

Comment on registance to efforts related to strengthening of para-veterinary services and ongoing initiatives at further explaining the supervision clause related to Minor Veterinary Practices.

(A note prepared for honorable president, Indian Veterinary Association)

Kind Attn.
Dr Chirantan Kadian.
President, Indian Veterinary Association

From:

Dr Miftahul Islam Barbaruah
Director,
Vet Helpline India Pvt Ltd.

The efforts towards strengthening of para-veterinary services have become a sensitive issue in India as majority veterinarians in the country are not made aware of their roles in the event of promotion and strengthening of para-veterinary services. There is a perception that para-veterinarians will replace the services of veterinarians in front end service delivery. Recent decisions of a state government related to the promotion of para-veterinarians to occupy positions meant for veterinarians has further fueled this perception.

In the current structure of veterinary service delivery in India, the majority of field veterinarians in the country are being forced to provide predominantly curative services. The services provided by majority veterinarians are discontinuous. The service is discontinuous because hospitals and dispensaries do not have any contractual obligation to producer/animal owner groups. There is a limited scope of follow up of advice or treatment. Often the relationship between a farmer/ animal owner with veterinarian starts when the animal is dying. Such relationships end once the veterinarian prescribes or cures the ailment temporarily. Majority veterinarian operates alone without any groups of animals assigned to him/her. Symptomatic treatment with the limited scope of use of laboratories or point of care diagnostics is another important drawback. In the current system, there is nominal differentiation between services of veterinarians and para-veterinarians. The situation is making many veterinarians to see para-vets as a competitor instead of a helper.

Majority administrators and policy initiators in India have limited awareness and appreciation of veterinarians training and capability to undertake planned programs for livestock productivity improvement, mass disease control (including zoonotic disease and bio-threats), trade and food safety, animal welfare, animal conservation, and genetic improvement, etc.. Veterinary services for many is only basic animal treatment, distribution of farm inputs and vaccination. With such a level of awareness, it is not surprising that some policymakers in the future can moot the idea of replacing veterinarians with para-veterinarians. It is also possible, for an economist to justify such a move because the majority of the trained veterinarian is providing only curative care for common diseases and basic vaccination, and it is a wastage of resources.

With the above backdrop, it is prerequisite that, the initiative related to the strengthening of para-veterinary services must be undertaken only as a part of overall strengthening and restructuring of veterinary services in India. A field veterinarian should be made to feel secure and motivated by giving them ample opportunity to update and use their knowledge. For example, when a para-vet conducts

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house to house vaccination, a veterinarian should be empowered to use his knowledge in areas such as vaccine potency testing, choice of vaccine to be used, vaccination strategy development and implementation, issuance of herd-level vaccination certificate, post-vaccination evaluation, etc.

The designing of para-veterinary services should be such that it enhances the reach of services provided by veterinarians and the continuity (follow up) of services can be maintained. There are emerging examples in the private sector where veterinarians and para-vets are joining hands to offer contractual services (including livestock extension) to client farmers either directly or through farmer organizations.

Veterinary service is a regulated service as it impacts public health. A country with growing international trade and commitment to issues like antimicrobial resistance cannot afford a para-veterinary service, which is delivered by unskilled persons and are not regulated appropriately. Ideally, a country should focus on resource mobilization for engaging more trained veterinarians in service delivery. Paravets, like in developed countries, should be groomed and organized to assist veterinarians.

Off late, there is an increasing need to enhance the outreach of veterinary services and livestock extension. Trade and international commitments for animal / zoonotic disease control are forcing the country to invest heavily on preventive care and strengthening of epidemiological services. The demand for quality veterinary services and productivity-enhancing knowledge are increasing day by day, even in interior rural areas. The unskilled, less informed para-vets, including quacks, are not going to survive in the system for long. However, the country will need sufficient time for this to happen as we are very poor in the enforcement of law and the fact that the number of qualified, skilled para-vets is very limited.

The situation of poor availability, accessibility, acceptability, adequacy, and affordability of veterinary services can vastly improve, and India can proudly demonstrate its international commitment by initiatives aimed at mandatory registration of all service providers (individual/organizations and including para-vets) under statutory veterinary council in each state for their effective regulation. The veterinary council should also declare veterinary practice standards both for veterinarians and para-vets. The practice of registering para-vet with the statutory veterinary council for a defined geographical area is a common practice in many developed and developing country.

The Indian Veterinary Council Act 1984 has aptly included a clause, that indicates that para-vets must receive supervision of a veterinarian. Here it can be argued that supervision does not necessarily mean regulation only, and it covers efforts on the part of the veterinarian to build the capacity of the para-vet under his / her supervision. A veterinarian, however, cannot be forced to supervised a para-vet, and the legal prerequisite and ramification of supervision must be made clear in the regulation. For any fault on the part of the para-vet, a supervising veterinarian should not suffer.

For a large country like India and considering less number of veterinarians in remote areas, it is not practical to expect a veterinarian to supervise para-vets in every situation physically. The registration of para-vet (all categories) under state veterinary council (by maintaining separate registers) can help bring in accountability within the para-vets. Separate disciplinary committee can be constituted within the state councils to address unethical practice and also to take care of insubordination complaints. The state councils can also prepare the Standard Operating Manual (SOM) for each category of para-vets specifying

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the procedures to be followed / drugs to be considered for treatment while attending notified common ailments specific to any state. Para-vets roles should be more focused at functions like assisting the veterinarian in disease control, epidemiological services and food safety-related data collection, livestock extension, livestock product marketing, implementation of development schemes etc. It is important again to highlight the role of a veterinarian while delegating each of the above functions to para-vets. For example, for livestock extension function, a para-vet may conduct cluster meetings, but the design of message for such meetings and responsibility of use of communication tools will rest on the veterinarian.

The extent of things para-vets can be allowed to perform alone without supervision but with reporting to the veterinarian should be decided considering training received by a particular category of para-vet. A regulation can list out things that are prohibited and allowed only with direct supervision or with the physical presence of supervising veterinarian. The practice of declaring things para-vet can do alone without direct supervision but with due reporting is common in many countries. India can refer to regulations of South Africa about para-veterinary services. The concept of indirect supervision is complex and may be risky for the supervising veterinarian, who in the context of indirect supervision, remains answerable for the outcome of the veterinary intervention.

Declaring regulation for streamlining of para-veterinary service may not be sufficient to achieve the desired goal of improved services. We also need to encourage a system like a mentorship program, where a skilled veterinarian receives incentives to act as a mentor with willing para-vets as a mentee.

Indian has already made quantum progress in making National Occupational Standards and qualification pack available for various categories of para-vets. These are living documents with provision for periodic revision. If you are to achieve the desired outcome, para-vet should not only know things but also understand it and do it themselves. The Occupational Standard (OS) already being popularized under Agriculture Skill Council of India (ASCI) describes what para-vet in three categories viz. Veterinary Field Assistant, Veterinary Clinical Assistant and Animal Health Worker need to do, know and understand to carry out assigned job role or a function. ASCI is also promoting standards for Artificial Insemination (AI) workers, but the same is not placed under para-vet occupation category because many stakeholders in the dairy sector do not consider AI services as a minor veterinary practice but a pure animal husbandry activity. The current ASCI qualification pack for AI worker avoids standards related to animal health care.

The following can be IVA's recommendation for Government of India for streamlining of para-veterinary services. Many of this has origin in the discussion conducted during a 16th April 2019 seminar organized under the aegis of Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries.

A. On the education of veterinary paraprofessionals

Government should initiate process for formal adoption of approved NSQF level description of veterinary paraprofessional categories, e.g. Level 5 for Veterinary Field Assistant (VFA) and Veterinary Clinical Assistant (VCA) which is equivalent to post 10+2 diploma and Level 3 for Animal Health Worker which is equivalent to post mid school certificate course.

An expert committee comprising of members from DAHD and Agriculture Skill Council of India should review the current version of National Occupational Standards for various categories of para-vets in the

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light of the availability of OIE competency guidelines for veterinary paraprofessionals. Similarly, minor veterinary notifications issued by various state governments should be reviewed to bring in uniformity across the country, indicating only things that require direct supervision or things that can be carried out without direct supervision. The minor veterinary notification of various states was a reference point for the development of national occupational standards and qualification packs.

B. On regulation of services by veterinary paraprofessionals.

A central expert committee may be constituted to explore the possibility under the IVC Act for maintaining separate register of qualified veterinary paraprofessionals (various categories with definition and job profile as specified in National Occupational Standard) at district level preferably under the supervision of a nominated senior veterinarian at district level or any elected member of state veterinary council.

The expert committee should also work with State Veterinary Councils to develop a state-specific supervision framework, Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for service delivery and for attending responsible duties/emergency/ vetero-legal situations in the absence of registered veterinarian, ethical code of conduct and disciplinary provisions specific to para-veterinary services.

The expert committee should also guide State Veterinary Councils to constitute the 'Veterinary para professional disciplinary committee' to address the complaints of unethical practices by registered veterinary para-professionals.

The expert committee in consultation with State Veterinary Council should also develop a mechanism for electing a representative of various categories of veterinary paraprofessionals within a state to serve as a member of the 'Veterinary paraprofessional disciplinary committee'.

For the state of Himachal Pradesh, the expert committee should evaluate the functioning of the existing para-veterinary council and suggests for improvement of its governance where required and ensure additional affiliation of training institutes to the Agriculture Skill Council of India for alignment of courses to National Occupational Standards.

C. On regulation of training institutions imparting veterinary paraprofessional education

Since India has already declared its national occupational standards (NOS) for various categories of veterinary paraprofessionals and mechanism is in place for affiliation of veterinary paraprofessional training institutes to Agriculture Skill Council of India. State governments may be requested to direct Agriculture and veterinary universities to partner with the Agriculture Skill Council of India and ensure alignment of their existing/new diploma courses for veterinary paraprofessionals as per national occupational standards. Similarly, the direction should be given to private institutes to mandatorily seek affiliation from the Agriculture Skill Council of India to offer courses for veterinary paraprofessionals.

Agriculture Skill Council of India should be requested to keep informed State Veterinary Councils across the country about the affiliated training institutes. State veterinary councils should also be given access to the electronic databased of trained veterinary paraprofessionals as maintained by Agriculture Skill Council of India.

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D. On creating an incentive system for team building and improve para-veterinary service

State government should be advised to initiate an incentive-based mentoring / team building program at the district level with volunteer registered skilled veterinarian as a mentor and veterinary paraprofessional as a mentee.

State government should also be advised to undertake periodic competency gap assessment and provide scope to veterinary paraprofessionals to attend continuous learning programs including in areas like ethnoveterinary practice, communication, community leadership, new and appropriate technologies, development and bank related schemes for farmers, etc.

State governments can also

1. Initiate schemes to award deserving veterinary paraprofessionals.
2. Ensure that para-vet cadre in public service has time-bound promotion avenues.
3. Ensure support for regular immunization, comprehensive preventive health checkup, and availability of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for veterinary paraprofessionals for occupational safety.
