Mandatory microchips: how they affect veterinary nurses

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The Government is bringing in compulsory dog microchipping from 6 April to help reunite owners with lost or stolen pets, relieve the burden on animal charities and local authorities, and protect the welfare of dogs by promoting responsible ownership.

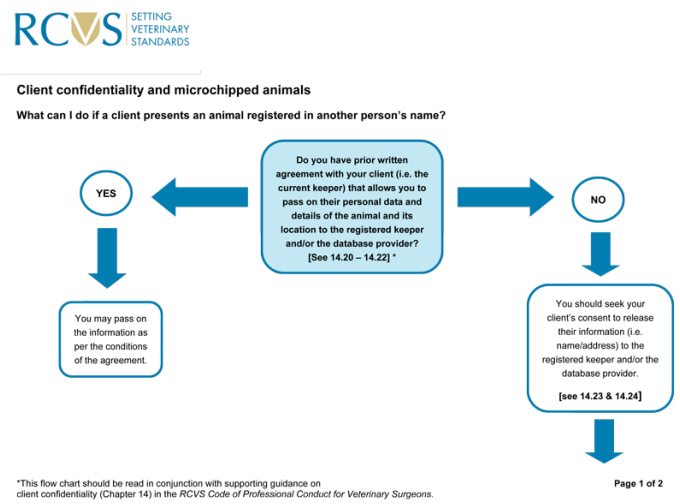


Figure 1. The RCVS offers guidance where a microchip is registered in another person's name. Image: RCVS.

Problems will arise with the enforcement of this and it does rely on owners updating their information on the database regarding their dog.

At present, it is a legal requirement for all dogs to wear a collar and a tag with information containing details on how to contact the owner, but this rarely occurs in dogs brought in as strays. It is common for pets to be presented to veterinary practices as strays, have a microchip found, but the owner's information is incorrect, therefore he or she is unreachable.

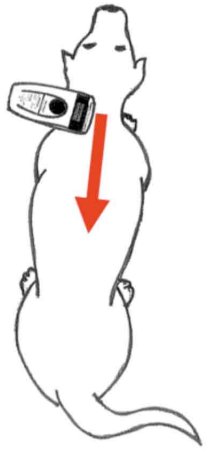
Around eight million pet dogs exist in the UK and nearly 60% are microchipped. After 6 April, owners of dogs found by the police or local authorities not to have a microchip will have the benefits explained to them and be given 21 days to comply with the microchipping law. If they do not, they will face a fine of up to £500.

Each year, 110,000 stray dogs are picked up by police, local authorities and animal welfare charities, and more than half (52%) cannot be reunited because their owners could not be identified. Six thousand dogs are euthanised each year because their owners are unknown and the dogs cannot be rehomed due to various reasons.

All puppies will require microchip implantation at eight weeks of age. As puppies should be with their mothers until that age, it may fall on breeders to have the puppies microchipped. However, those puppies sold at eight weeks without a microchip will have to be taken to a veterinary surgeon to have a chip implanted. With recent technology, smaller chips are available, which are ideal for implantation in small animals – especially puppies and small exotic species.

It is vital parties that implant and check microchips scan all animals to ensure they haven't been lost or stolen – this includes puppies and kittens. When chips are found, many readers just display the microchip number; however, some readers also display whether the pet has been reported lost or stolen. If a client presents an animal registered in another person's name, the RCVS has provided flow charts that should be used showing where to seek further guidance (**Figure 1**).

a.



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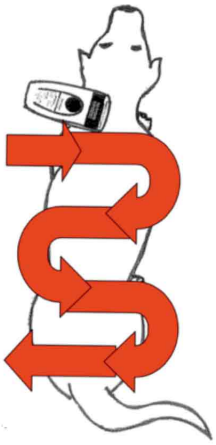

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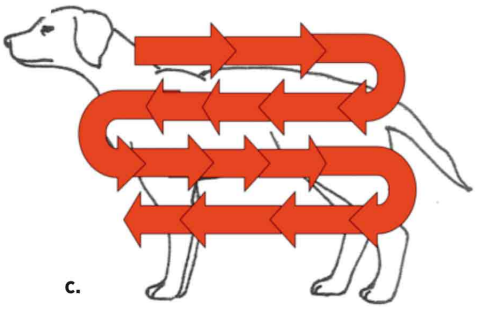

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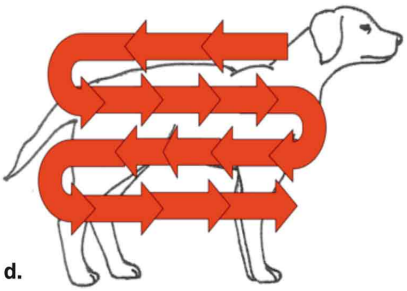

Figure 2. The methodical technique used to locate a microchip in a dog.

Where microchips have migrated, it is the RVN's responsibility to inform the owner of this. When scanning a pet it is important to use a methodical standardised pattern to ensure the full area is scanned (**Figure 2**):

- Hold the scanner over the surface of the animal so the scanning "hot spot" is in contact with the fur.
- Scan slowly – the scanner needs time to transmit the signal and the microchip needs time to respond. The scanner should be gently rocked from side to side during scanning – this action helps maximise the potential for success by allowing for slight deviation in chip positioning.
- If the microchip isn't present in the usual area (a) then the rest of the animal should be thoroughly scanned. Scan in a slow S-shaped pattern down the back of the animal, starting from the left shoulder (b).
- Repeat the slow S-shaped pattern on both sides of the animal from head to tail (c and d).

If a microchip is still not found, slowly scan the chest and abdomen using the same S-shaped pattern from head to tail.

Who can implant microchips?

Section 9 of The Microchipping of Dogs (England) Regulations 2015 stipulates no person may implant a microchip in a dog unless:

- he or she is a vet – or a VN acting under the direction of a vet
- he or she is a student of veterinary surgery or a student VN and, in either case, acting under the direction of a vet
- he or she has have been satisfactorily assessed on a training course approved by the Secretary of State for that purpose
- before the day on which the regulations come into force, he or she received training on implantation, which included practical experience of implanting a microchip

Defra can advise on training courses approved for the teaching of microchip implantation and holds a list of qualified non-veterinary microchip implanters. RVNs and enrolled student nurses working under the direction of a vet do not have to undertake an additional training course as adequate training should be available in-house during the student nurse's training.

Free resources are available on The American Animal Hospital Association's website, with an hour-long webinar on all the practical aspects of microchip implantation, scanning and theoretical

aspects of how microchips and scanners work. Website registration is also free.

Microchipping in horses

In 2009, new regulations came into effect concerning passports in all EU member states for equines. All horses, ponies and donkeys must have a horse passport as it helps prevent the sale of a stolen horse, pony or donkey, with the passport proving its identity. The passport is also used to record medications that have been used on the animal, so horses treated with certain medicines don't end up as food for humans – though this does not always happen.

On application of a passport, mandatory microchipping is required. The microchip must be implanted by a veterinary surgeon, as implantation into the nuchal ligament is deemed an act of veterinary surgery.

The animal's rider or keeper must have the passport with him or her at all times when with the animal, unless it is in a stable, grazing in a field or being moved by foot. Owners can take their animals for short rides without one. The horse's main keeper may have to show the passport to a Trading Standards inspector or animal health officer as a fine of up to £5,000 exists for horses without a valid passport.

Where a pony is individually identified in the lists kept by stud book holders (for example, New Forest or Dartmoor ponies), an owner is not required to microchip the pony and apply for a passport, provided it is not moved (other than temporarily for welfare reasons – for example, to back-up grazing to improve condition, recover from illness/injury, weaning and so on) from the designated area.

Ponies may be taken to kennels without a microchip/passport as they are still within the designated area. Problems have risen when ponies grazed on common grounds (for example, Bodmin Moor) have been found in a neglected state and no owners can be traced. Equines that had a passport prior to 2009 do not require microchipping.

Pet Travel Scheme

Figure 3. Under the Pet Travel Scheme microchips are compulsory for pets travelling abroad. Image: Vetkit/iStock.

Microchips are compulsory for pets travelling abroad under the Pet Travel Scheme (PETS). Defra does not specify a particular type or brand of microchip (**Figure 3**) to be used; however, in Europe, International Standards Organisation (ISO) microchips meeting specifications 11784 or Annex A of ISO standard 11785 are generally used. ISO standards are used in Europe, so vets and transport companies undertaking pet travel checks are likely to have only ISO-compatible microchip scanners.

If the microchip does not meet either of these ISO standards, it is the owner's responsibility to ensure it can be read on entry to the UK. This may mean he or she will need to provide a microchip reader (at his or her own expense). Some ports of entry may have equipment capable of reading other microchip types and this should be checked before travelling – if not, the animal may be refused entry. It can be placed into quarantine and released early once it has met all PETS requirements.

If an appropriate scanner does not read the animal's microchip at the first attempt, further attempts should be made moving the scanner slowly and thoroughly over the animal. A more powerful scanner should be tried, if available. Always check the correct battery types have been used in the reader and that they are not depleted. It is, therefore, vital owners are advised if non-ISO microchips are used they might not be suitable for PETS.

Microchip Adverse Event Reporting Scheme

Vets and VNs should report an adverse reaction to, or the failure of, a microchip to the VMD. Further information about the Microchip Adverse Event Reporting Scheme is available from the VMD's Pharmacovigilance Unit by telephoning 01932 338427 and reports can be submitted online. The VMD closely monitors all reports to identify emerging issues and will feed back any concerns to the chip manufacturer and Microchip Trade Association.

Other microchip uses

More microchip products are becoming available as technology evolves, with innovations pushing the boundaries. Microchips are also used for security tagging – these can be implanted in saddles and similar technology is being used for tagging skis and snowboards. Microchips can also be implanted into foam, which is placed inside the frames of cycles and, in those with solid frames, the chip can be glued to the frame.

Innovative ways to use the identification microchip are continually being found – its use is no longer just reserved for identification (whether for research work or tagging animals). Feeding bowls and cat flaps are now commonplace – what next?

Conclusion

The RCVS website is an invaluable source of guidance notes and advice for vets and VNs on the microchipping regulations. Many pet owners are not aware of the new regulations and good education from VNs and others working within the veterinary practice is still required.