Consumer information: In-person consultations for authorising medicines for companion animals

The Vet Council has prepared information that practices can share with clients to explain some of the rules and regulations around veterinary medicines.

Why does my vet need to see my animal regularly to prescribe/authorise ongoing medication?

The requirement for a vet to see an animal before it is prescribed/authorised medicine is set by the Veterinary Council of New Zealand in the Code of Professional Conduct. Every vet in New Zealand is legally required to follow the Code under the Veterinarians Act 2005.

The Vet Council is responsible for the regulation of veterinarians under the Veterinarians Act 2005. Its role is to protect the public by ensuring registered veterinarians are competent to practise. All veterinarians must be registered to practise in New Zealand, meet professional standards, and work to the Code of Professional Conduct (the Code), which is available on **vetcouncil.org.nz**. Every veterinarian practising in New Zealand must comply with the Code, and the medicines requirements also reflect the rules set by the Ministry for Primary Industries and, for some medicines, the Medicines and Misuse of Drugs legislation. Because these are professional and legal requirements, they cannot be set aside by agreement between a veterinarian and a client, even a well-informed one.

Two requirements of the Code must be considered:

Under the Code, a consultation is required before a medicine can be authorised.

The Code states that a veterinarian can only prescribe for an animal that they have current, personal knowledge of. A veterinary consultation is required before a medicine can be prescribed to your animal, as the vet must be confident the medicine is the right choice. They must have examined the animal or at least have seen it recently or often enough to have personal knowledge of its current health.

Prescriptions (authorisations) have a maximum period of supply. The Code sets a maximum length of time an authorisation can run before it must be renewed. The maximum period depends on the type of medicine. It ranges from:

- six months for human prescription medicines used in animals
- four months for critically important antibiotics

• six months for most other restricted veterinary medicines for cats, dogs and other companion animals. These are maximum periods, not defaults. Within these limits, your veterinarian decides how long your pet/animal should be given medication for, based on the medicine, the animal's condition, and the risks that need to be managed. Once that period ends, another consultation is needed before the medicine can be authorised again.

Recent updates to the Code have clarified what this means in practice, including the six-month limit on how long ago the animal was last seen in person. This highlights what has always been required under the law and supports consistent and safe prescribing.

Check-ups with your vet can confirm the medicine is working as intended. Some conditions progress or change in ways that may not be obvious day-to-day, and a dose that was suitable for your pet/animal six months ago may no longer be appropriate.

Consultations are also the main opportunity for your vet to detect side effects or other problems early, especially as your pet ages or their issues change. This is part of responsible stewardship of medicines to ensure animals only stay on treatment that is necessary, effective, and as safe as possible. It's also a good chance for you to raise anything you've noticed at home, such as a change in habits, and ask questions about your pet's health. It is a legal requirement, but it is also, very importantly, in the best interests of your pet.