Mental Health in Veterinary Professionals

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Around the world, the month of May has gradually become known as Mental Health Awareness Month. The dedication of this month was originally started in 1949 in the United States, and opened the door for a global movement to increase knowledge and awareness of a variety of mental health problems. As this movement and subsequent awareness grew internationally, several key concepts were highlighted, which included the staggering statistics on depression, anxiety and suicide in medical professionals. Studies on the mental health of veterinary professionals, specifically, started as early as the 1960s, with recordings of suicide rates that were among the highest of working adults in the USA. Up-to-date studies now show that the rate of suicide in all health care professionals is double that of the national average, whereas, in veterinary professionals, the rate is quadruple that of the general population. More studies continue to quantify the seriousness of this global problem, and recent data shows that at least 5% of current veterinarians have seriously considered committing suicide and further issues of alcohol and substance abuse due to depressive tendencies are commonly encountered within the veterinary community. Due to this phenomenon, multiple investigations have been undertaken to try and localize the cause and to, in turn, produce sustainable solutions.

Recent data reports that a staggering 1/5 to 2/3 of US veterinarians are suffering from major depression. The majority of attempted suicides occur after long-term sufferance by veterinarians that deal with daily dissatisfaction of clients, emotional euthanasias, and feelings of being undervalued by the general public. While a lot of the research that has been conducted is specifically about qualified veterinary doctors, it is important to note that the increased suicide rate spans across the professional board, affecting veterinary technicians, students, nurses and assistants. More recently, efforts for the improvement of mental health have begun to target veterinary students, in order to educate students on the necessary life changes needed for a healthy and positive career. A lot of the damage to the mental wellness of veterinary students can be attributed to the stressors of working in the veterinary field, including euthanasia, long hours, and taxing physical work, as well as the pressure of getting accepted into a highly selective university, and the economic burden of the schooling.

Pay rates seem to be a heavy factor in general dissatisfaction, as the starting wage for a veterinarian is low, especially in comparison to the amount of student debt that veterinary professionals are left with upon graduating. On average, in the USA, the average graduation debt is over $130,000 USD, and starting veterinarians seldom make enough money to pay back their loans for 20-30 years. In addition, veterinarians work long hours in emotional roles, often providing stressful end-of-life and emergency care, and regularly working in emotionally taxing conditions - especially when conflicts with other professionals, management and clients regularly occur.

Mental health is an important topic to openly discuss in order to prevent more casualties and continued depression in this field. Good, friendly, personal management and communication in clinics are two of the best ways to combat these issues. Staff who feel valued and appreciated will not only work harder, but are less likely to suffer from mental health issues caused by their job. We are also able to relieve pressure on staff by implementing various procedures to reduce stress, such as support networks or ready access to psychological help.
In recent years, several greatly saddening deaths of high-profile veterinarians have provided further needed, yet unfortunate, exposure to the subject of mental health. Animal Behaviourist, Doctor Sophia Yin committed suicide in 2014, which simultaneously brought a sense of great loss to the veterinary community and allowed a conversation to form about the importance of mental health care in the veterinary profession. Doctor Jian Zhicheng, a Taiwanese shelter veterinarian succumbed to depression in 2016 and committed suicide after becoming a regular victim of online bullying, as well as struggling under the pressure of the high volume shelter in which she worked. Doctor Zhicheng was faced with the hard decision of having to euthanise many stray animals due to lack of space at her shelter, which, sadly, caused the un-informed community around her to criticize and attack her methods. These two cases opened frank discussions about how best to protect the mental well-being of veterinarians around the globe. These deaths are two examples out of countless others that strikingly define the importance of mental health wellbeing in veterinary professionals.

As awareness has globally spread on the catastrophic implications of poor mental health in the profession, many countries have sought to increase knowledge and education through various programs, including structured continued professional development sessions, webinars and student lectures. In 2015, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) in the United Kingdom, set up and began funding the Mind Matters Initiative (MMI). Along with projects to support mental health charities, the MMI also offers various training sessions meant to teach veterinary professionals how to recognise symptoms of depression and simultaneously teaching the best ways to approach these situations, and how to start an effective conversation between professionals. Another goal of these sessions is to get attendees thinking about their own mental health, while also aiming to disassemble the perceived stigma around mental health issues.

In a recent study, it was shown that while 60% of adults within the general public agree that people are tolerant and understanding of others with mental health illnesses, only 32% of US veterinarians agreed that they felt supported by the public, peers or supervisors. This backs up the theory that mental well being is not widely accepted as a necessary priority within the veterinary profession. In 2015, as there became progressive movement towards improving and protecting mental health in veterinarians, the Veterinary Benevolent Fund was rebranded to become Vetlife. The Vetlife Charity offers an anonymous service through either phone or email to provide advice and assistance when needed. They have professional mental health workers constantly on hand for those who need it, and they also offer financial support where possible. In addition, their website provides multiple articles, advice sections for both employees and employers on different topics and issues and many other resources to help tackle mental health issues. Vetlife aims to specifically support veterinarians, veterinary nurses and veterinary students by providing reliable aid.

Awareness of the importance of mental wellbeing also extends to surrounding communities as it has a profound effect on animals and patients that come into veterinary care. Several major signs of mental health issues include depression and fatigue, which can both make it very complicated for veterinary professionals to concentrate and come to make the best diagnostic decisions for the animals involved. Another symptom can include anxiety, which also makes it very difficult for veterinarians to appropriately manage their daily tasks. Mental health problems can also manifest as emotional instability, causing erratic thinking and impulsive actions. These symptoms can cause problems with patient care plans and, in turn, detrimentally affect the care of a patient. It is clear that mental health is extremely important. Necessity dictates that we must support the mental health of
veterinary professionals for both their sakes, and for the patients’ best interest. The introduction of new policies and the subsequent change of older policies, together will allow the reduction of veterinary stress, and will improve veterinary support worldwide.

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