The Veterinary Companion Animal Surveillance System (VetCompass) collates and analyses data from primary-care veterinary practices to reveal vital information on the health and welfare of companion animals in the UK. The project, which is led by the Royal Veterinary College in collaboration with the University of Sydney, aims to improve the welfare of companion animals by investigating the frequency of and risk factors for disorders recorded by veterinary surgeons. The outputs of these studies support an evidence-based approach that is highly relevant to primary-care practitioners. The project also aims to facilitate practices with internal analysis of their own data and to generate valuable benchmarking information.

To date, 190 veterinary clinics have shared data on over 3.5 million episodes of care relating to 601,334 animals. These data have been used to estimate the prevalence of and identify risk factors for epilepsy of unknown origin, chronic kidney disease and diabetes mellitus in dogs and hyperthyroidism in cats. Other studies have explored the geographical distribution of disease, usage of antimicrobials and glucocorticoids in practice and longevity of dogs. VetCompass studies supported by the RSPCA and the Kennel Club Charitable Trust have revealed unique insights into the extent to which dog breeds are affected by inherited disorders. A Dogs Trust Welfare Grant has recently been awarded to fund a VetCompass project entitled 'Evidence-based prioritisation of canine inherited diseases', which will progress and re-focus the priorities for improving canine health.

Pet Plan Charitable Trust is supporting a novel study exploring the survival of dogs with degenerative mitral valve disease that will evaluate the prognostic value of cardiac biomarkers and simple clinical measurements in the primary-care setting. The VetCompass project will run indefinitely and aims to recruit as many veterinary practices as possible. Currently, practices with recent versions of RxWorks, Teleos, Vet-One and ezVetPro practice management systems are able to share data with the VetCompass database. These systems offer a standardised list of diagnostic terms (VeNom codes, www.venomcoding.org), from which appropriate diagnostic terms can be recorded at episodes of care. VeNom terms are rapidly selected from a dropdown list of matching or related terms by typing in the first few letters of the diagnosis, or the first letters of more than one word. Practice staff and VetCompass researchers can subsequently use VeNom codes to identify animals that were assigned a specific diagnosis. Data shared with VetCompass include demographic data (e.g. species, breed, sex), VeNom diagnostic codes, treatments prescribed and clinical notes. De-identified data are automatically uploaded to a secure database at the RVC, making participation in the project time-neutral. No personal client information or financial details are shared and all data collection is fully compliant with data protection legislation. The aims of the VetCompass project are endorsed by organisations including SPVS, RCVS and BVA (VetCompass 2013).

In addition to facilitating VetCompass research, recording VeNom codes allows practices to better analyse their own data. Such internal analyses have many applications including clinical audit to evaluate responses to protocol changes as well as assisting decision-making to identify equipment or training needs and encouraging practice led research. VeNom terms enable faster reviewing of patient histories and completion of insurance claim forms without lengthy interrogation of free text clinical notes that may be plagued by colloquial terms, abbreviations and misspellings. Practices participating in VetCompass are acknowledged on the project website and provided with posters and leaflets to promote their involvement with welfare-focused research to clients. Further benefits, such as free CPD and subsidised diagnostic tests are also available for specific projects within VetCompass.

The VetCompass project provides a valuable resource that will both improve the health and welfare of companion animals and also offer significant clinical and management benefits to collaborating veterinary practitioners.

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