

# A Consumer Guide to Veterinary Dental Services



In Washington State, the practice of veterinary dentistry is a service offered to animal owners that can only be provided legally by a licensed veterinarian. Nonetheless, there are a number of people who call themselves “veterinary dentists” or “equine dentists,” working outside the law in the Evergreen State.

The WSVMA regularly fields complaints from consumers who have received unacceptable, even potentially dangerous or damaging services, from non-medically trained people conducting business illegally as veterinary dentists.

Additionally, WSVMA member veterinarians trained in dentistry have discovered and reported subsequent injuries to animals due to inappropriate veterinary dental care provided by non-veterinarians acting as dentists.

While the WSVMA has no enforcement authority, cases and complaints brought to us are actively passed on to the Washington Department of Health and the Veterinary Board of Governors for legal investigation and enforcement.

Because of this growing consumer issue involving primarily horse and dog owners, the following outlines what a consumer in Washington should know before agreeing to services provided by persons other than a licensed veterinarian.

The Veterinarians' Voice  
**WSVMA**  
Washington State Veterinary Medical Association

## What the Consumer Should Know

Poor, or no, training and lack of the most basic knowledge in dental anatomy, physiology, and pathology is dangerous and can be harmful to your animals.

Without proper academic training, knowledge, medical experience, modernized instrumentation, diagnostic equipment, the availability of sedation, and anesthetics when needed, it is impossible to gain access to visually and digitally examine every structure in most animals' mouths.

American Veterinary Dental College defines veterinary dentistry as the art and practice of oral health care in animals other than man. It is a discipline of veterinary medicine and surgery. The diagnosis, treatment, and management of veterinary oral health care is to be provided and supervised by licensed veterinarians.

## Knowledge and Training in Dentistry

The self proclaimed "horse dentist" often has no formal training or has attended an unaccredited commercial program often marketed with impressive names that attempt to legitimize an illegal practice.

Veterinarians gain their instruction and experience in veterinary dentistry beginning with their professional studies at an accredited college of veterinary medicine. There is also advanced training available through such professional organizations as the American Veterinary Medical Association, the American Association of Equine Practitioners, the American Veterinary Dental Society, the Academy of Veterinary Dentistry, and the American Veterinary Dental College.

In North America, designation as a specialist in veterinary dentistry is limited to Diplomates of the American Veterinary Dental College (AVDC), or board certified veterinarians who have demonstrated specialist knowledge and expertise in veterinary dentistry as a result of completing the AVDC training requirements and have successfully passed the AVDC examination.

## Medical Concerns

Proper dental care involves the manipulation of living tissue. Animal teeth, just like human teeth, are composed of vital tissues that must be treated in such a way as to preserve or restore health of those tissues. In addition to the teeth themselves, the gingiva, periodontal tissues, and other structures within the animal's mouth must be professionally evaluated and treated for disease when necessary. Examination, diagnosis, treatment and prognosis of abnormal or diseased dental/oral structures can only be legally provided by licensed veterinarians.



A key to proper dental care for animals is appropriate instrumentation and its use.

- Veterinarians use surgical grade light sources and instruments or assistance to see all structures in a patient's mouth. Complete dental care cannot be provided without proper visualization.
- All dental instruments should be properly cleaned and disinfected after each and every patient without exception.
- A veterinarian that practices dentistry will likely have more than 100 motorized and non-motorized instruments on site that they use to provide proper and safe dental care.

Sedation and anesthetic drugs are necessary to have on hand and employ when appropriate during a proper dental examination and treatments. Only a licensed veterinarian can legally and safely administer these drugs.

Veterinarians are trained in advanced medical imaging and can perform or order the necessary imaging for making a complete and accurate diagnosis.

Any veterinary medical procedure must be properly documented with a legal medical record. Failure to record results of an examination, treatment plan, and follow-up is not only illegal but dangerous to the consumer's animals.

## Legal and Liability Issues

Drugs used to sedate or anesthetize animals are at times essential tools for a veterinarian to provide proper care. Possession, transportation and use of these substances without proper medical licensing is illegal under federal and state law, is very dangerous to animals, and subject to enforcement by local, state, and federal authorities including the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Since veterinary dentistry can only be provided legally in Washington by a licensed Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, consumers should understand that contracting for these services with a non-licensed individual or group is outside the law and may therefore invalidate business liability coverage for commercial boarding and training operations that contract to keep horses or dogs for members of the public.

Using non-medically trained animal dentists outside the law presents an increased personal liability risk for boarding and training business owners with individual clients seeking compensation for any damages they believe have occurred.

The average consumer believes the terms "dentist" and "performing dentistry" refer to someone with at least eight years of higher education. To portray oneself in this manner without the attendant training and a valid license is fraudulent.

Washington consumers of veterinary dental services are advised to seek out only licensed veterinarians to provide those services. Anything less represents an unacceptably lowered standard of care, is illegal, and dangerous to the animals involved.

The WSVMA suggests consumers seeking veterinary dental services consult our free database of veterinarians available at [www.wsvma.org](http://www.wsvma.org).

### Washington State Veterinary Medical Association

[www.wsvma.org](http://www.wsvma.org)

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