

What members of the public should know about second opinions and referrals?

Today most veterinarians have at their disposal the services of many specialists in the veterinary field.

1. It is your right, as a pet owner, to request a second opinion and or referral for your pet from your vet.
 - a. Your vet may not refuse your request and must accommodate this with reasonable speed and due care.
 - b. When going for a second opinion, it is a good idea to “upgrade”. If the case is too complicated for the first general practitioner, it is less likely that the second general practitioner will be able to do much better. This is so much more imperative when an owner requests a second opinion from a general practitioner after having been seen by a specialist.
2. Alternatively, your vet may recommend a second opinion and or referral. This does not in any way detract from their skill as a vet. Rather, it shows that they would like to share the responsibility in trying to get the best outcome for your animal. It is impossible, with the current amount of information in medical science, to remain up-to-date and be competent in all the veterinary fields.
 - a. Veterinarians should as far as possible refer to a specialist.
 - b. Veterinarians should suggest or recommend referral as early as possible.
 - c. Veterinarians are expected to know their limitations and to suggest referral when they reach that point.
 - d. You have the right to decline the suggestion and request that the general practitioner carries on treating your pet at his or her best ability.
3. The sooner a referral is sought the better: this saves time, costs and improves patient outcome. The correct diagnosis is made sooner, the appropriate treatment is applied earlier, before further patient deterioration occurs, and patient outcome improves. The cost of inappropriate treatment is decreased and is frequently offset against the increased cost of referral.
4. Understand the difference between a specialist and someone with an “*interest*”
 - a. A veterinary specialist is someone who has registered with the South African Veterinary Council as a “*Specialist*” in a certain speciality. They would have usually undertaken postgraduate qualifications or similar training in their area of speciality.
 - b. Someone who has an “*interest*” or “*experience in an area*” is not registered with the South African Veterinary Council as a specialist in that area. This does not detract from their skill or ability, but there has been no formal *assessment* of their level of expertise. The South African Veterinary Council considers such veterinarians as general practitioners, and they will be measured against that standard should any complaints be laid against them to Council regarding their actions or standards of care.
 - c. Please note that in some areas of veterinary science a registered speciality does not exist (in South Africa). An example of this is exotic

animal medicine (e.g. birds, snakes). In these cases, a referral or second opinion should be sought for an experienced vet in that particular field (who may or may not have had further qualifications) and who is acknowledged by fellow veterinarians to be the best in that particular area of interest. They are often considered to be specialists although they don't have the formal registration.

- d. Asked your referring veterinarian whether the person they have been referred to is a *registered* veterinary specialist in their field.
5. Please note that referral to a specialist may require travelling a long distance, depending on your location. In some rare circumstances, travelling may in itself be more detrimental than staying at your veterinarian or being referred to another general practitioner in your area. In deciding when to recommend referral, the practitioner should first of all take the welfare and well-being of the patient into consideration. In some circumstances it may be also more detrimental to the patient to wait 2 or 3 days for an appointment with a specialist, rather than to see someone who is not a specialist, but who has a special interest in that area, immediately.
 6. Please remember that a recommendation by a vet for a referral or second opinion usually suggests that the case reflects a difficult diagnosis or a complicated treatment or a treatment facility not available in their practice. This has some implications:
 - a. it may take more time and be more complicated to make an accurate diagnosis,
 - b. treatment is often likely to be longer and more complicated, necessitating multiple medications to be administered,
 - c. A diagnosis may not always be achievable within the constraints of veterinary practice, nor will the outcome always be good or successful.
 - d. Costs incurred in referral will in most cases escalate more rapidly due to the above and the increased skill of the practitioner. Please discuss this with both with the referring and the referred to veterinarian/ specialist