

Not one more vet

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Abstract

Veterinary medicine can be an incredibly rewarding career. However, it can also be a very challenging one. Veterinary wellbeing has become a hot topic in recent years, but the problems we face aren't new. There is a wealth of research on wellbeing in our profession spanning both organizational and personal-ity focused challenges. There is a path forward, though! In this lecture we will discuss the challenges we face as well as some solutions.

Key words: wellbeing, professional development

Background

The last year-and-a-half has been an incredibly taxing one for pretty much all of humanity, but certainly also for veterinary medicine. And veterinary medicine wasn't easy to begin with. There is literature discussing wellbeing issues in veterinary medicine spanning back to the 1960s discussing elevated rates of suicide.¹² Even the most famous veterinarian of all time, Dr. Alf White, better known by his pen name James Herriot, is reported to have had bouts of depression and feelings of inadequacy.⁸

If we are to look at the wealth of research done on the subject, a few themes are clear. Multiple studies report problems in wellbeing, with burnout, compassion fatigue, anxiety, depression and unfortunately, suicide. There are studies from multiple countries, spanning decades. But why? We have the dream job of thousands of starry eyed 7-year-olds. How does this dream go so terribly wrong for so many of us? The answer is complicated, but as we start to dig in, some common themes emerge.

Organizational issues

Certainly, on an organizational level, we have some problems.

The AVMA reports there are 18 openings for every DVM job applicant, and the rate in which we are producing new veterinarians is not keeping up with demand.¹⁵ The Merck Wellbeing Study found that only 41% of veterinarians would recommend this career to a friend or family member, citing student debt as the primary driver of that.¹⁸ In 2019, the average vet student was leaving vet school with \$183,000 in debt, and 10% of those students had more than \$300,000 in debt.¹ There are currently 221 USDA-designated veterinary shortage areas in 48 states.

These problems don't just affect veterinarians. We are also facing a critical shortage of technicians. When polled in the 2016 NAVTA demographic survey, 21% of registered technicians were not working in practice, and 45% of those techs had left the field entirely. The primary reason given for leaving the field was compensation. Unfortunately, based on average compensation, a large number of our veterinary technicians live at or just above the poverty line.¹⁰ In fact, 95% of veterinary technicians in the United States do not make a living wage.⁹

But the difficulties of the job aren't just about staffing and compensation. It's common for veterinarians to be placed in

difficult situations which prevent an ethically ideal response. Moral Distress is the negative emotions that occur when circumstances prevent you from doing what you feel right. Unfortunately, 91% of veterinarians face an ethical dilemma that results in serious distress once a week.² Morally distressing situations can arrive in many different ways. Food animal practitioners are often asked to balance economics, the desires of the producer, animal welfare and regulatory concerns – all of which is rife with potential conflict.⁷ Moments of ethical distress may arise on a day-to-day basis; for instance, a practitioner may face a situation where they would like to use a therapy, but it is not allowed due to organic farming regulations.¹⁶ Often at this level, there is at least a partial solution to be found. However, other situations, like an emergent situation necessitating depopulation, can have more significant mental health consequences. Fifty-one percent of veterinarians involved with disaster response showed behavioral health concerns both during and up to 6 months after the disaster.²⁰

Certainly, all of these factors add to our distress, but these larger issues can be difficult to tackle as an individual in this profession and some of them will never be completely solvable.

Personality challenges

Interestingly, as we look at the data, our environmental stressors don't actually affect us as much as some of our internal ones. Dawson et al found that personality, particularly neuroticism, was more impactful to the experience of occupational stress compared with environment.⁶ Similarly, the Merck Wellbeing Study found that neuroticism was the key risk factor for poor wellbeing in veterinary medicine. Perfectionism and neuroticism can predispose us to feeling ethically distressing situations as more stressful than our peers.⁵ In fact, the silver lining here is that if much of our experience of stress is secondary to our own personalities, then much of our experience of that stress is something we can change on an individual level.

Dr. Sonya Lyubomirsky, a leading positive psychology researcher, has put forth that 40% of our happiness is under our direct control.¹¹ Decisions we make in the moment, places we put our focus, and skills that we cultivate have a direct and scientifically measurable effect on our happiness. Things like gratitude exercises and mindfulness are often discussed in pop psychology, but there is a solid foundation of scientific evidence to show benefit here – especially in jobs with high emotional labor. The practice of mindfulness, for instance, has been shown to reduce burnout and decrease occupational stress in ER nurses and physician GPs.^{13, 17} These techniques can absolutely be helpful, but more than anything, they prepare us to deal with stress.

Individual responsibility in change

In my internship, one of my mentors told me that the first thing you do in CPR is to take your own pulse. In this, he explained the simple truth that you need to be calm, centered and focused to deal with a major problem. So, the very first thing we need to do is deal with our own internal conflict and get our head in

the game. We need to deal with our own demons first. It's from that place we can start to deal with some of the larger systemic issues in our field. Small solutions on an individual scale have been shown to have impact. For example, we may not be able to solve the student debt crisis on our own, but hiring a financial planner has been shown to significantly reduce distress.¹⁹ And certainly as a practice owner, I have made it my priority to pay my staff more. A technician salary of \$21/hr is actually associated with improved wellbeing.⁹ But the improvements we make for our support staff need not end there. In fact, in a study over 1,600 technicians, salary absolutely did help with burnout and engagement. However, feeling like they were respected and added value to the practice mattered more.⁹

Conclusion

At the end of the day, veterinary medicine will never be stress-free. Truly we will never fully rid our profession of challenging situations. In fact, I would argue that those challenges are part of what drew us to this career. We are a helping profession. If there are no problems, no help is required. Stress and enjoyment are not mutually exclusive. A survey of U.K. veterinarians showed that while 83% of vets agree that veterinary medicine is stressful, 93% also agree that the work is enjoyable.¹⁴ If we can get ourselves in a place where we are not just surviving the stress minute-to-minute, we will face those challenges as our best selves. And, we need to believe in our ability to fix these problems. For many of us, our neurotic natures predispose us to focus on the negative. You can even see this in the literature. In a review of all of veterinary wellness literature since 1995, Cake found the majority of papers focused on negative factors like mental health problems, and stressors rather than exploring supportive factors and solutions.⁴

But there is joy to be had in this career, and more importantly, there is a tremendous sense of meaning and purpose. In fact, in a large review, veterinary happiness was largely focused in eudaimonia, or the type of happiness that is found living a life of meaning and purpose.³ So rather than set our sights on a career without stressors, I would rather change the framework with which we view our career. We will never completely remove stress from the field; however, we can build the skill set and professional culture to make facing that challenge a sustainable, even enjoyable endeavor.

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