

Evaluation vs. Diagnosis in Animal Chiropractic Care

Clarifying Scope, Safety, and Statutory Consistency

Purpose

This memo clarifies the distinction between evaluation and diagnosis in animal chiropractic care, addresses concerns raised by veterinary stakeholders, and provides statutory and professional frameworks supporting safe, limited-scope practice.

Evaluation (Animal Chiropractic Scope)

An evaluation is a functional neuromusculoskeletal assessment used to determine whether an animal is appropriate and safe for chiropractic manual care, to identify vertebral or extremity joint dysfunction, and to screen for contraindications requiring veterinary referral. Evaluation does not include diagnosing disease.

Diagnosis (Veterinary Medicine Scope)

Veterinary diagnosis involves identifying and naming disease or pathological conditions, including systemic, infectious, neurologic, metabolic, or structural disease, and determining medical or surgical treatment. This remains within the exclusive scope of licensed veterinarians.

Can Evaluation Occur Without Veterinary Diagnosis?

Yes. Evaluation and diagnosis are related but not equivalent. Animal chiropractors make limited clinical judgments related to functional joint assessment and care suitability, not veterinary disease diagnosis. This distinction is reflected in multiple state statutes.

Examples of State Statutory Language

Ohio: Defines animal chiropractic as the "*evaluation and treatment of an animal's vertebral or extremity joint dysfunction*" (Ohio Rev. Code §4734.151).

Minnesota: Permits "*animal chiropractic diagnosis and treatment*" while explicitly excluding traditional veterinary diagnosis (Minn. Stat. §148.01).

Colorado: Defines animal chiropractic as "*diagnosing and treating animal vertebral subluxation*", reflecting a chiropractic-specific finding rather than disease diagnosis (C.R.S. §12-215-103).

Maine (Stakeholder Draft Language): Uses "*evaluation and treatment of joint dysfunction*" and requires veterinary referral when findings exceed chiropractic scope.

AVCA Training and Red-Flag Identification

Chiropractors who are certified by the American Veterinary Chiropractic Association (AVCA) receive formal training in recognizing red flags that may indicate systemic disease, neurologic conditions, fractures, infections, or other non-chiropractic issues. This training emphasizes prompt referral to a licensed veterinarian when findings fall outside the chiropractic scope or suggest underlying disease requiring veterinary diagnosis or medical intervention.

Patient Safety and Referral Safeguards

Animal chiropractors do not replace veterinary diagnosis. Patient safety is maintained through defined scope limits, red-flag screening, documentation, and timely referral to veterinarians when signs suggest disease processes outside the chiropractic scope.

Professional Organization Alignment

AVCA and IVCA standards emphasize practicing within scope, patient welfare, documentation, and referral when findings exceed competence. Both organizations support functional evaluation with appropriate veterinary collaboration.

Summary

Animal chiropractors evaluate function, not disease; do not diagnose veterinary medical conditions; are trained to identify red flags requiring veterinary referral; and refer to veterinarians when indicated. This approach is consistent with statutory language across multiple states and professional standards.