

Author: Paul Waldau, D.Phil., J.D.

1. Acronyms from Tannenbaum 1995

Many of the problems you encounter will have multiple dimensions. A principal cause of this complexity is the fact that you as healer represent two very distinct interests: the patient *and* the client.

The following acronym will help you remember a convenient list of different kinds of "interests" to be identified in various fact situations.

1.1 SePACKProSo

The acronym is composed of the initial letters from seven different kinds of interests that Tannenbaum has identified (he elaborates on these interests in Chapter 6 generally):

- **S**elf-oriented interests
- **P**atient-oriented interests
- **A**nimal-oriented interests (general animal interests, often at the level of species or perhaps compassion for individuals generally)
- **C**lient-oriented interests
- **K**nowledge/science/theory-oriented interests
- **P**rofession-oriented interests
- **S**ociety-oriented interests
(Source: Tannenbaum 1995, *Veterinary Ethics*, 47, Table 6-1, "Mapping the Values of Veterinarians")

1.2 DOAN

Tannenbaum also is helpful in pointing out "veterinary ethics" has a number of levels. This acronym will help you remember these different levels or kinds of veterinary ethics. The acronym is composed of the initial letters from these words:

- "**D**escriptive veterinary ethics" (local community)
- "**O**fficial veterinary ethics" (professional organization guidelines)
- "**A**ministrative veterinary ethics" (government rules—violation leads to civil or criminal penalties)
- "**N**ormative veterinary ethics" (looking for "correct moral standards"—what might be called objective criteria of right/wrong, good/bad behavior, justice/injustice; this approach typifies ethics courses offered by university philosophy departments)
(Source: Tannenbaum 1995, Chapter 2)

2. Some Practical Guidelines

1. **When you get into practice, you do *not* need to have a lawyer available immediately.**

But it would help if you knew the names of several lawyers who (a) have good reputations for fairness, (b) know the area of veterinary malpractice, and (c) are in or near your community. **If you meet a lawyer in your community, ask some simple, common sense questions**, like “Are you familiar with veterinary practice?” It will help if the lawyer is familiar with the realities of what veterinarians face.

2. **If you are going to talk to a lawyer, interview several** lawyers early on in the process. Waiting until the last minute will likely cause you problems.
3. **What to do when you get served with legal papers**—Contact an attorney immediately, or your insurer if you have one (your liability policy most likely requires you to notify your insurer “immediately”). What you discuss with your attorneys will typically be “privileged,” that is, not available to anyone else at any time. If you contact the other side, however, recognize that whatever you say will be admissible in court.
There are **important deadlines** that **begin running as soon as you are served with papers**. For example, many states give you thirty days within which to respond to a complaint in which you are named as a defendant in a civil matter. These deadlines can vary depending on the kind of legal process that has been started. Whatever the time limit, it can often be extended, but the opposition can cause you extremely serious problems if you do not comply strictly with the applicable deadlines.
While it is possible for a lawsuit to start without you being served personally with a complaint or other document that begins the legal clock ticking, it is rare. Sometimes defendants intentionally avoid service, or defendants cannot be found after a diligent search—in such cases, the court sometime permits service of the papers by “publication”, that is, an ad in a newspaper.
4. **What to do when you want to sue someone**—Be aware that your right to sue someone else in the civil courts is almost always subject to a deadline, usually known as a statute of limitations. These time limits vary tremendously. Typically, when suing the government there are very short statutes of limitations. When suing private individuals, the length of the statute of limitations usually varies depending on the kind of claim you want to bring. In some jurisdictions, for example, you may have only one year to sue for recovery after an automobile accident, three years for fraud (which is a tort), and four years for breach of contract. Importantly, recognize that these time limits vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. So consult an attorney or your insurer as early as you can.
5. **If you need to retain an attorney for a new matter**, you can get the names of prospective attorneys from the local bar association. The lawyers whose names you are given may not be the best lawyers in

your community—the local bar association gives out the names of virtually anyone who lists their name with that bar association. You'll have to do some research and use common sense to determine which lawyer will serve you best. You may want to establish an ongoing relationship with an attorney in your community whom you can consult whenever you have questions. Fee arrangements for this kind of relationship vary. Some attorneys bill you by the hour, and others will accept a set monthly fee (a retainer) that allows you to call whenever you have a question.

6. **Keep written notes of important conversations** that you suspect or know to have important legal ramifications. It is possible that your notes may in some instances be "discoverable" (see Glossary) by the opposing side. You should always alert your own attorney to whatever notes you have taken. In many cases, such notes have proved the difference in avoiding a lawsuit or in successfully moving against someone else.
7. **Keep good file records** beyond the minimum that your profession requires.
8. **Generally, if you speak and act honestly and have good records**, regularly confirm your agreements with others in writing, and refrain from public statements that are untrue and harmful to others, **you will minimize your exposure to legal problems.**