



## Understanding the different types of Veterinary Specialists for Dogs and Cats as well as Certifications

Pet owners would often mention to me, that their family vet has got an “in-house specialist” that they can be referred to and, in all honesty, this is actually seldom the case.

In fact, there are actually **only a handful of Surgery Specialists** practising in Hong Kong and the large majority work in large multidisciplinary hospitals.

In veterinary medicine, specialist titles can mean different things depending on the Board and the training. Adding to the confusion, there are numerous veterinarians holding other qualifications under various names and grouped under the name “certificate”.

At times where the population of pet owners are exposed to all sorts of qualifications, and all ranges of cost, it seems more than critical to clarify the main differences between these qualifications and allow pet owners to make an informed decision when choosing between two veterinary surgeons with different levels of expertise.

When your pet needs surgery, you may see veterinarians described as:

- Board-certified surgical specialists;
- ABVP canine/feline specialists
- Certificate-trained in surgery.

In veterinary surgery, the difference between a **certificate holder** and a **board-certified veterinary surgeon** is substantial and relates to training length, depth, supervision, and credentialing. Let's review successively the different types of training and titles that are most commonly found in Hong Kong.

### Board-Certified Veterinary Surgeon = Specialist surgeon

A board-certified veterinary surgeon is a veterinarian who has completed a **formal surgical residency** and passed rigorous examinations administered by a recognised specialty board.

#### Training Pathway (Typical)

- DVM + licensure + General or Specialised Internship + Surgical residency + Board Examination
- 3–4 years, full-time

Conducted at an accredited academic or Specialty referral centre

**The training is exclusively focused on surgery**

**Includes:**

- Orthopaedic surgery,
- Soft tissue surgery,
- Neurosurgery,
- Surgical Oncology
- Minimally invasive surgery
- Emergency and complication management

**Case log requirements:** a resident must complete hundreds of supervised surgical cases and must complete a minimum number of cases of each types. This guarantees consistency in the level of expertise achieved over 3-4 years.

**Research & scholarship:** Required publication or scholarly activity



### Board examinations

- Multi-day exams (written and/or practical)
- Administered by boards such as:
- American College of Veterinary Surgeons (ACVS)
- European College of Veterinary Surgeons (ECVS)

### Ongoing certification

- Continuing education
- Adherence to specialty standards
- **Periodic revalidation** (region-dependent). The **Specialist has to re-certify every 5 years** and demonstrate that he has **maintained the highest standard of care**. This guarantees that each Board-Certified Surgeon remains up to speed in a quickly progressing veterinary science.

### Legal & Professional Standing

Recognised by the AVMA American Board of Veterinary Specialties (ABVS) or European equivalents (EBVS)

May use protected titles such as:

"Diplomate, ACVS", "Diplomate ECVS"

"Board-Certified Veterinary Surgeon"

## American Board of Veterinary Practitioners- Canine and Feline Practice

An ABVP specialist is a **species-based medical specialist, not a surgical specialist**.

### What this means:

- **Advanced expertise in the overall medical care of dogs and cats;**
- **Focus areas include:**
- **Internal Medicine**
- **Dermatology**
- **Endocrine diseases**
- **Preventative and long-term care**

Diplomates of this Board are trained in various disciplines including **medicine, wellness care, behaviour, and public health**. In Hong Kong, a practitioner holding this title will be called a **Specialist** and can advertise as such, however surgery is not the primary focus.

The typical veterinarians who pursue Canine and Feline certification work in high-quality practices and have access to the latest equipment, supplies. They routinely see interesting, complex cases and can work them up and manage them at a high standard.

Certification is challenging but rewarding. Veterinarians must have at least 4 years of full-time, high-quality practice experience with dogs and cats and be able to document a commitment to high-level continuing education.

They also must be able to communicate professionally and scientifically by following instructions and preparing written case reports.

To pass the comprehensive examination, candidates often spend an average of 1 hour per day studying, reading textbook and journal articles, and taking courses and practice tests. There are online study groups to help with credentials and examination preparation. Two Regents are also available to answer questions and provide assistance and feedback.



Training will therefore cover all aspects of being a high-quality general practitioner, however they have not been trained specifically in-depth, in one particular field. They are not Board-certified Specialists in Medicine or Specialists in Surgery.

Read more on: <https://abvp.com/become-a-specialist>

## Certificate-trained in Surgery

A certificate holder is a licensed veterinarian who has completed additional education in surgical techniques but **has not completed a surgical residency nor achieved board certification**. A certificate holder is not Specialist in surgery.

### Training Characteristics

- Baseline qualification: DVM or equivalent veterinary degree
- Licensed to practice veterinary medicine

### Additional training

- Short courses, continuing education (CE), or modular programs
- May include wet labs (training on cadavers), online modules, or case-based learning
- Typically **weeks to months**, but sometimes clinicians busy in practice will spread the modules over 1 to 2 years

### Scope of training

Focused on **specific procedures or techniques**

e.g., TPLO courses, laparoscopic skills, fracture repair workshops

**Supervision:** Limited or none after course completion

**Assessment:** Course exams, attendance, or limited case submissions

### Credentialing:

Certificates are issued by some universities, or some professional associations and even private training organisations. There are nowadays a huge variety of these courses and this adds even more confusion.

Titles are **not standardised**, have a huge variety of expertise levels and **do not confer specialist status**

### Key Limitations

- **No real residency training (no supervision)**
- **Limited surgical case exposure**
- **No need for Peer-reviewed publication**
- Training **does not cover the full scope of veterinary surgery**
- Certificate holders cannot legally or ethically claim specialist status
- Certificate-holders do not need to re-certify, they hold this title for a lifetime.