

# Alphabet Soup

By Renee McDougall, DVM, MPH, Tyler Clough, DVM, and David Dycus, DVM, MS, CCRP, DACVS-SA

Ever wonder what all those letters mean on veterinary business cards? Or why two people may be able to give you advice about the same injury while a third feels they need to refer you elsewhere? It can get confusing, even for veterinarians. Every year the number of accreditations and certifications increases, which helps us all make important strides toward improving veterinary medicine, even if we do feel like we may need a decoding device to help us clarify our roles within it.

So, how do you know if you've made an appointment with the right veterinarian? Is this clinician trained or self-acclaimed? And what exactly does it mean to have achieved the right to use those letters alongside your name?

## First Things First

To become a veterinarian, an individual had to complete tertiary schooling and achieve a veterinary degree (typically following three to four years for an undergraduate degree). Therefore, the first three or four letters after your veterinarian's name will signal what type of veterinary degree they have and, if you care, what country it came from. The most common acronym seen in the United States is DVM, or Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. Only one school has an alternative acronym for the same U.S. degree, and that is the University of Pennsylvania,

whose graduates are VMDs. Other countries may also award DVMs after completion of tertiary schooling in veterinary medicine; however, to practice in the U.S., foreign veterinarians must complete an extremely rigorous certification program demonstrating comparable knowledge and skills to veterinarians in the U.S. Other common foreign degrees of veterinary medicine include MVB, or Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine, a degree awarded by the University College Dublin, and BVSc, Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine, and BVetMed, Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine, both United Kingdom equivalents of the DVM.

## Taking the DVM the Extra Mile

Veterinary specialists, like human medical specialists, are veterinarians who have, at minimum, completed additional training and passed an examination that evaluates their knowledge and skills in a specific area. In most cases, a year of internship training is required prior to entering a residency. After completing a two to four year residency and passing the specialty-specific test, the veterinarian is known as a Diplomate of the college, or a member of that specialty organization. The hard-earned title must be upheld by maintaining a current knowledge of advancements in the field. Generally, they are required to participate in a minimum

amount of continuing education and/or teaching. There are currently 41 specialties recognized by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), the national organization of veterinary profession. Below is a list of those you are most likely to encounter with your dog:

- DACVAA: Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Anesthesia and Analgesia (Anesthesiologist)
- DACVB: Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (Behaviorist)
- DAVDC: Diplomate of the American Veterinary Dental College (Dentist)
- DACVD: Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Dermatology (Dermatologist)
- DAVECC: Diplomate of the American Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care (Critical care clinician)
- DACVIM: Diplomate of the American Veterinary Internal Medicine

We should pause here to appreciate the variety of specialties that can accompany these six letters, the first being internal medicine. When you see DACVIM alone you are talking to an internist, which is someone who trained in internal medicine. Sometimes, to delineate themselves

from the other specialties considered a part of the college of veterinary internal medicine, an internist may add the letters SAIM (small animal internal medicine) or LAIM (large animal internal medicine) after DACVIM. In addition to internists, however, the college of internal medicine encompasses a few other specialties, including cardiology, neurology, and oncology. These will typically be written as seen below:

DACVIM (SAIM) – small animal general internist

DACVIM (Cardiology)

DACVIM (Neurology)

DACVIM (Oncology)

- DACVN: Diplomate of the American Veterinary Nutrition (Nutritionist)
- DACVR: Diplomate of the American Veterinary Radiology (Radiologist)
- DABVP: Diplomate of the American Board of Veterinary Practitioners

Think of this as a board specialty for general practitioners, achievable by demonstrating the skills and knowledge of a specialist without having to complete a formal residency program. Within this specialty are eleven recognized veterinary specialties, including a canine and feline practice specialty, likely the most common you and I encounter.

- DACVS – Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons

This specialty is for board certified surgeons in the U.S. who have completed a residency program and ad-

ditional requirements asked of them by the ACVS, the American College of Veterinary Surgeons. Requirements include a two-part written examination that occurs during their second year of residency and after their third. Recently, many ACVS diplomates add SA (small animal) or LA (large) animal after DACVS. You may also notice, however, that your surgeon has the letters DECVS after his or her name. These letters reflect candidate satisfaction of the European and/or United Kingdom surgery program requirements, including the required examination, and indicate that they remain in good standing as a surgeon outside the United States. Similar designations exist for some other AVMA recognized veterinary specialties, though not all.

- DACVSMR: Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation

The AVMA recommends that only those individuals that have achieved Diplomate status within a particular specialty be called a “specialist.” Furthermore, some specialties have specific requirements of what terminology can be used. For example, the ACVS recommends that only individuals achieving Diplomate status within the college be called a “surgeon.” You may note that some individuals may use the distinction “practice limited to...” These individuals have completed a residency and have either not taken the examination or have not passed the examination to become board certified.

In addition to achieving board certification, many veterinarians that complete a

residency within an academic institution will have graduate research degrees such as a Masters of Science (MS) or a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). The graduate research degree is often completed during the residency training to emphasize the additional knowledge in the area of veterinary research.

## The Icing on the Cake

Aside from the specialties listed above, there are several additional important veterinary certifications. These certifications generally require some level of additional training, but do not require residency training, and are not AVMA-recognized specialties. Eligible individuals may or may not be veterinarians, depending on the certification. The requirements may be less standardized, and there may be redundancy among certifications. Take canine rehabilitation and sports medicine, for example, a post-injury and postoperative practice that continues to grow in popularity as recognition of its importance increases. You may find practitioners in the form of a CCRT or a CCRP, certified canine rehabilitation therapists or certified canine rehabilitation practitioners, respectively. These certificates are awarded to veterinarians and physical therapists after completion of one of the two rehabilitation certification programs in the U.S. Both programs preceded the board certification in sports medicine and rehabilitation, therefore, many DVMs practicing rehabilitation and sports medicine may be either a CCRT or a CCRP in addition to a DACVSMR. Veterinary technicians may become either a CCRP or a CCRA, a Certified Canine Rehabilitation Assistant.

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Several additional professional certifications are available for those working closely within the rehabilitation and pain management field. The American Association of Veterinary Chiropractic (AAVC) provides chiropractic certification to those currently doctors of human chiropractic, those currently enrolled or graduates of veterinary school, and those who have graduated from a basic animal chiropractic program. Certification requires candidates to pass both a written and practical competency examination and allows them to practice on both large and small animals.

The American Academy of Veterinary Acupuncture (AAVA) provides certification to veterinarians and students through an application and examina-

tion process that requires case based and continuing education learning, as well as passing a written examination.

The International Veterinary Academy of Pain Management (IVAPM) offers certification to veterinary pain practitioners (CVPP) with a minimum of 5 years in practice and 2 years of veterinary pain management. Applicants must complete a minimum number of continuing education hours and case based studies followed by a written examination to achieve certification.

### The End Game

Though there are hundreds of letter combinations out there, with more added each year, the end game is to be able to offer comprehensive medical care to

your loved one, or refer them to someone who can. And even if you're not sure if your dog's problem falls under their purview, your veterinarian should be able to tell you what they feel comfortable treating, and what they don't. Because at the end of the day, we may all love an individual aspect of veterinary medicine, but veterinarian or technician, we all took an oath to do no harm, and we are in this profession to heal.

Further information on each veterinary specialty can be found on the American Board of Veterinary Specialties (ABVS) section of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) website ([www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org)). 🐾

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*David Dycus, DVM, MS, CCRP, DACVS-SA is a board-certified surgeon at Veterinary Orthopedic & Sports Medicine Group in Annapolis Junction, Maryland. He is trained in the use of minimally invasive procedures, regenerative medicine, as well as a number of orthopedic procedures for the treatment of ruptured cruciate ligaments. Dr. Dycus also earned stem cell certification from Vet Stem and certification as Certified Canine Rehabilitation Practitioner. To remain on the cutting-edge of research, Dr. Dycus holds an appointment on the research committee of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons. Along with being a scientific reviewer for multiple veterinary journals, he serves on the editorial review board for Veterinary Surgery, the official publication of the American and European Colleges of Veterinary Surgeons.*

*Renee McDougall, DVM, MPH is a surgical intern at Veterinary Orthopedic & Sports Medicine Group in Annapolis Junction, Maryland. A graduate of Cornell University's College of Veterinary Medicine, she spent a year training in a general internship at the Animal Medical Center of New York City prior to arriving at VOSM. Following her surgical internship, she plans to pursue surgical residency. In addition to orthopedic surgery and sports medicine, Dr. McDougall has a strong interest in research and public health.*

*Tyler Clough, BVetMed is currently an orthopedics and sports medicine intern at the Veterinary Orthopedics and Sports Medicine Group. Originally from the Boston area, Dr. Clough attended veterinary school at the Royal Veterinary College in London, England. He then went on to complete a rotating internship in Brooklyn, New York and a surgical internship in Las Vegas, Nevada. His professional interests include orthopedics and emergency surgery.*

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