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Advertising of veterinary medical services on social media

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Abstract. This study presents a literature review based on the *Veterinarian's Code of Ethics*, focusing on Chapter XIII – *On Advertising and Scientific Works*, with the aim of clarifying what is permitted and prohibited regarding veterinarians' conduct on social media. The research highlights the growing presence of veterinary professionals in digital environments and identifies frequent ethical violations related to self-promotion and misinformation. By analyzing national regulations and comparing them with international ethical frameworks, this study emphasizes the need for clearer digital guidelines, stronger oversight by professional councils, and greater awareness among veterinarians in regards to the responsible use of social media as an educational and ethical communicational tool.

Keywords: Advertising, code of ethics, regulation, veterinary medicine.

Publicidade dos serviços médico-veterinários nas mídias sociais

Resumo. Este estudo apresenta uma revisão de literatura fundamentada no *Código de Ética do Médico-Veterinário*, especificamente no Capítulo XIII, da Publicidade e dos Trabalhos Científicos, com o objetivo de esclarecer o que é permitido e o que é vedado em relação à conduta dos médicos-veterinários nas mídias sociais. A pesquisa evidencia o crescente uso dos ambientes digitais por profissionais da área e identifica frequentes infrações éticas relacionadas à autopromoção e à desinformação. Ao analisar a legislação nacional e compará-la com referenciais éticos internacionais, o estudo ressalta a necessidade de diretrizes digitais mais claras, de maior fiscalização pelos conselhos profissionais e de uma conscientização ampliada entre os médicos-veterinários acerca do uso responsável das mídias sociais como instrumento de comunicação educativa e eticamente orientada.

Palavras-chave: Publicidade, código de ética, regulamentação, conduta medicina veterinária.

Introduction

In the current digital era, social media has become an essential communication tool across various professions, including veterinary medicine(Burin et al., 2014). The growing online presence of veterinarians has expanded professional opportunities but also introduced new ethical challenges (Conceição et al., 2017). According to the Federal Council of Veterinary Medicine (CFMV, 2017), the number of ethical complaints related to improper advertising by veterinarians has increased significantly in recent years. Between 2020 and 2023, the Regional Councils of Veterinary Medicine (CRMVs) across Brazil recorded over 600 ethical proceedings related to irregular online advertisements, highlighting the urgent need for greater awareness of digital ethics within the profession.

Recent studies have sought to better understand how this digital exposure shapes public perceptions of veterinary professionals. Widmar et al. (2020) analyzed online discussions and found that veterinarians' visibility in social and digital media environments directly influences public trust and the

perceived credibility of the profession. However, this exposure also amplifies reputational risks when ethical boundaries are not respected. Similarly, Springer et al. (2022) demonstrated that while platforms such as Facebook create new opportunities for interaction between clinics and clients, they also provide a space for public complaints and negative feedback, underscoring the need for stronger ethical guidance in online environments.

Although the *Veterinarian's Code of Ethics* provides clear guidance on professional conduct, many practitioners still disregard the established norms, often due to limited understanding of how these rules apply to digital media. For example, Article 14, Chapter VIII, establishes that veterinarians must not use advertising in a sensationalist, promotional, disrespectful, or inappropriate manner. Nonetheless, it is still common to find online posts advertising "low-cost consultations," "free vaccines," or promotional packages such as "bath + vaccine combos," practices that constitute ethical violations (Malacarne, 2011; Slowinski et al., 2016).

Additionally, posts showing animal treatments or "before and after" images are frequent and often fail to meet ethical and scientific standards. The dissemination of unverified treatments or images without proper consent breaches the principles of confidentiality and respect for patients and their guardians, as outlined in Articles 3, 10, and 11 of Resolution CFMV No. 780/2004 and Resolution No. 1138/2016.

The CFMV (2017) defines advertising as any public dissemination of professional activity promoted or authorized by the veterinarian, regardless of the medium used, including television, radio, print materials, websites, or social networks. In this context, maintaining ethical responsibility online is essential not only to preserve the integrity of the profession but also to strengthen public trust in veterinary services.

However, monitoring ethical compliance in digital environments remains a significant challenge. The decentralized and fast-paced nature of social media makes it difficult for regulatory bodies to identify and address violations effectively. Many infractions go unnoticed or are reported only after they have already reached a wide audience. This reality reinforces the importance of continuous professional education and proactive engagement by veterinarians themselves in upholding ethical standards (Arns & Reis, 2011).

In comparison, international veterinary councils such as the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) have established more detailed guidelines on digital conduct, emphasizing professional boundaries, data privacy, and responsible communication online. While Brazil's ethical framework is comprehensive, it could benefit from similar modernization to address the complexities of the digital landscape and to promote a culture of transparency, professionalism, and respect in online interactions.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the *Veterinarians' Code of Ethics*, particularly Chapter XIII, *On Advertising and Scientific Works*, to clarify the boundaries between ethical and unethical behavior in the digital environment. By examining the legislation and discussing the implications of online conduct, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of professional responsibility in the age of social media.

Metodologia

This research is a literature review focused on analyzing the Veterinarians' Code of Ethics to clarify the guidelines regarding the professional conduct of veterinarians on social media. The study was conducted through a search of academic publications and official documents.

The bibliographic search was carried out between January and March 2025, using the databases SciELO, PubMed, Google Scholar, and the Federal Council of Veterinary Medicine (CFMV) official publications. The search strategy employed combinations of the following keywords: "veterinary ethics", "code of ethics", "social media", "professional conduct", and "veterinarian behavior online". Boolean operators ("and", "or") were used to refine the search and ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic.

The inclusion criteria comprised scientific articles, theses, and institutional documents published in English or Portuguese, that addressed ethical aspects of veterinary practice and professional behavior on digital platforms. Studies that were not directly related to professional ethics or that focused exclusively on medical or clinical aspects were excluded.

This methodological approach enabled a critical examination of the rights and duties of veterinary professionals, as well as the implications of non-compliance with ethical standards, encouraging reflection on the responsibilities of veterinarians in digital environments.

Telemedicine

Resolution No. 1,465/2022 of the Federal Council of Veterinary Medicine (CFMV, 2022) authorizes the use of telemedicine, defined as the remote provision of veterinary medical services using information and communication technologies (ICTs)—as published in the Diário Oficial da União on June 29, 2023 (CFMV, 2022).

However, there are specific criteria that must be followed in order to comply with CFMV regulations. One such criterion is the establishment of a Prior Veterinary-Animal-Owner Relationship (PVAOR), which requires a documented history of in-person care, formally reported in accordance with Item III of Article 4 of Resolution No. 1,465/2022 (CFMV, 2022).

It is important to emphasize that caution must be exercised when using telemedicine, as the resolution itself stresses that in-person consultations are always the ideal approach. Veterinarians must be aware of the actions that are permitted or prohibited in virtual care. For example, emergency or urgent situations must never be handled through teleconsultation, reinforcing the importance of teletriage in determining whether a virtual consultation is appropriate (DOU, 2022).

In light of the aforementioned information, it is essential that veterinarians adhere to the Veterinarian's Code of Ethics and maintain proper documentation in accordance with legal standards to avoid future complications (CFMV, 2017).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate common examples of advertising practices on social media that conflict with ethical guidelines, such as the display of before-and-after treatment images and price-based promotions. Figure 3 presents a summary of the main rule's veterinarians must follow when promoting their services online, emphasizing restrictions on unauthorized disclosures, promotional pricing, and unverified treatments.

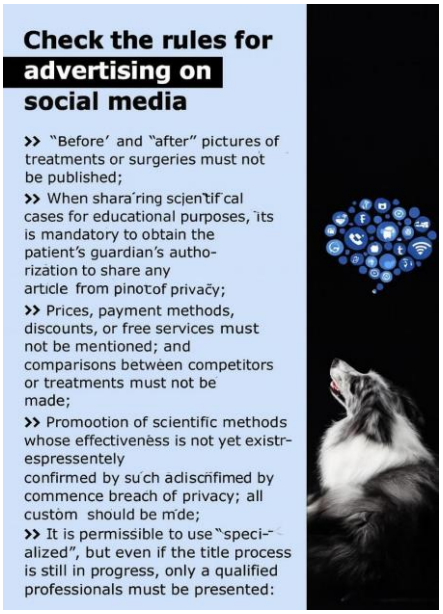

Figure 1. Ethical rules for veterinary advertising on social media



Figure 2. Infringing advertisement: price-based promotion of veterinary services



Figure 3. Infringing Post.

Discussions

Given the growing digital presence of professionals, ethical violations within veterinary practice have become increasingly visible and complex. Although the Veterinarian's Code of Ethics establishes clear guidelines regarding the dissemination of professional content, many practitioners continue to use social media without a full understanding of its legal and ethical boundaries. This often results from limited emphasis on digital ethics during academic training and the absence of continuous education throughout professional practice.

A major challenge lies in the monitoring and enforcement of ethical standards in online spaces. Regulatory councils face difficulties in supervising the vast and dynamic volume of digital content produced every day. Unlike traditional advertising, social media operates in a decentralized and fast-paced environment, which makes it harder to detect and correct ethical violations. Strengthening digital literacy and developing specific regulatory frameworks can improve the effectiveness of ethical oversight.

Another important issue concerns the impact of digital publicity on the relationship between veterinarians and clients. The ease of online exposure can blur the line between professional communication and self-promotion. Excessive marketing or sensationalized content intended to attract followers can harm professional credibility and distort how society perceives veterinary practice. Ethical communication must always prioritize transparency, accuracy and respect for both the profession and the welfare of animals and their guardians.

Recent studies help to clarify this scenario. DeWilde (2024) explains that digital marketing has become a key element in the management of veterinary clinics, allowing professionals to expand their reach and reinforce their public image. However, when these actions are not guided by ethical principles, they can weaken public trust and damage the reputation of the profession. In Brazil, Silva et al. (2024) found that many clinics use social media primarily for commercial purposes and fail to explore its potential as an educational and awareness tool about animal health. These findings show the importance of balancing professional visibility with ethical responsibility in the digital environment.

When comparing international codes of ethics, such as those of the American Veterinary Medical Association and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, it becomes clear that the Brazilian framework follows the same ethical values but lacks specificity about behavior on social networks. In other

countries there is greater attention to responsible communication, data privacy and professional boundaries in online contexts. The British Veterinary Association also offers the guide Pets in Advertising: A Social Concern, which presents good practices for the respectful and realistic representation of animals in promotional content. This document serves as a reference for ethical advertising that values professionalism without losing effectiveness in communication.

Considering these aspects, it is essential that veterinarians maintain an ethical and conscious posture in digital spaces. Social media should be seen as a channel for education, public awareness and dissemination of reliable information. Preserving professional integrity in online environments protects public confidence and strengthens the collective image of the veterinary profession.

Conclusion

The use of social media has become increasingly common among various professionals, including veterinarians. However, a major concern arises when these professionals disregard existing legislation by publishing content that does not comply with the Veterinarian's Code of Ethics, thus influencing other professionals to do the same. It is becoming increasingly frequent to see shocking content, giveaways offering services as rewards, and advertisements promoting discounts and low prices, all used as strategies to attract consumer attention.

We conclude that it is extremely important to warn both students and professionals to avoid such unethical practices. It is also essential to remain vigilant and up to date with the Veterinarian's Code of Ethics, as well as the regulations established by both the Regional and Federal Councils of Veterinary Medicine.

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