



ESVONC Oncology internship guidelines

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1. AIM OF THE DOCUMENT

The aim of this document, created by the ESVONC oncology internship committee, is to establish clear standards and expectations for an enriching and rewarding oncology training experience, recognising the diverse landscape of veterinary oncology expertise across European countries. In light of the variability in the quality and scope of veterinary oncology internships currently available, this project seeks to provide comprehensive guidance to ensure consistent standards of excellence and professionalism in training.

By delineating the objectives, roles, and responsibilities associated with a veterinary oncology internship, this initiative aims to address the need for structured and high-quality training programs that equip interns with the necessary skills and knowledge to excel in their future careers.

Additionally, it endeavours to outline the minimum standard requirements for veterinary hospitals intending to host such internships, emphasising the importance of mentorship, access to essential resources, and opportunities for professional growth. Through this project, ESVONC strives to foster a culture of excellence in veterinary oncology education and training, ultimately contributing to advancing cancer care for animal patients across Europe.

These guidelines are intended as a voluntary quality framework, not a regulatory or accrediting system.

Their purpose is to support institutions in providing high-quality training while respecting the diversity of clinical settings across Europe.

2. DESCRIPTION OF AN ONCOLOGY INTERNSHIP



A veterinary oncology internship is a desirable step in the career path of a veterinarian towards becoming a specialist in oncology, providing hands-on experience and oncology-specific training.

A veterinary oncology internship is a **1-year** oncology-focused training program designed to provide veterinarians with knowledge and experience in the diagnosis, treatment, and management of cancer in animals. Throughout the internship, veterinary oncology interns receive mentorship and guidance from experienced veterinary oncologists, which helps them refine their clinical skills, critical thinking, and professional judgment.

By the end of the internship, interns are better equipped to pursue further training in veterinary oncology or related fields.

3. ENTRY REQUIREMENTS:

To ensure that candidates are adequately prepared to benefit from oncology-specific training, ESVONC recommends that applicants have completed a minimum of one year of general clinical practice following graduation or a rotating internship.

This prerequisite reflects the need for interns to enter the programme with a solid grounding in general veterinary medicine. A full year in clinical practice allows early-career veterinarians to consolidate essential skills such as history taking, physical examination, diagnostic interpretation, client communication, and case management. These fundamental abilities form the basis upon which oncology-focused competencies are developed.

Given the multifaceted nature of cancer care, which requires sound medical judgement, familiarity with diagnostic pathways, and the ability to navigate emotionally sensitive conversations with clients, this period of preparation significantly enhances the quality of training and the intern's contribution to the clinical team.

4. **OBJECTIVES:** Interns gain knowledge by being embedded within clinical practice, including diagnostic imaging, medical oncology, surgical oncology, radiation therapy, and palliative care. Moreover, they will have a basic understanding of cancer biology and pathology and gain confidence in the core scientific literature relating to cancer in pets.

By the end of an oncology internship, oncology interns should have acquired diverse practical skills that enable them to support holistic care to cancer patients, and effectively contribute to the veterinary oncology team.

In order to achieve the objectives, the following **core competencies** should be met:



- a) **Clinical Examination:** Proficiency in taking history and conducting thorough physical examinations of cancer patients, including assessment of tumour burden according to VCOG criteria.
- b) **Diagnosis:** Develop awareness of the diagnostic procedures to achieve a cytological or histological diagnosis. Gain competence in selecting, assisting or performing diagnostic procedures such as fine needle aspirates, tru-cut biopsy, punch biopsy, and incisional or excisional biopsies.
- c) **Staging:** Understand the different staging systems and their application to the main tumour types. Be able to choose the most appropriate staging methods and a basic ability to interpret their findings.
- d) **Treatment Planning:** Contribute to developing and understanding the proposed individualised treatment plans for cancer patients based on diagnostic findings, tumour staging, and individual factors (health status, owner preferences, finances and goals). Understand the meaning of definitive and palliative treatment and the application of the therapeutic modalities available for each setting.
- e) **Chemotherapy Safety Protocols:** Understanding why chemotherapy agents are classified as hazardous drugs, being aware of safe handling protocols, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE) and closed system transfer devices, and how to advise colleagues and owners on the safe handling of patients after treatment.
- f) **Chemotherapy Administration:** Gain competency in administering chemotherapy drugs safely and accurately, including proper handling, storage, contingency planning, preparation, dosing based on patient's need, and monitoring for adverse effects.
- g) **Radiation Therapy knowledge:** *awareness of radiation therapy as part of multimodal treatment options. For internships where RT is available, the intern is expected to gain confidence and knowledge with patient setup, positioning, radiation safety protocols, and basic understanding of definitive and palliative plans for a range of radiation-responsive diseases. Assistance during radiation therapy sessions is also expected.*
- h) **Surgical knowledge:** understanding the rationale behind surgical oncologic procedures based on tumour, stage, surgical goals, dose and outcome, and how this relates to multimodal care.
- i) **Pain Management:** Skill in assessing and managing pain in cancer patients using analgesics, adjuvant therapies, and multimodal pain management strategies.
- j) **Client Communication:** Ability to effectively communicate with pet owners, explaining cancer diagnosis, treatment options, prognosis, and supportive care measures in a clear, empathetic manner.
- k) **Patient Monitoring:** Competency in monitoring cancer patients throughout the treatment process, including assessment of treatment response, monitoring for adverse effects, interpretation of laboratory tests.
- l) **End-of-Life Care:** Skill in providing compassionate end-of-life care for terminal cancer patients, including discussions about euthanasia, palliative care options, and support for pet owners during the grieving process.
- m) **Medical Record Documentation:** Proficiency in maintaining accurate and thorough medical records, including patient history, diagnostic results, treatment plans, and client communications.



- n) **Professional Development:** Commitment to ongoing professional development through participation in continuing education activities, actively participating in journal clubs and all educational activities, and collaboration with veterinary oncology colleagues.

5. ONCOLOGY INTERN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES:

1. Patient Evaluation and Diagnosis:

- Conduct thorough physical examinations of cancer patients.
- Review medical history, diagnostic test results, and imaging studies to assess the extent of the disease.
- Assist in the interpretation of diagnostic tests, including bloodwork, cytology, radiographs, ultrasounds, CT scans, and MRIs.

2. Treatment Planning and Implementation:

- Collaborate with supervising oncologists to develop individualised treatment plans for cancer patients.
- Administer chemotherapy drugs following established protocols and safety guidelines.
- Assist in the administration of other treatment modalities such as radiation therapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy, and palliative care measures.
- Monitor patients' responses to treatment and adjust therapy as needed.

3. Surgical (and RT when feasible) and Procedural Assistance:

- Assist in surgical procedures related to oncology, including tumor biopsies, excisions, and reconstructive surgeries.
- Provide support during radiation therapy sessions to ensure correct patient positioning and safe radiation administration. Administer anaesthesia and monitor patients' vital signs during procedures.

4. Patient Care and Monitoring:

- Provide nursing care and supportive therapy to cancer patients, including pain management, nutritional support, and hydration therapy.
- Monitor patients for treatment-related side effects and complications, such as chemotherapy-induced nausea and vomiting, immunosuppression, and (when feasible) knowledge about ensuring correct patient positioning and safe radiation administration.
- Educate pet owners about at-home care, medication administration, and monitoring for signs of disease progression or treatment toxicity.

5. Client Communication and Education:

- Communicate with pet owners to explain the diagnosis, treatment options, prognosis, and expected outcomes for their pets.
- Provide emotional support and empathy to pet owners facing difficult decisions about their pets' cancer care.
- Offer guidance on palliative care options and end-of-life decisions when appropriate.



- Educate pet owners about cancer prevention, early detection, and wellness strategies for their pets.

6. **Professional Development and Continuing Education:**

- Attend rounds, case discussions, and seminars to enhance knowledge and skills in veterinary oncology.
- Participate in journal clubs, research projects, and presentations to contribute to the advancement of veterinary oncology knowledge.
- Seek mentorship from experienced oncologists and specialists to refine clinical skills, critical thinking abilities, and professional judgment.

7. **Core Professional and Soft Skills**

In addition to clinical and technical competencies, interns are expected to develop a range of professional and interpersonal skills that are essential for effective oncology practice. These include empathy and emotional intelligence, clear and compassionate communication with clients and team members, and strong organisational and time-management abilities. Interns should demonstrate adaptability and resilience when faced with complex or emotionally challenging situations, as well as the capacity to work collaboratively and resolve conflicts constructively within multidisciplinary teams. Cultural sensitivity, professionalism, and a commitment to ethical conduct are also fundamental expectations throughout the programme.

Incorporating these competencies reflects established educational best practices and responds to feedback, emphasising the critical role of soft skills in delivering high-quality cancer care. Their inclusion ensures a well-rounded training experience that supports both clinical excellence and the development of reflective, patient-centred practitioners.

6. **MINIMUM STANDARD REQUIREMENTS**

ESVONC recognises that hospitals across Europe differ in size, caseload, access to advanced diagnostics, and availability of specialists.

These guidelines therefore allow for flexibility through structured externships and alternative supervision arrangements, ensuring inclusivity while maintaining training standards. However, there are common criteria that a veterinary hospital should meet to host an oncology internship, including:

Case load: a minimum caseload is expected for the hospital to be considered suitable to host an oncological internship (minimum of 300 oncology cases/year)

Supervisor Qualification:



- Ideally, the hospital should have at least one certified Diplomate of the European/American College on staff. This may be a veterinary oncologist or other Specialist
- When Diplomates are not available, it is recognised that a supervisor may be qualified through extensive experience in the field of veterinary oncology to provide an appropriate caseload, level of supervision and mentorship to an oncology intern, provided they can demonstrate:
 - consistent clinical caseload
 - mentorship capability
 - commitment to structured teaching and feedback

The institution must submit a self-reporting declaration of compliance with ESVONC standards (no audit).

An externship that exposes the intern to an oncology specialist must be organised by the hosting hospital for a minimum of 4 weeks, which need not be continuous. The externship structure should include:

- defined learning objectives
- checklist of required competencies (template provided by ESVONC)
- feedback form to be completed by the externship supervisor

The candidate and the Hospital team should consider the level of supervision available for the internship before the programme commences. Where gaps in provision are identified, externship arrangements must be in place so that the experience gained is balanced.

Externships become crucial opportunities for interns to supplement their education, gain exposure to oncology specialists, and foster mentorship relationships.

Comprehensive Oncology Services: The hospital should offer a comprehensive range of oncology services, including chemotherapy administration, surgical oncology, and supportive care for cancer patients. Facilities should comply with ECVIM/ACVIM guidance and local regulations with respect to safe handling of chemotherapy medications. In addition to high-quality diagnostic imaging, advanced diagnostic imaging such as CT or MRI should be available. Externships to centers where radiation therapy is available are highly desirable but not mandatory at the commencement of the programme where these are not available on site.

Research and Continuing Education Opportunities: The programme should encourage and support participation in research projects and continuing education activities related to veterinary oncology. This may include access to journal clubs, conferences, and seminars.

7. SUGGESTED FRAMEWORK FOR COMPETENCIES ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK CULTURE



A structured and transparent approach to competencies assessment is essential to ensure that interns progress appropriately throughout the programme and achieve the expected learning outcomes. Hospitals hosting an oncology internship should implement a framework that allows supervisors to monitor skill development, identify areas requiring further support, and provide timely, constructive feedback.

Assessment should be continuous rather than limited to isolated evaluations. Regular touchpoints, such as monthly or quarterly review meetings, enable supervisors and interns to discuss clinical performance, reflect on challenging cases, and set specific objectives for further growth. Competency checklists, procedure logs, and reflective notes can support this process by offering a clear record of the intern's activities and development over time.

A strong feedback culture is central to the success of the internship. Feedback should be specific, actionable, and delivered in a supportive manner that fosters learning and professional confidence. Interns are encouraged to actively participate in this process, seeking clarification when needed and contributing to their own development plans.

Supervisors, in turn, should create an environment in which open dialogue is encouraged, expectations are clearly communicated, and progress is reviewed consistently.

Where challenges or gaps in experience are identified - whether related to clinical exposure, procedural skills, or professional behaviours - supervisors and interns should work collaboratively to establish targeted strategies for improvement. This may include additional supervised procedures, case discussions, focused reading, or externships designed to address specific deficits.

The purpose of this framework is not only to ensure the acquisition of core competencies but also to cultivate reflective practitioners who embrace continuous learning. A robust and supportive assessment system strengthens the overall quality of the internship and contributes to the development of future specialists who are well-prepared, confident, and aligned with best practices in veterinary oncology.

ESVONC will provide optional downloadable tools to support implementation:

- Case log templates
- Intern evaluation forms
- Externship checklists
- Feedback templates



Intern Feedback to ESVONC

To support continuous improvement of the internship framework, ESVONC welcomes interns to send annual anonymous feedback. This information will help monitor the effectiveness, relevance, and practical applicability of the guidelines across different clinical settings. Regular feedback also ensures the framework remains responsive to emerging needs, enabling ongoing refinement and adaptation over time.