



# IS DATING A CLIENT TABOO?



When *Veterinary Team Brief* approached me about writing this article, I was a little reluctant. “Dirty laundry” indeed! But after giving the subject some thought, I decided, *Why not? Certainly I can find some helpful statistics to bring about a solid article.*

What I did find was that in the worlds of physical therapy, law, and counseling, research reveals that dating clients is common, although not looked upon favorably. I was not able, however, to find statistics regarding veterinary professionals dating clients. Instead, I moved my research to the “field” and asked colleagues and friends about their personal experiences. Some of their feedback surprised me.

## Occupational Hazard?

I have worked as a veterinary technician in a small western Colorado town for 13 years, so I have a good understanding of what goes on within a practice. We have hired many fresh graduates, and the majority were single at the time. Key point: “At the time.”

Single veterinarians spend 40 hours a week (often much more) at work and have the opportunity to meet wonderful clients and establish great working relationships. Our new veterinarians are introduced to a large percentage of the town (nay, the county) because the practice serves the majority of pet and livestock owners. Is it any wonder that single clients consider our single veterinarians “dating candidates?”

I can recall 3 new veterinarians marrying clients. When I consider my many single team members—veterinary technicians, receptionists, assistants, and veterinarians—I estimate that about a third have dated a client or 2. Keep in mind, not all those relationships began in the practice; when people start dating a team member, they tend to bring their pet to the practice.

One manager I interviewed said, “I had a veterinarian marry a client. I encouraged him because I felt they were a great fit. They kept a low profile, but all the staff knew. We loved them both and were very happy they were together. Realistically, as much as most veterinarians work, where else would they meet someone?”



## Worst-case Scenarios

However, dating relationships impact not only the individuals but also the practice. Here are 2 problems that can arise.

- **A team member begins dating a client and the relationship goes sour.** The practice may lose the client and negative comments may be made about the practice. This may occur only a small percentage of the time; again, there are no statistics available.
- **A team member may be accused of, or may actually be “stalking” a client, in which case management must be made aware of the unwanted advances and take action.**

Sexual harassment is a serious allegation. All policy manuals should address harassment, and managers and supervisors must be trained to deal with and prevent sexual harassment, both

among team members and clients, according to federal and state laws.

Love can blossom in the most peculiar places, and romantic relationships between clients and veterinary professionals do happen, and they have the potential to impact an entire practice. Keeping that in mind, it is advisable to include a section in your policy manual that addresses “potential client relationships” and clearly defines personal responsibility and responsibility to the practice.

Your policy manual should have a statement associated with state and federal laws regarding discrimination. In my experience, team education about expectations and professionalism is needed to alleviate conflicts, including those posed by dating clients. Harassment policies are not just for sexual harassment; they can include any behavior that could create

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a nonproductive environment. After review with a human resource lawyer, introduce a statement outlining the pitfalls of dating clients, including the effects on client confidentiality, and describing expected conduct from team members. Point team members to a leader or manager who can help identify potential conflicts, recognize the obstacles, offer solutions, and guide them in the right direction.

**Editor’s note:** *Rebecca Rose, CVT, has worked in a mixed animal practice, managed 2 AAHA-accredited hospitals, written books on veterinary careers, assisted managers with creating employee handbooks, and offered courses on professionalism, employee handbooks, and human resource tools. She is founder and president of CATALYST Veterinary Practice Consultants.*



## READ ALL ABOUT IT

- **Code of ethics for the physical therapist.** American Physical Therapy Association; [http://www.apta.org/uploadedfiles/aptaorg/about\\_us/policies/hod/ethics/codeofethics.pdf](http://www.apta.org/uploadedfiles/aptaorg/about_us/policies/hod/ethics/codeofethics.pdf)
- **Customer or vendor harassment.** McCarthy Weisberg Cummings, P.C.; <http://www.discrimination-harassment-law.com/sexual-harassment/customer-or-vendor-harassment.shtml>
- **Sexual harassment training.** SexualHarassmentTraining.biz; [http://www.sexualharassmenttraining.biz/sexual\\_harassment\\_training\\_Sexual-Harassment-Training-for-Managers-and-Supervisors.html](http://www.sexualharassmenttraining.biz/sexual_harassment_training_Sexual-Harassment-Training-for-Managers-and-Supervisors.html)