga. As part of the deal, Stefan and his wife were able to gain better work/life balance and spend more quality time with their children.

"We went from using the kids' bedroom to stock supplies to our current warehouse."

Success brings competition

Although MyVet is the largest online pharmacy in New Zealand, other outlets have entered the market. Stefan sees this as a good thing because "consumer choice is important and it's been something that pet parents in New Zealand didn't have for too long".

Dr Rebecca Penman, of Vet Post (vetpost.co.nz), concurred.

"Pet care is expensive and unsubsidised. But the most important thing for my business is consumers understanding that they are not getting a second-rate product. We buy from the same wholesalers that clinic-based veterinarians buy from."

When I spoke to Rebecca, she was less than 48 hours away from departing New Zealand to assist with bushfire relief in Australia. Her contacts in the veterinary supply field enabled her to travel with much-needed supplies. Both Vet Post and MyVet were audited by MPI in mid-2019. It was checked that the original prescriptions were on file and that medications were filled as prescribed. Both businesses passed their audits.

When should you ask for a script?

If a condition is acute, such as a wound or infection, then time is of the essence in getting medication administered to your pet. Buying directly from your vet practice is recommended.

However, when a pet's treatment is longer term, such as the many pets who are being managed with arthritis medications, then it's worth looking at prices and

selecting the most cost-effective provider.

You should also be aware that there are maximum periods of supply that apply to medications. For a stable condition in a companion animal, a script for a registered veterinary medicine may be filled for a maximum period of six months. The time limit is a maximum of four months for critically important antibiotics. The actual period of supply is chosen by the veterinarian depending on the medication, the condition being treated, and the risks that need to be managed.



Above: Rebecca Penman, from VetPost.co.nz, in Australia providing veterinary care to a bush fire patient.

Script fees

You'll have to factor in the cost for a script, which is virtually always an added cost to your consult fee. This is where the models of human healthcare and veterinary care diverge.

Whereas your GP will not charge extra for writing you a script, it is perfectly legal for a veterinarian to charge a script fee and most do. In researching this column, I selected vet practices at random using Google and asked about fees. Here are the results:

Location	Highest price	Lowest price
Auckland	\$25	\$15
Tauranga	\$35	Same
Palmerston North	\$15	Same
Wellington	\$22	\$17.80
Christchurch	\$25	\$24
Dunedin	\$12.50	Same

One vet practice automatically stated that for its regular clients, they would look to match an online price for medications. From personal experience, some vet practices where you are a loyal and regular customer will value your business by matching an online price.

It is certainly worth checking out online pricing because, even with paying a script fee, you may find that you can save yourself money that can be directed to other aspects of your pet's day-to-day care.

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