

# A Guide for Training Providers and Practices: Religious Clothing and Beliefs

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## Veterinary Nursing



**September 2023**



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# Guidance on Religious Clothing and Beliefs

## Background

The original guidance was a key output of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Student Support Working Group. The Working Group was established to explore issues in supporting BAME veterinary students during their studies and to propose recommendations to improve their experience. The document was produced in collaboration with staff and students at the University of Liverpool and the University of Surrey.

The guidance was created with the aim that it can be customised and adapted for use by other higher education institutions, veterinary environments, and organisations across the veterinary sector.

## This version of the document

The VN Futures Diversity, Inclusivity and Widening Participation Group (DIWP) adapted and developed this version of the guidance so that it is applicable and relevant to the veterinary nursing profession.





# Introduction

All students studying for a veterinary nursing qualification or working within practice need to be able to study and/or work in a safe and supportive environment without fear of prejudice. These values are supported by both the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) and the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA).

As part of the RCVS and BVNA commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion, it is imperative that, where possible, veterinary nursing students and team members of every religious, cultural, and social group are included. The aim of this practical guide is to highlight to training centre staff, students, placement providers, veterinary nurses and practices, that reasonable accommodations may be offered to or requested by students or team members for reasons of religious beliefs. Considerations of animal health and welfare, and public health (for example, local infection control policies), should be taken into account and will take precedence over the guidance in this document.

## Veterinary practices

The document also provides guidance that can be utilised by veterinary practices and other workplace environments in the veterinary sector, to ensure that reasonable accommodations can be offered to veterinary nursing staff members holding different religious beliefs.



**BVNA**  
British Veterinary  
Nursing Association



## **1. Requesting that a reasonable accommodation be made**

Should any veterinary nursing student or team member wish to request that a reasonable accommodation be made on the grounds of religious beliefs, then an approach to the member of staff responsible for that area of work or study should be initially made. The request can then be assessed, and the relevant members of staff can be informed.

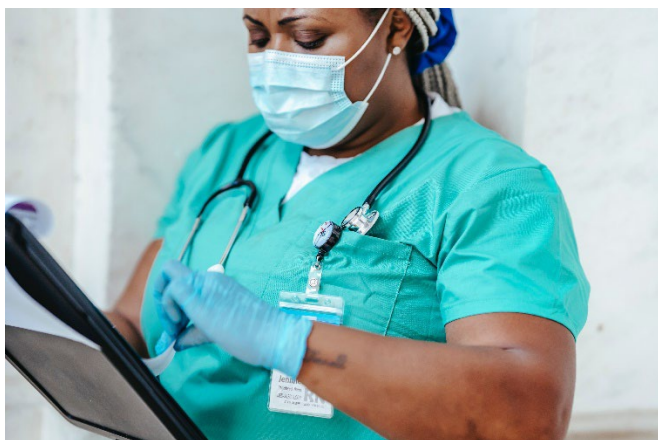
Where appropriate, the training centre or practice should then make reasonable adjustments to facilitate the request in-line with local policies. Where a request for accommodations on the grounds of religious beliefs do not comply with local policies, then the student or team member must abide with the regulations of the training centre or practice.

It could be considered appropriate that new team members (including locum staff and students on placement) are asked if they have any religious beliefs so that any reasonable accommodations can be planned for.

## **2. Uniforms and workwear policy**

### **2.1 'Bare below the elbows' policy**

In 2007 the Department of Health (DH) published a document 'Uniforms and workwear: An evidence base for developing local policy,' which was further updated over the years with its latest iteration published by NHS England and NHS Improvement in 2022. This document widely became known as the 'bare below the elbows' policy and it aims to help combat infection.



The policy emphasised the vital importance of hand washing as part of infection control. In line with this policy, it is common that veterinary nursing training centres and practices adopt similar guidelines, and when involved in direct patient care activity, a strict 'bare below the elbows' approach must be followed.

Any sleeve must be able to be rolled or pulled back and kept securely in place during hand-washing and direct patient care activity. Therefore, any personnel who come in to contact with patients or contaminants must wash/sanitise their hands between patients and additionally, an individual may need to wash their hands several times when examining or treating the same patient.

To maintain asepsis in certain procedures, personnel who require below-elbow coverage for religious reasons will need to use long plastic gloves that cover below the elbow to prevent contamination to a patient. In the theatre suite, long sleeves are not permitted when scrubbing up for surgery. Long sleeve gowns used in theatre may be acceptable (see section 4.2).

Local exceptions to this rule may be agreed, for example, between a veterinary nursing student or team member and the practice where they are undertaking their placement or working, but any exceptions should not compromise animal health and welfare and/or public health.

## **2.2 Dress codes**

It is important to understand that the development of any dress code should be decided locally within each training centre and/or practice. Dress codes remain the responsibility of each individual department and workplace and may vary between departments on the same site for health and safety reasons. Team members and students alike need to be aware that dress permitted at one placement or practice may not be permitted at another, depending on decisions made by the clinical managers and the local infection prevention and control team. The same may apply to external placement providers for which the training centres have no authority to override.



## 3. Forearms

### 3.1 Sleeve length

Due to cultural or religious reasons, during times when individuals are not directly on certain clinics and treating patients, some veterinary nursing students and other team members may not wish to expose their forearms.

Taking the advice of the [National Institute for Clinical Excellence Guidelines Equality Impact Assessment Form Recommendations](#), if the exposure of forearms is not acceptable due to religious faith, clothing may include provision for sleeves that can be full or  $\frac{3}{4}$  length when personnel are not engaged in direct patient care, but they must not be loose or dangling.

The sleeves must also be able to be rolled or pulled back and kept securely in place during hand washing and direct patient care. Additionally, disposable over-sleeves, elasticated at the elbow and wrist, may be used, but must be put on and discarded in the same manner as disposable gloves, ie changed between patients. Veterinary nurses and students are, however, required to comply with any local infection control or other regulations with regard to the permitted length of sleeves.

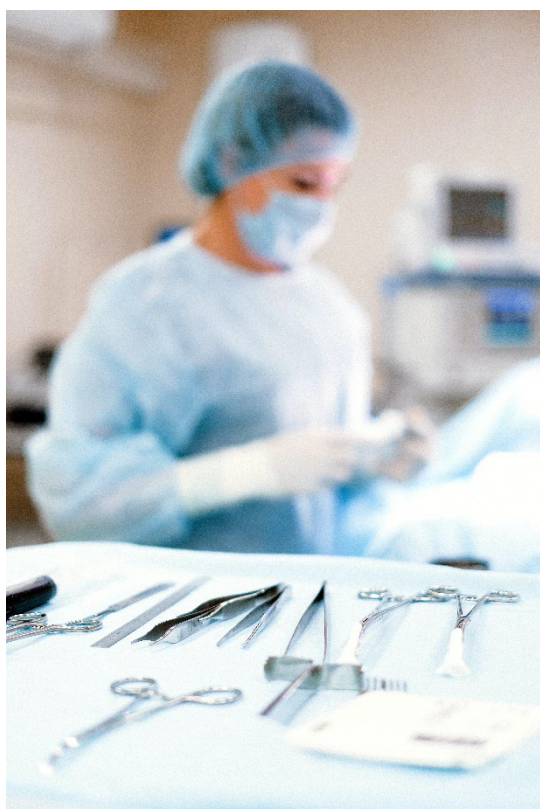




## 4. Surgery

### 4.1 Surgical attire

All veterinary nursing team members and students are required to be able to correctly scrub into surgical procedures. It is recognised that this may be problematic for some as it will involve exposing the forearm to surgically scrub, and potentially whilst being supervised by a male colleague.



### 4.2 Request for a reasonable accommodation

For cultural or religious reasons some females may wish to be observed by a female staff member when scrubbing in, and reasonable accommodation should be made for this to happen, whilst being aware that it may not always be possible to make such an accommodation due to staff availability.

While training centres may have no authority to facilitate this for placements, they should make placement providers aware of such requests, so that advance planning can be made.





## 5. Alcohol-based hand gel

According to advice obtained from the 'Muslim Spiritual Care Provision' project in the NHS, alcohol-based hand gel contains synthetic alcohol and so does not fall within the Muslim prohibition against natural alcohol (made from fermented fruit or grain). Alcohol-based gel is used widely in Islamic countries within healthcare settings and so it is permissible for Muslims to use such gels.

There are other religions that prohibit alcohol, including certain groups within Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Sikhism.





## General guidance on attire

### 6. Suitable clothing

Veterinary work can be physically demanding and may require personnel to sit or kneel on the floor when dealing with patients, especially in a small animal environment. Flat shoes with enclosed toes are mandatory for all personnel to prevent inadvertent injury. Veterinary nurses may wear head coverings when in a clinical environment as well as a skirt over trousers. However, long flowing skirts or very long heavily flared trousers are not permissible as they can easily be caught and are a significant risk in the clinical environment.

#### 6.1 Loose dress

As part of their religious or cultural observance, to avoid showing the contours of their body, some personnel may wish to wear loose clothing such as a jilbab (a loose dress from neck to ankle which covers the arms including the wrists) or a chador (a full-body cloak).

It should be permitted to wear loose clothing as long as this does not impede:

- Direct patient contact
- Working with staff or students
- Examining a patient
- Health and safety while undertaking lab work

#### 6.2. Equine and farm environments

Sturdy footwear is required for all personnel when on farm and equine work on the grounds of health and safety, and overalls and relevant protective clothing may also be required. Head protection (hard hat or riding hat) is also required for veterinary nursing personnel at all times around horses, with the exception of turban-wearing Sikhs who are exempt from these requirements (see Section 8).



### 6.3 Laboratory coats

Inside laboratories, all personnel must wear laboratory coats over their clothes and must be able to close the coat up completely or wear an appropriate uniform and other protective clothing.



### 6.4 Trailing clothing

Apart from shoes, personnel must not wear any clothing that touches the floor, as this could potentially pick up contamination from the floor surface, dangle in chemical or biological hazards, or become a trip hazard.

### 6.5 Personal protective equipment

Individuals must be able to wear the full range of personal protective equipment such as gloves, eye protection eg safety glasses or face shields, full face masks and a filtering face mask in certain areas or during certain procedures. Head wear must always allow individuals full frontal and peripheral vision and must allow for communication in an unobstructed manner especially during emergency situations or when alarms are sounding.



## Specific considerations

The following provides information on specific items of clothing or other items significant to particular faiths. All of these items should be permitted to be worn on campus, placements and within practice, however further guidance is given for situations where exceptions may need to be made – for example in surgical settings.

Where local rules are protective of patients and the public, then the local rule should be followed in the first instance.

If local rules can be amended or adapted without risk to the public and patients to allow expression of religious beliefs and meet the requirements of this religion, then accommodations should be made.

### 7. The Headscarf

For religious reasons, some personnel will choose to cover their hair, ears and/or neck but leave the face exposed by wearing a headscarf such as a hijab, tichel or chunni.

In surgical settings veterinary nursing students and other team members can continue to wear a religious headscarf provided it is itself covered by appropriate surgical head-coverings.

Alternatively, sterile, disposable head coverings are available from medical equipment providers and should be issued to veterinary nursing students and other team members as required.

Where the headscarf has a trailing or loose end which may hang down when bending down, presenting an infection control risk, it should be tucked in or pinned down where possible.



## 8. The Turban

For cultural or religious reasons some Sikh team members may wish to wear a turban.



In surgical settings a theatre head-covering to appropriately cover the turban can be used. Turban-wearing Sikhs are exempted from any legal requirement to wear head protection at a workplace under the Employment Act, including when working in an equine or farm setting.

## 9. The Yarmulke

For cultural or religious observance some Jewish students and team members may wish to wear the yarmulke skullcap.

In surgical settings, a theatre head covering that appropriately covers the head and yarmulke should be worn.



## 10. Face Veil

As part of their religious or cultural observance, some personnel may wish to wear a veil, such as a half-face veil (eg a niqab) or a full-face veil (eg a burka).

Effective communication is an important skill that is needed by all veterinary professionals. Face veils are permitted on religious grounds, provided that patient care, health and safety, infection control and security and safety of patients, staff and students is not compromised. However, veterinary nursing students and other team members may be required to expose their face in certain clinical settings and in some teaching situations where this is deemed important for communication with another person. In these situations, it may therefore be permissible to request that an individual removes their face veil. This request should be made by a senior member of the team and the request logged.

### In practice

While on placements, all students are expected to comply with each individual establishment's dress policy and infection control regarding the niqab or burka.

## 11. Identification checks

An individual's identity may need to be verified for security reasons. On campus this is often done by checking photographic ID. In order to verify the identity of an individual wearing a facial covering, we recommend that an appropriate colleague should, wherever possible, perform this identity check in a private viewing area.

However, if a suitable staff member is not available, unveiling for another member of staff may be necessary. Checks must always be conducted in a sensitive and respectful manner.



## 12. The Kara: steel bangle

Sikhs may choose to wear the Kara; a sacred bracelet made of steel. The Kara is an article of faith and in the Sikh tradition it should not be removed.

During hand washing, scrubbing for surgery and direct patient care activity it is recommended that Sikh personnel should ensure that the Kara is pushed up the forearm and secured in place with tape just above or below the elbow.

Provided that it is taped to the arm just above or below the elbow, practices should allow Sikhs to wear the Kara when in surgical theatre.





### 13. The Kirpan: Ceremonial Sword

A Sikh may be uninitiated or initiated. Initiated Sikhs are required to wear the Kirpan (a ceremonial sword). The Kirpan is carried in a sheath attached to a cloth belt. It is normally worn discreetly under clothes and most people would be unaware that a Sikh was carrying a Kirpan. The size of the Kirpan may differ depending on the personal taste of the initiated Sikh but may be only a few inches.

Under the 1988 Criminal Justice Act, the Kirpan is **not** classified as an offensive weapon and therefore Sikhs carrying the Kirpan are exempt from prosecution under the Offensive Weapons Act 2008.

Training providers and practices should be mindful that not everyone will be familiar with the full significance of the Kirpan. In order to avoid undue alarm to others, when on campus, wearers of the Kirpan must ensure this item is worn discreetly.

This means that the Kirpan should remain out of sight by such methods as:

- Tucking it inside clothes
- Tucking it inside a belt and ensuring the wearer's clothes cover the belt

Any person wearing the Kirpan should also ensure it is secured so it cannot easily be drawn.

If a veterinary nurse or student needs to scrub in to take part in a surgical procedure, then practices may require that the Kirpan is taped securely to their body.





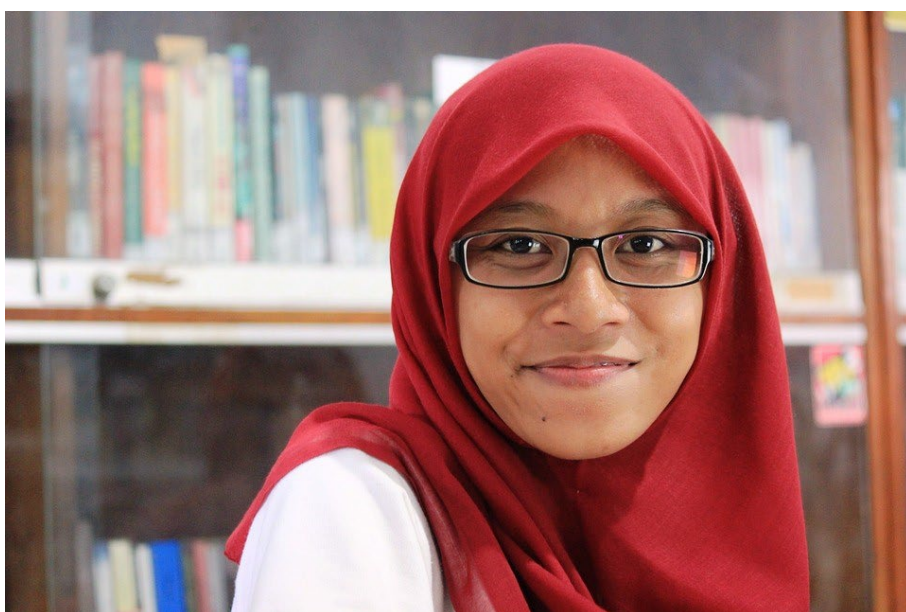
## 14. Changes to the academic or exam timetable and workplace rotas

### 14.1 Religious Observance policy

We recommend that policies be put in place to allow veterinary nursing students and veterinary nurses to request a change to their academic or work timetable for reasons of religious observance. Such requests should be dealt with fairly and with due consideration of the Equality Act and any other relevant legislation, as well as any impact that changes may have on the individual's learning outcomes or requirements of the practice.

### 14.2 'Religious Observance and Exams' policy

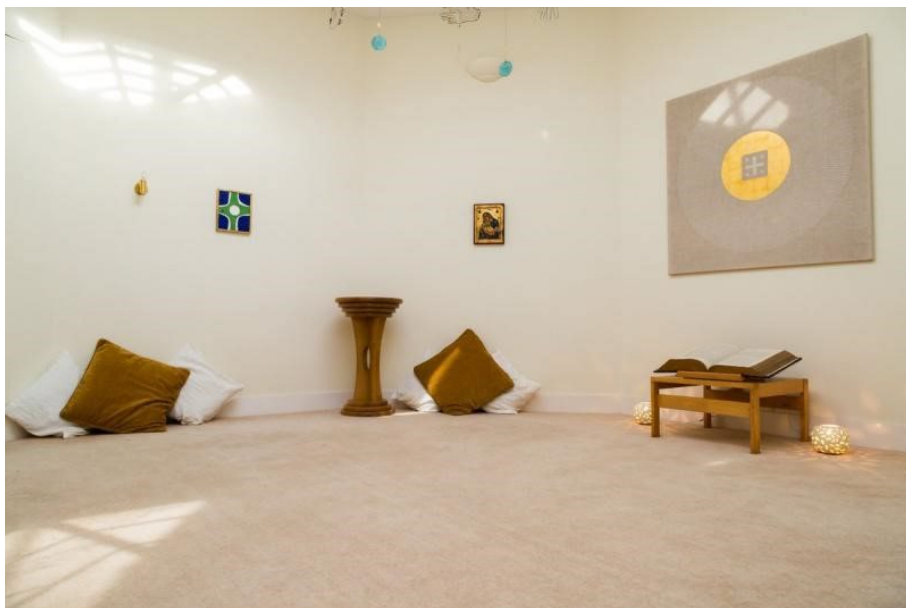
We recommend that training centres have a policy in place that allows veterinary nursing students to make requests for a change to be made to their exam timetables on the grounds of religious observance. Such a policy should outline the circumstances under which the training centre may be able to offer reasonable adjustments and all requests should be dealt with fairly and with due consideration of relevant legislation, and any impact changes may have on the individual's learning outcomes.





## 15. Multi-faith and quiet contemplation (MFQC) rooms

It is recommended that MFQC rooms are provided on campus, on placement and within practice where possible.



Further guidance on provision of MFQC rooms can be found here:

<https://wudumate.com/articles/tips-for-designing-a-multi-faith-room/>

## 16. Food

Training centres and practices should take steps to provide facilities that cater for specific food needs based on religious beliefs eg. Halal or Kosher foods.

If any team member has special dietary requirements due to religious beliefs, then the team member must be prepared to make their own arrangements with regards to food. Placements should not be changed because of an individual's dietary requirements.

We recommend that team members entering a period of religious fasting inform the training centre or practice, allowing plenty of notice to discuss how the fasting may impact their time in work or on placement. Any requests for reasonable

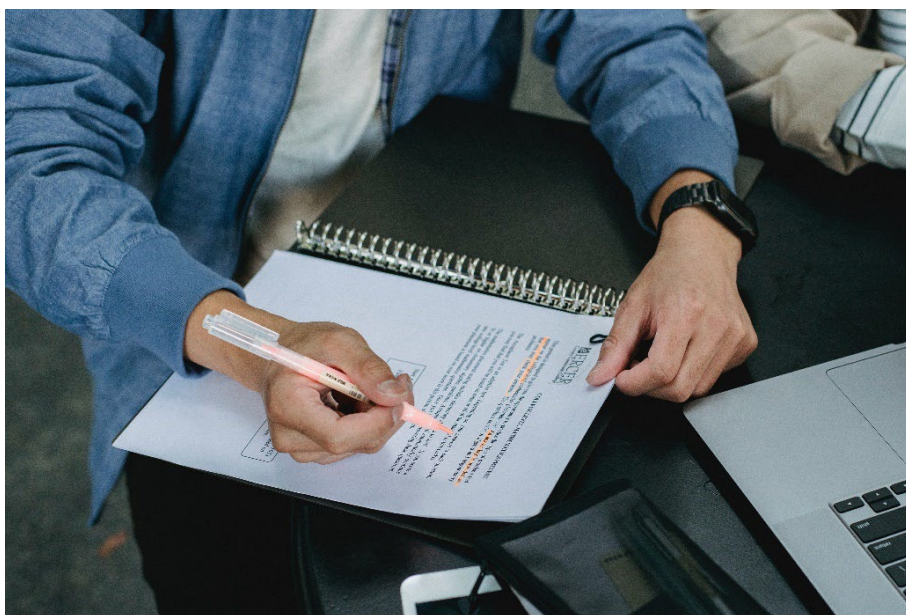


accommodations (such as additional time for prayers) should be considered by the placement provider or practice.

## 17. Keeping a record of requests

We recommend that records are kept of all requests for religious accommodations and that the team member is made aware of this. This information may include for example:

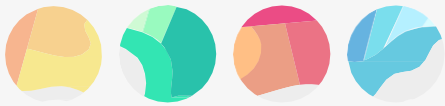
- The team member's programme
- The team member's role
- The team member's religion or belief
- The nature of the accommodation requested
- If the accommodation was made, how so, if not, why not – so as to record the 'objective justification' to refusing such an accommodation.



Please note that religious belief is regarded as a special category as part of the GDPR and should be treated accordingly.

Further information on GDPR can be found here: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/>

Anonymised information can be used for equality, diversity and inclusivity monitoring purposes.



VN Futures is a collaborative project between the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and the British Veterinary Nursing Association

[www.vnfutures.org.uk](http://www.vnfutures.org.uk)

[info@vnfutures.org.uk](mailto:info@vnfutures.org.uk)

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