WSAVA professional wellness guidelines

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose

Those who are attracted to a veterinary career expect that its rewards will include the fulfilment associated with providing valuable skills to help animals, plus the appreciation of their grateful owners. They also hope to achieve their professional goals in a way that brings them pleasure, gratitude and satisfaction. Their motivation to pursue these goals is not weakened by their knowledge that the financial rewards are commonly less than in other health care professions.

Sadly, for some who embrace this career path, the difficulties they face are more than they are equipped to cope with. In Australia, a workforce survey (Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey, 2018) indicates that the attrition rate among veterinarians is quite high, with 20% of vets considering leaving the profession within the next year. The underlying reasons for this worrying statistic include high graduate debt, low graduate remuneration, excessive workplace stress and unfulfilled undergraduate expectations.

The personalities of those attracted to the veterinary profession are often dominated by idealistic, perfectionist traits (Crane et al., 2015). These traits can be unsuited to the emotionally challenging realities of a profession whose clients can have expectations about the capabilities and costs of veterinary services that differ significantly from reality. The inability to provide the most appropriate patient care due to cost pressures, combined with the toll of providing services to emotional and dissatisfied clients can quickly turn a stressful situation into one that is distressing for the veterinarian or veterinary team member.

Many studies globally have detailed the challenges of clinical practice and how they can lead to suboptimal mental health in the veterinary profession (Hatch et al., 2011; Bartram & Baldwin, 2010; Dalum et al., 2022; Nett et al., 2015). Mental health problems can lead to suicide. Research into the high rate of suicide by veterinarians in Australia, UK, Norway and USA suggests several possible explanations:
• High achiever, perfectionism personality types
• Social and geographical isolation
• The need to accept euthanasia to alleviate suffering
• Ready access to lethal medications and knowledge of how to use them (Nett et al., 2015)

An even broader perspective has been posed by Bartram and Baldwin (Bartram & Baldwin, 2008, 2010), involving a complex interaction of possible risk factors across the course of a veterinary career. The challenges of clinical practice and their detrimental effects, preventing the actualization of a fulfilling career, combined with the lack of accessible means to alleviate the circumstances, can lead many veterinarians to leave the profession within the first 3 to 4 years (AVA Australian Veterinary Workforce Survey, 2018; Montoya *et al.*, 2021).

This problem has led to veterinary professional bodies in countries, such as the USA, UK and Australia, developing programmes to support professional wellbeing. Vetlife in the UK (Vetlife, 2022), the Graduate Mentoring Program in Australia (Australian Veterinary Association Healthy [AVA], 2022), and the wellbeing programmes and resources provided by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) in the USA (American Veterinary Association Mental Health [AVMA], 2022), are some of the initiatives launched to support the mental health of veterinarians and veterinary teams.

The existence of this body of preventative and therapeutic programmes is testament to the caring and problem-solving nature of veterinarians and other veterinary colleagues. The global veterinary community has many members who do find their careers rewarding and fulfilling and it is to the credit of the community that many of these happy, healthy veterinarians give their time and resources to develop programmes, mentor colleagues or give individual assistance to colleagues in need. Many of those who give their time to improve their colleague's mental health, find they enhance their own wellbeing by their efforts.

There is a large body of scientific research defining and addressing the problems in veterinary mental health (Brscic *et al.*, 2021). The veterinary profession and veterinary team have become a significant focus for mental health research due to the prevalence of mental health morbidity (Brscic *et al.*, 2021). This research has led to a better understanding of the challenges facing the profession, as well as the development of programmes focused on preventing or treating their worst effects, as exemplified by the programmes in the UK, USA and Australia referenced above. However, these programmes are predominantly operating in wealthier, better-resourced jurisdictions. Little is yet known of the state of mental health of those in the rest of the global veterinary community, which we define as all people involved in veterinary practice, veterinary research and/or animal health care globally.

The status of veterinary mental health worldwide

In 2018, the WSAVA conducted a global survey of mental health to define the extent of mental health challenges in the global veterinary community. The results indicate that, while there are some differences in risk factors in the diverse cultures in veterinary industries around the world, mental health challenges affect large portions of the global veterinary family, and not only individuals, but entire veterinary teams. The main stressors identified in the survey were:

- Client interactions
- Veterinary colleague relationships
- Organisational management issues
- Financial issues
- Time management and workload (WSAVA, n.d.)

As the expression and extent of the challenges in veterinary mental health differ around the world, these Professional Wellbeing Guidelines have been designed to outline the challenges facing the profession and offer advice and support. They provide an overview of the factors that can impact veterinary mental health; how these can negatively impact veterinarians and their teams, and the various ways in which the issues may be addressed, including both preventive and therapeutic approaches. These approaches are wellness-oriented, aimed to enhance wellbeing.

Wellbeing and wellness: defining the terms

There are no universally accepted definitions of the terms, "wellbeing" and "wellness." In both the scientific and non-scientific literature and communications, the terms are often poorly or un-defined or used interchangeably. A systematic review of Physician Wellness, Brady *et al.* (2018) found that a clear and consistent definition of physician wellbeing and wellness was lacking, and, in the papers included for review, 86% did not give a definition of wellbeing or wellness.

Brady *et al.* (2018) also stated: "The continued absence of a shared definition… may lead to inaccurate inferences regarding the relationship between measures of physician wellness and the latent construct of physician wellness that the measures represent (Standish *et al.*, 2002)." The same is true for the wellbeing of the veterinary team.

While there are no universally accepted definitions, the following will be used for the purposes of these WSAVA Global Guidelines:

Wellbeing is the state of physical and mental health of a person at any one time

The English Oxford Dictionary defines wellbeing as the state of being happy, healthy or prosperous; and is related to physical, psychological or moral welfare (OED, 2022).

Attaining a state of wellbeing is closely related to developing and nurturing a positive life outlook through a sense of meaning and purpose, fundamentally rooted in relationships – with oneself, with other people and with the natural world, culture and spirituality.

In a wellbeing context, spirituality refers to the ability to experience and integrate meaning and purpose in life through a person's connectedness with self, others, art, music, literature, nature or a power greater than oneself (HRZone, n.d.).

Wellbeing is a state comprising a person's physical, mental, emotional and social health. Martin Seligman is a preeminent proponent of positive psychology. Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2022) of wellbeing differs from other definitions in that it does not include aspects of physical health, and is comprised of five main elements which contribute to that state of wellbeing:

Seligman's PERMA model (Seligman, 2022):

P – Positive emotion: Attitude and view of your world.
E – Engagement: Participation with others in something that makes you happy.
R – Relationships: Loving and fruitful personal connections.
M – Meaning: A feeling of purpose and/or spiritual belief.
A – Accomplishments/Achievements: Pride in your contributions to the world.

Wellness is the process of taking action to maintain and improve wellbeing

The National Wellness Institute considers wellness to be "an active process through which people become aware of, and make choices towards, a more successful existence." (Holm & Severinsson, 2015).

This definition is based on three tenets:

1. Wellness is considered a conscious, self-directed and evolving process of achieving full potential
2. Wellness is multidimensional and holistic, encompassing lifestyle, mental and spiritual wellbeing, and the environment
3. Wellness is positive and affirming.

Wellness can also be thought of as a holistic integration of activities that can be engaged in to sustain physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing. It encompasses fuelling the body, engaging the mind and nurturing the spirit (University of Maryland [UMD], 2022) and thus refers to activities we undertake to stay healthy and happy, such as:

• Eating healthy food
• Getting sufficient sleep
• Exercising regularly
• Engaging in yoga, meditation or other reflective practices
• Maintaining a healthy work–life balance.

Beyond striving for health, wellness is about living life fully (University of Maryland [UMD], 2022), taking a personalised approach to living that enables becoming the best that one's potentials, circumstances and fate will allow (Ardell, 1986). It necessitates good self-stewardship.

There are several dimensions of wellness: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, vocational, financial and environmental (University of Maryland [UMD], 2022). These dimensions are mutually interdependent, with one influencing the other. While they do not need to be equally balanced, all require some level of attention. Neglect of any one over time will adversely affect the others and impact wellbeing and, ultimately, quality of life. When it comes to the dimensions, each person can find a "personal harmony" that feels most authentic to them (University of Maryland [UMD], 2022).

A person's wellbeing and wellness are framed within the environment that influences them. This perspective highlights the importance of understanding our colleagues within the ecosystem which influences veterinary teams. Other factors from our personal lives also affect wellness and wellbeing.

Purpose

These Global Guidelines have been developed by the WSAVA Professional Wellness Group (PWG). The Group was formed to identify the extent of mental health challenges in the world veterinary family and identify and evaluate the resources most suited to preventing or alleviating these challenges. As the PWG is focused on wellness, as per the definitions above, we identify and encourage the use of, a range of wellness strategies to enhance the wellbeing of individuals and groups in veterinary teams.

In these Global Guidelines, the PWG, working with – and in the best interests of – veterinary member groups and individual members, will outline the challenges facing the profession and gather veterinary mental health resources to assist their groups and members to improve the wellbeing of all the veterinary teams.

Goals

• To support the wellbeing and wellness of individual, team, and association members of the global veterinary community.
• To increase awareness of mental health and its importance within the global veterinary community.

- To identify, and assist in implementing, appropriate remedies and programmes to improve mental health in the global veterinary community.

Checklist

- Are you familiar with the WSAVA Professional Wellness Group (PWG) and its work?
- What are the main differences between wellness and wellbeing and how do they apply to your mental health?
- How do you perceive the challenges to improving wellness within your working team(s) and within your professional group?
- Can you more effectively identify and use resources to protect and improve your wellbeing and that of your veterinary team?

Note

These WSAVA Professional Wellness Guidelines are not intended as a diagnostic tool. They offer guidance to optimise professional wellbeing. They can also help readers to identify professional wellbeing issues within themselves for their team. Once the issues are identified, it is important to seek help from the appropriate sources.

ASPECTS OF THE PERSON THAT CAN INFLUENCE MENTAL HEALTH

Introduction

Health and wellbeing can be understood within the "person-in-environment" perspective (Kondrat, 2008). This perspective (see Fig 1) highlights the importance of understanding people and their behaviour in the light of the environments in which they live and act.

Within this perspective, health and wellbeing are influenced by aspects of the self that are inherent, meaning genetic or hereditary, plus the totality of life experience from conception onwards, including events or circumstances that have had, or have, a significant impact. This combination of inherent features and life experience is unique to any one person. In fact, everyone has "a single unique story" – their life story, woven with its own players, plots and subplots.

Mental health can be thought of as a continuum; from healthy, adaptive coping (green), to mild and reversible distress or functional impairment (yellow), to more severe, persistent injury or impairment (orange), to clinical illnesses and disorders requiring more concentrated medical care (red) (Bailey, 2015; Chen et al., 2020; MHCC, 2018). A person can move in either direction along the spectrum (Fig 2).
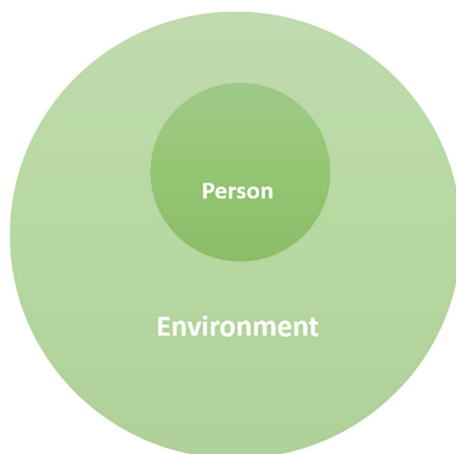

FIG 1. Person-in-environment perspective

FIG 2. Mental health continuum

Of the world population, currently standing at almost 8 billion (Worldometer, 2022), approximately 1 billion are affected by mental health conditions (The Lancet, 2020), falling within the "injured" or "ill" areas of the continuum. These conditions are damaging, causing one in 5 years lived with a disability and about 800,000 deaths/year from suicide (WHO, 2019). Mental illness affects people of all ages, education, income levels and cultures – no-one is immune (CMHA, 2021).

Although mental illness and mental disorder, as terms, are often thought to be synonymous, the latter is more specific, as mental disorders are defined by unique sets of symptoms and causes. The three most common classes of mental disorders (as recognised in North America) are anxiety disorders, depressive disorders and substance abuse disorders (Kessler *et al.*, 2005) (see Table 1). About half of those with a mental illness struggle with comorbidity, meaning with two or more mental health disorders (Kessler *et al.*, 2005).

Mental disorders are caused by a combination of, and interaction between, a variety of factors (NIMH, 2020; CMHA, 2021) (see Fig 3 below). These include genetic, biological, psychological and environmental factors. The first three of these are, at least in part, hereditary and the fourth refers to life experiences and exposures. These factors are acknowledged within the biopsychosocial model of mental health initially proposed by George Engel in 1977 (Engel, 1977), which has become the mainstream ideology of psychiatry and standard for practice around the world for the past 40 years (Papadimitriou, 2017).

It is helpful to become familiar with how these factors can influence mental health, as understanding "the self in one's story" enables the ability not only to recognise your own strengths and vulnerabilities, but also to take steps to improve mental health. Each will be discussed in turn.

Genetic factors that can influence mental health

As it relates to inheritability, most mental disorders are caused by a combination of genes and exposure (Hyman, 2000; Shabir, 2021; Tsang *et al.*, 2004). Although a simple genetic cause has not been found (Hyman, 2000; Shabir, 2021), certain genes and gene variations have been linked with specific mental disorders (CMHA, 2021; NIH, 2013; NIMH, 2020), including major depression, bipolar disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and schizophrenia (Hyman, 2000; NIH, 2013; NIMH, 2020; Shabir, 2021).

As these conditions tend to run in families, having a close relative with a diagnosis poses an increased risk for the condition. Depression, for example, is thought to be 40% to 50% inheritable (Levinson & Nichols, 2022). This means that, if a person has a parent or sibling with major depression, they have a two-three times' greater risk for this compared with the average person (Levinson & Nichols, 2022). There are also increased tendencies between different conditions. For example, those with ADHD are three to six times' more susceptible to depression (Cuncic, 2020; Riglin *et al.*, 2021). This is, in part, via a causal relationship, but also via genetic overlap (having shared genetic factors) (Riglin *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, those with ADHD are at increased risk of an anxiety disorder and substance abuse (ADAA, 2021; Cuncic, 2020).

Biological factors that can influence mental health

Biological factors can directly influence mental health. Physical health can impact mental health and vice versa, as they are inseparably connected. Those with chronic health conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, arthritis and asthma, are especially at risk (CMHA, 2022a; MHF, 2022), typically experiencing anxiety and depression twice as often as those of the general population (CMHA, 2022b).

Biological factors can indirectly influence mental health through various social ramifications. Natural and acquired physical or observable differences in people have also been linked to the risk of mental health problems. Differences in *characteristics*, such as race, sexual orientation and ability, and *in practices*, such as ethnicity or religion, can place people into minority groups. Those in minority groups often experience discrimination in day-to-day living in areas such as housing, employment, health care and education. This can happen not just through direct interpersonal interactions, but also through structural inequalities which cause inequitable access to rights and opportunities (Wikipedia, 2022a). The disadvantages faced are experienced as unique chronic stressors, and these increase the risk for mental health problems (Herek & Garnets, 2007; Wikipedia, 2022b). Those of a sexual minority are especially vulnerable, experiencing a higher incidence of anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, eating disorders, substance abuse, self-harm and suicide (Gilmour, 2019; Herek & Garnets, 2007; Wikipedia, 2022b).

Psychological factors that can influence mental health

A number of psychological factors, including personality traits, can influence the tendency to develop a mental disorder. The personality traits that are of particular influence include (1) the "Big Five" (which comprise *conscientiousness*, *agreeableness*, *neuroticism*, *openness* and *extroversion*) (McCrae & Costa, 1994), (2) sensory processing sensitivity (Aron *et al.*, 2012; Boterberg & Warreyn, 2016), (3)

Table 1. Examples of mental disorders (APA, 2013; Kessler *et al.*, 2005).	
Anxiety disorders	Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), specific phobia, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), panic disorder, agoraphobia, social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder and separation anxiety disorder
Depressive disorders	Major depressive disorder (MDD), bipolar I-II disorders and dysthymic disorder
Substance abuse disorders	Alcohol abuse, alcohol dependence, drug abuse and drug dependence
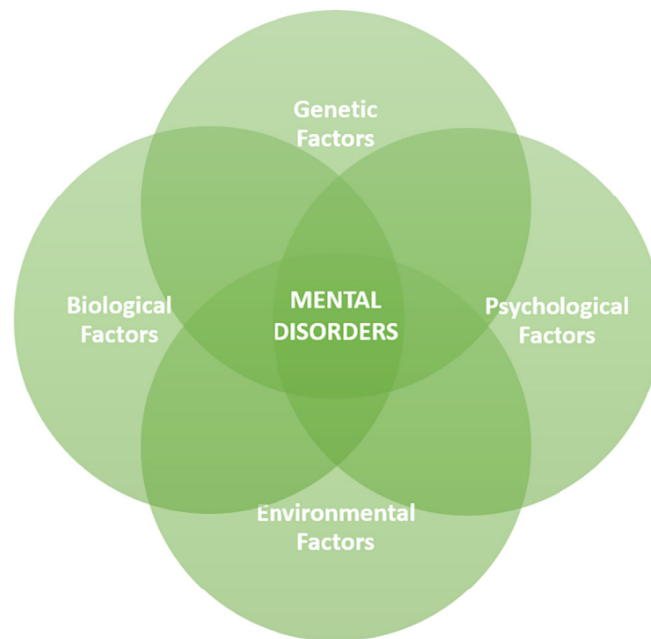
FIG 3. Types of factors that cause mental disorders

perfectionism (Curran & Hill, 2019) and (4) optimism (Carver *et al*., 2010; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Good Therapy, 2019; Plomin *et al*., 1992). Each of these is partly hereditary.

Genetics influences 40% to 55% of "the Big Five" personality traits (Bouchard & Mcgue, 2002); 47% of sensory processing sensitivity (Greven *et al*., 2019); 25% to 40% of perfectionism (Iranzo-Tatay *et al*., 2015) and 25% of optimism (Plomin *et al*., 1992).

Of the "Big Five" personality traits, neuroticism, which is the disposition to experience negative affects, including anger, anxiety, self-consciousness, irritability, emotional instability and depression (Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017), is the most strongly correlated with mental disorders (Kotov *et al*., 2010). It has been linked to general mental distress, anxiety disorders, depression, eating disorders, substance abuse, psychosis and schizophrenia (Jeronimus *et al*., 2016; Widiger & Oltmanns, 2017).

Sensory processing sensitivity, which is an increased sensitivity of the central nervous system and a deeper cognitive processing of physical, social and emotional stimuli (Aron *et al*., 2012; Boterberg & Warreyn, 2016), has also been linked to mental health problems. High sensitivity, which characterises about 20% of the population (Aron *et al*., 2012; Boterberg & Warreyn, 2016), is associated with higher levels of stress, anxiety, depression, psychosomatic illness and greater work unhappiness and need for recovery (Boterberg & Warreyn, 2016; Greven *et al*., 2019).

Perfectionism, a personality style characterised by excessively high personal standards and overly critical self-evaluations (Curran & Hill, 2019), causes feelings of failure, guilt, indecisiveness, procrastination, shame and low self-esteem (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). It is associated with several health concerns, including anxiety disorders, depression, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, personality disorders, eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorder, substance abuse, self-harm and even suicide (Curran & Hill, 2019; Geranmayepour & Besharat, 2010; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Sandoiu, 2018; Tabaka, 2017).

Optimism, which is the tendency to anticipate favourable outcomes (Carver *et al*., 2010; Gallagher & Lopez, 2009; Good Therapy, 2019), is the opposite of pessimism, so the tendency to anticipate unfavourable outcomes. Pessimism poses greater risk for anxiety disorders, depressive disorders and suicide (Carver *et al*., 2010; Conversano *et al*., 2010; Plomin *et al*., 1992).

Self-esteem also influences mental health. Self-esteem is a person's subjective evaluation of their own worth, and interestingly enough, is approximately 50% hereditary (Raevuori *et al*., 2007; Roy *et al*., 1995). Low self-esteem is associated with anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, high-risk behaviours and suicide (Gold, 2016; Henriksen *et al*., 2017; Mann *et al*., 2004; Silverstone & Salsali, 2003).

Environmental factors that can influence mental health

There are infinite environmental factors – meaning aspects of life experience and exposure – that can influence mental health. Adverse childhood experiences, commonly referred to as "ACEs," can have long-lasting effects on mental health (Bangor University, 2018; Harvard University, 2022). There is a lifetime increased risk for, and incidence of, anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse and suicidality in those who have experienced abuse, neglect and household dysfunction (De Venter *et al*., 2012; Sciolla *et al*., 2019). Stressors as in discrete events (*e.g.* relationship breakups, car accidents), chronic circumstances (*e.g.* long-term illness, ongoing marital problems, and political strife and war) and daily hassles (*e.g.* keeping up with the chores, meeting deadlines) can cause the kind of

stress that can culminate in a mental disorder (Monroe & Simons, 1991). As well, other types of stressors, such as social media, climate change and most recently, the pandemic, can each pose its own kinds of stress (APA, 2019; Cianconi *et al.*, 2020; Dodgen *et al.*, 2016; Robinson & Smith, 2021). Any level of stress which becomes unmanageable can negatively impact mental health.

Summary

Mental health and wellbeing are influenced by the combination of, and interaction between, both personal (inborn or hereditary) and environmental (life experience or exposure) factors. This blend of factors, unique to each person, shapes each to who they become. Everyone has "a single story," and there is not a single story that cannot be made better. Becoming aware of the factors that can influence mental health enables not just the ability to recognise one's unique strengths and vulnerabilities, but also to maximise one's resilience to stay healthy.

Checklist

- Where might you place yourself on the mental health continuum?
- What particular aspects of yourself, personal (inborn or hereditary) and environmental (life experience or exposure), do you see as influencing your mental health?
- Are you aware of your personality strengths, such as optimism, or vulnerabilities, such as neuroticism or perfectionism?
- What experiences in your life, historically or currently, do you think might be negatively impacting your mental health? What might you be able to do to address them?

THE ENVIRONMENT – THE VETERINARY ECOSYSTEM

Introduction

For the purposes of the WSAVA Global Guidelines for Professional Wellbeing, we are interpreting the word "environment" broadly, to include all veterinary workplaces, together with their physical environment, for instance, geographic region and location and the social environment they provide (Baum *et al.*, 2015). These elements together comprise the "ecosystem."

In this chapter, we provide an overview of the workplace and social factors that may impact the wellbeing of veterinarians and the veterinary team and explore common stressors in the veterinary workplace.

Environment and wellbeing

Environments impact the people within them – whatever the occupation associated with the environment. Actions can be taken in any environment to support wellbeing. Equally, some actions can act as a barrier to it.

The veterinary profession is complex and involves high-level decision making and other factors that can contribute to experiences of stress (Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study, 2020; Volk *et al.*, 2018). As the environmental factors in the veterinary ecosystem are diverse and dynamic, distinct categorisation is difficult but, based on our definition of the veterinary environment, we have categorised them below as workplace factors and social factors.

The existing literature cites the following workplace factors as influencing wellbeing:

Workplace factors

A work environment is the setting in which employees work. According to the 2018 BVA Workforce Report (Begeny *et al.*, 2018), it is important to ensure a work environment in which individuals feel they fit in and have opportunities to grow professionally, and which offers inspiring role models, as well as improving the experience of veterinary professionals and the retention of skilled staff (VetFutures, 2018).

- *A degree of autonomy* as to how people do their job has been shown to have a positive impact on wellbeing (Wheatley, 2017).
- *Clarity of roles and responsibilities within a team* are essential (VetFutures, 2018). When roles and responsibilities are not clear, it slows the joint effort and undermines job satisfaction and therefore the sense of wellbeing.
- *A sense of doing something important*, of achieving something that has an impact (Mastenbroek *et al.*, 2015; Wallace, 2019).
- *Receiving positive feedback*, clear terms and conditions and a regular appraisal process (Juncu, 2017).
- *Emotional and physical safety* (Lal *et al.*, 2021). Good workplaces ensure personal safety and support a culture of psychological safety (BVA, 2020). In the 2019 Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Survey of the Veterinary Profession, respondents who had concerns for their personal safety when dealing with an emergency showed a lower average wellbeing score than those who reported no such concerns (Robinson *et al.*, 2019).
- *Fairness, equity and inclusion*. Veterinary workplaces should be inclusive. Zero-tolerance to all forms of discrimination must be upheld and clearly communicated to everyone, including staff and clients (BVA, 2020).
- *Positive relationships with managers, peers and clients*. Workplace support from colleagues and managers is invaluable. Mentor–mentee relationships have been shown to benefit both parties (Niehoff *et al.*, 2005). Good workplaces expect fair and equal treatment of all team members from clients and do not tolerate inappropriate behaviour (BVA, 2020). The 2021 AVA Workforce survey

(AVA, 2021) revealed that veterinarians may struggle with the emotional toll of difficult client interactions and compassion fatigue, and that this is exacerbated where they perceive their superiors or employers are not providing adequate support.

- *Opportunities for professional growth.* Good workplaces encourage career progression for all team members, with regular mentoring and appraisals throughout their career and personal and professional development (BVA, 2020). The 2015 Vet Futures survey of BVA members found that while for most vets (59%), their working life to date had matched or exceeded their expectations, a large percentage (41%) reported disappointment mainly due to Insufficient opportunities for career progression (VetFuture Press Office, 2017).
- *Workload and flexibility.* Good workplaces have fair working hours, recognising and rewarding work above contracted hours and supporting requests for flexible working wherever possible (BVA, 2020)
- *Fair pay and equal opportunities.* Workplaces must provide fair and equal pay and benefits for all team members, relevant to their respective roles (BVA, 2020). Interestingly, research suggests that vets outside clinical practice tend to be more satisfied in their careers and more optimistic about the future compared to vets in small animal practice (VetFuture Press Office, 2017).

Social factors

Social factors are the aspects of life that influence the behaviour and quality of life of an individual. Social factors affect how we behave in social situations (Psychological Dictionary, 2015). Social variables that may impact the veterinary team wellbeing are:

- *Public safety* (*e.g.* a safe neighbourhood). The feeling of being physically safe can influence a person's wellbeing, health and productivity. The two are intrinsically linked.
- *Physical, social and professional support.* Social and professional support networks can have a profound positive impact on someone's wellbeing. *The* ability to establish support structures in new environments is important. Some authors claim that social relationships affect happiness more than any other factor (Larkin, 2013)
- *Perceptions as to the role of the veterinarian.*

Veterinarians contribute to society in a number of ways, including nurturing the human animal bond; supporting farmers; protecting the environment; ensuring public health; food safety; research, and educating the public. Veterinarians form strong partnerships with human health professionals and environmental organisations, in line with the One Health concept (VetFuture Press Office, 2017). The One Health concept is described as "a worldwide strategy for expanding interdisciplinary collaborations and communications in all aspects of health care for humans, animals and the environment" (One Health Initiative, 2023). The profession needs to demonstrate expertise as it is its ethical duty to practice competently. This, in turn, earns the trust of society (VetFuture Press Office, 2017).

- *Political stability.* As with public safety, political stability can positively influence wellbeing.
- *How do veterinary professionals score in terms of wellbeing?*

Working as a veterinarian or veterinary team member can be very rewarding. In a 2019 survey in the UK, respondents cited the best things about working the profession as working with animals, job satisfaction and challenge/stimulus. Respondents suggested that a better work–life balance, better financial reward and less workload pressure would make the profession more rewarding (Robinson *et al.* (2019).

Job characteristics such as realising their potential, helping others (animals or people), a sense of belonging (to a team or profession) and doing meaningful work exert a positive influence on the wellbeing of veterinarians (Wallace, 2019).

Other positive factors associated with veterinary work and veterinary wellbeing are: professional expertise, positive outcomes and job characteristics, relationships and recognition (Clise *et al.*, 2021). The significance of these findings is that they may help direct the focus from the harmful, demanding aspects of veterinary work to better understanding the deeply meaningful aspects that improve veterinarians' wellbeing (Wallace, 2019).

Almost 90% of veterinarians surveyed in the 2014 RCVS Survey considered veterinary work to be stressful, although a similar proportion said it provided variety and more than 80% reported job satisfaction (RCVS, 2014; VetFuture Press Office, 2017).

In the 2019 RCVS Survey, the overall WEMWBS wellbeing average (mean) score for respondents was 47.7, lower than in 2014 and 2010 when the score was 49 (Robinson *et al.*, 2019). In the WSAVA's 2018 Survey (manuscript in prep), the scores on the Kessler 6 (Kessler *et al.*, 2003) differed significantly between male and female veterinarians with the wellbeing of male veterinarians better than that of females. The WSAVA Survey also looked at the age of the veterinarians and showed that the wellbeing of younger members of the profession and less experienced veterinarians was worse than that of older members.

Stress and stressors

Before exploring common stressors in the veterinary profession, it is important to define the terms "stress" and "stressor."

The term "stress" as it is currently used was coined by Hans Selye in 1936, who defined it as the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change (Marksberry, 2017). Stress is a normal reaction to everyday pressures but can become unhealthy when it upsets day-to-day functioning. Stress affects all systems of the body, including the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endo-

crine, gastrointestinal, nervous and reproductive systems. Our bodies are well equipped to handle stress in small doses but, when stress becomes long-term or chronic, it can have serious effects on the body (APA, 2022a, 2022b).

While there is no firm definition of stress, clinical research confirms that the sense of having little or no control is always a cause of distress – and that's what stress is all about (Bewley, 2023).

The combination of reactions to stress is known as the "fight-or-flight" response because it evolved as a survival mechanism, enabling people and other mammals to react quickly to life-threatening situations. Unfortunately, the body can overreact to stressors that are not life-threatening, such as traffic jams, work pressure and family difficulties (Harvard Health, 2020).

Any definition of stress should also include "good stress" or what Selye called "eustress." Good stress pushes us to do more, experience more and achieve more (Bewley, 2023). In the short term (acute), stress can help boost our energy, improve our memory and motivate us to meet difficult challenges. On the other hand, long-term (chronic) stress can build up over time, lasting months, even years. This is stress resulting from repeated exposure to situations that lead to the release of stress hormones. Eventually, chronic stress can take a toll on our mental and physical health (White, 2022). Because it became apparent that most people viewed stress as a threat, Selye subsequently had to create a new word "stressor" to distinguish stimulus from response (APA, 2022a, 2022b).

What are the different types of stressors?

Stressors are the triggers behind the stress we face every day. They have a major influence upon mood; our sense of wellbeing; behaviour and health. Acute stress responses in healthy individuals may be adaptive and do not typically impose a health burden. However, if the threat is unremitting, particularly in older or unhealthy individuals, the long-term effects of stressors can damage health (Schneiderman *et al.*, 2005).

Stressors can be divided to short term and long term (Keely, 2021).

Short-term stressors *versus* long-term stressors

Short-term stressors may show up suddenly and be gone in a very short time. They place a strain on the mind and body but will not have a significant impact on health if they are managed effectively. Short-term stressors may include:

- *Acute stressors* – *e.g.* dealing with an emergency case in veterinary practice.
- *Trigger stressors* – reminders of past stress that is now producing a renewed stress response, for instance, a past failure may trigger anxiety when the same problem is faced.
- *Not knowing stressors* – i.e. experiencing stress because of a lack of information. For example, a lack of experience or dealing with unexpected situations in veterinary practice.

Long-term stressors persist over a longer period. Individuals may be under constant pressure for months or even years, with their body and mind staying in a constant state of readiness. Long-term stressors may include:

- *Daily hassles* – these stressors occur on a day-to-day basis and, while no single stressor is detrimental, the sum of them can be.
- *Chronic stressors* – these usually occur in high-risk jobs, abusive relationships and other long-term situations in which the individual feels they have to be constantly on their guard.
- *Ripple effect stressors* – these can be triggered by a change in routine or a life event. Graduation; finding a new job and getting fired are examples of ripple effect stressors.

Common workplace stressors in the veterinary profession

Common workplace stressors as reported in the literature are presented below in no particular order.

Workload and working overtime

For veterinary professionals, a major factor in the maintenance of their wellbeing is being able to get to the end of a day feeling content and in control. This can prove to be difficult with the demands of their work schedule interfering with their ability to lead a "normal family and social life." The 2020 Merck study showed good work/life balance to be a key driver of job satisfaction. Moreover, consistently working more than 46 hours a week is associated with high burnout (Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study, 2020).

The stress and pressure that veterinary teams are under today are significant. Many practices have experienced an increase in demand for their services. This, combined with productivity issues and high staff turnover, make the situation even more difficult (Salois, 2021).

Financial concerns

The veterinary profession is not immune to financially related issues as a workplace stressor (AVA, 2018; Griek *et al.*, 2018). It is also one of the primary reasons veterinarians consider leaving the profession (Olson, 2022).

Caregiving; ethical challenges/euthanasia

Veterinarians frequently encounter situations involving euthanasia, end-of-life care, financial limitations and the inadequate provision of care and these can create practical and moral dilemmas (Morgan & McDonald, 2007). Differences in beliefs regarding the moral value of animals, client and veterinary responsibilities, and deciding what is in an animal's best interests can cause ethical tension (Morgan & McDonald, 2007; Rollin, 2011).

A 2018 USA researcher revealed that 77% of vets have experienced moderate to severe levels of stress because of ethical dilemmas and 70% have had little or no training as to how to resolve these issues (Moses, 2018).

Conflict in the workplace – toxic culture

Interpersonal relationships are integral to any workplace and are crucial for enhanced teamwork and the overall success of the business. A work environment with toxic culture has a negative impact on the wellbeing of veterinary professionals (Nielsen *et al.*, 2015; Pearson, 2010). Research suggests that incivility also impacts patient care (Riskin *et al.*, 2015).

Difficulties with clients and managing client expectations

Clients are known to be a major source of stress to veterinary professionals (AVA, 2018; Griek *et al.*, 2018).

Some of the problems encountered are:

• Clients who are unable or unwilling to pay
• Bullying and aggressive clients
• Clients with unrealistic expectations
• Clients with poor compliance with regard to patient care
• Pressure and extortion from clients demanding services free online *via* social media
• Bias and inequity

Inequity – gender bias

UK research reveals that women face discrimination and occupy fewer places in the higher reaches of the veterinary profession, even as they begin to outnumber men in the field as a whole (Knights, 2019). The 2018 BVA report on Discrimination in the Veterinary Profession offers compelling evidence that, even when everything about two vets is equal, their gender can still significantly impact how they are perceived, treated and paid. According to the same report, younger and female veterinarians are significantly more likely than their older colleagues to have personally experienced discrimination (Begeny & Ryan, 2018).

Safety and access

Veterinary team members offer animal care services for a variety of animal species in many different workplace settings. As a result of this, they can be exposed to biological, chemical, physical and psychological hazards (CDC, 2022). Staff levels of competence and attention to occupational safety and health can vary, resulting in a safety or harmful culture for the business.

Impact of social media

Cyber-bullying and shaming in a public forum are common issues related to the use of social media (Olson, 2022). An AVMA survey in 2014 (AVMA, 2014) found that the most common impacts of cyber-bullying were workplace tension and mental wellbeing problems. Almost half of veterinarians who had been the victims of a cyber-attack had considered a career change due to the incident.

According to a survey conducted by AVMA and Banfield Pet Hospital in 2022 to measure the incidence of cyberbullying, 90% of respondents reported negative client interactions in the past year, and 65% reported negative interactions on a weekly basis (Teller, 2023).

Checklist
- Do you have fair and transparent processes for recruitment and performance appraisal?
- Do you have a system for identifying and reporting incidents of discrimination?
- How do you ensure achievable workload and work/life balance?
- Do you have a debriefing process for negative situations with colleagues or clients?
- Are your staff members trained to provide positive and/or constructive feedback?
- Do you have peer support/mentoring programme in place?
- Could you introduce activities to enhance professional development?
- How do you motivate your staff?
- How do you ensure an inclusive culture in your practice?
- Are your staff members trained in client communication?

THE IMPACT OF THE PERSONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS ON WORKER WELLBEING

Introduction
The personal and environmental factors described in previous chapters may contribute to chronic stress – and this, in turn, can have a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing.

While job characteristics such as realising their potential, helping others and doing meaningful work have a positive influence on the wellbeing of veterinarians (Wallace, 2019), factors such as workload, financial concerns, long working hours, challenging interactions, unexpected outcomes, euthanasia, dealing with bereaved clients and the fear of complaints or mistakes can cause stress. These have a negative impact on their wellbeing (Dow *et al.*, 2019; Moir & Van Den Brink, 2020).

A recent literature review found that about twice as many published articles on veterinary wellness focus on the negative aspects of mental health, compared to the benefits of wellbeing (Wallace, 2019). Raw word frequency counts across the surveyed literature revealed that problem-oriented mental health terms are used more frequently than resilience or wellbeing-oriented terms, by a ratio of about 2:1 (Cake *et al.*, 2017).

The impact of stressors on wellbeing
Stressors can have a physiological and/or mental impact on wellbeing.

Physiological impact
Human bodies are well equipped to handle stress in small doses, but when stress becomes long-term or chronic, it can have serious effects (Mayo Clinic, 2023; Volk *et al.*, 2018).

Stress affects all systems of the body (APA, 2023; WebMD, 2023) as below:

Musculoskeletal system – the musculoskeletal system reads the stress signals and causes muscles to become tense.
Cardiovascular system – the cardiovascular system causes the heart rate to increase. This, turn, causes the heart to pump more blood through the large blood vessels, raising blood pressure.
Nervous system – the amygdala triggers the hypothalamus, the "command centre" for the stress reaction, by alerting the body to a threatening situation.
Endocrine system – the hypothalamus triggers the endocrine system to produce stress hormones, which provide energy and encourage the digestive system to produce glucose in the liver.
Gastrointestinal system – the gastrointestinal system triggers the consumption of more or different foods. This can result in diarrhoea or constipation.

Research suggests that chronic stress contributes to high blood pressure, promotes the formation of artery-clogging deposits and causes brain changes that may contribute to anxiety, depression and addiction (Harvard Health, 2020). Preliminary research also suggests that chronic stress may contribute to obesity, both through direct mechanisms (causing people to eat more) and indirectly (by reducing sleep and exercise) (Harvard Health, 2020).

Impact on mental health
The effects of being in fight-or-flight mode can also be felt in the mind. Short-term effects may include a heightened sense of awareness and focus. However, stress can also create feelings of anxiety, helplessness, anger and fear. This can cause difficulties in dealing with everyday tasks by causing those affected to overreact and feel out of control or overwhelmed.

In a study aiming at measuring the prevalence of severe mental distress and determining the level of wellbeing within the veterinary profession, two thirds of participants reported feelings of depression, compassion fatigue, burnout and anxiety within the last year. Veteri-

narians under 45 years of age were the most affected by psychological distress and showed lower wellbeing index scores (Volk *et al.*, 2018). Women are much more likely to suffer from serious psychological distress (Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study, 2020). According to the 2020 Merck Animal Health Wellbeing Study, having a personality high in neuroticism and higher debt are predictors of serious psychological distress (Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study, 2020).

Common mental health problems include depression, anxiety, substance abuse, burnout, compassion fatigue, suicidal ideation, impostor syndrome, moral distress, work/life integration and problems related to an individual's intersectionality. *Intersectionality* is defined as the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalised individuals or groups (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023a, 2023b).

Depression – It is estimated that 5% of adults suffer from depression globally (WHO, 2023). Depression is different from usual mood fluctuations and short-lived emotional responses to challenges in everyday life and, especially when recurrent and with moderate or severe intensity, it can become a serious health condition. It can cause the affected person to suffer greatly and function poorly at work and in their personal life. At its worst, depression can lead to suicide.

Anxiety – Anxiety is an emotion characterised by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes, such as increased blood pressure. People with anxiety disorders usually have recurring intrusive thoughts or concerns. They may avoid certain situations out of worry. They may also experience physical symptoms such as sweating, trembling, dizziness or increased heart rate ("Anxiety," no date).

In a USA study surveying veterinarians licenced in Alabama, 66% of respondents indicated that they had been "clinically depressed," but 32% of those with depression had not sought treatment (Skipper & Williams, 2012).

A 2021 study in the USA revealed high levels of burnout, characterised by high levels of emotional exhaustion and a feeling of a lack of personal accomplishment among the participants. The mental component of their quality-of-life score was lower than the general USA population, whereas the physical component score was consistent with the general USA population (Chigerwe *et al.*, 2021).

Substance abuse – Substance abuse refers to the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs. Numerous factors put veterinary professionals at a high risk of substance abuse, including the stress of their job, access to controlled substances, long hours of practice and constant contact with critically ill patients.

In 2015, Dr Jon Geller of Colorado State University shared the results of an online survey of veterinarians (Kahler, 2015). This showed that 72% of respondents said they had worked with someone in the veterinary workplace they suspected of having a drug problem. More than 40% said they knew two or more people who with a suspected drug problem. A full 68% said drug abuse and addiction was at least as big a problem in the veterinary profession as in the general population, if not bigger (Geller, 2016).

Burnout – According to the World Health Organization (WHO), occupational burnout is a syndrome resulting from chronic work-related stress, with symptoms characterised by "feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy."

The Mayo Clinic defines burnout as "a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion accompanied by doubts about one's competence and the value of one's work" (Mayo Clinic, 2023). The concept of burnout in health care emerged in the late 1960s to describe the emotional and psychological stress experienced by clinic staff caring for structurally vulnerable patients. Since then, the term has been used to characterise job-related stress in any health practice environment (Rotenstein *et al.*, 2018). Burnout affects interpersonal skills, job performance, career satisfaction and psychological health.

Burnout in physicians is largely driven by excessive workloads, an imbalance between job demands and skills, a lack of autonomy and prolonged work stress (Neill *et al.*, 2022). While everyone is susceptible to burnout at some level, it is a particular issue for those in the frontline of the veterinary profession (Neill *et al.*, 2022). In a recent survey, 86.7% of USA veterinarians had burnout scores in the moderate or high range (Ouedraogo *et al.*, 2021). The trend towards burnout is increasing over time (Neill *et al.*, 2022), as are overall stress levels for veterinarians (Merck Animal Health, 2020).

Studies have shown that burnout is higher among recent veterinary graduates; veterinarians with high veterinary educational debt; those in small animal practice and female veterinarians (Neill *et al.*, 2022). Burnout is also more prevalent among associates in private practice compared to practice owners, relief veterinarians and veterinarians in public practice (Neill *et al.*, 2022).

Compassion fatigue – The term compassion fatigue describes the physical and mental exhaustion and emotional withdrawal experienced by those who care for sick or traumatised people over an extended period (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023a, 2023b).

Unlike burnout, which is caused by everyday work stresses, compassion fatigue results from taking on the emotional burden of a patient's agony. Within high care professions where empathy, compassion and caring for others are at the core of practice, compassion fatigue is recognised as an occupational hazard (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2023a, 2023b).

Caring for patients and clients can be tremendously satisfying, offering a sense of meaning, purpose and making a difference. However, it comes at a price. "The cost of caring," (Stoewen, 2021). "The cost of caring," was defined by Charles Figley as "the deep physical, emotional, and spiritual exhaustion that can result from working day to day in an intense caregiving environment" (Figley & Roop, 2006).

Compassion fatigue is thought to be a manifestation of secondary traumatic stress and burnout (Stoewen, 2021). It is no surprise that the definition of burnout is similar to that of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue arises from stress – work-related stress and compassion stress (Stoewen, 2021). The question has been raised as to whether compassion fatigue is more accurately described as "empathic distress" fatigue (Klimecki & Singer, 2012). Exposure to the suffering of others can lead to two different emotional reactions: empathic concern, with sympathy and compassion, or empathic distress (Stoewen, 2021).

A study in South Australia in 2015 revealed that female and younger veterinarians, were more prone to experiencing mild to severe psychological distress and almost half of the participants were experiencing high to very high levels of compassion fatigue (Dow *et al.*, 2019). A significant proportion of participants in the same study felt that their own mental health was affected by dealing with clients grieving the loss of a companion animal (Dow *et al.*, 2019).

Suicidal ideation – Suicidal ideations, often called suicidal thoughts or ideas, is a broad term used to describe a range of contemplations, wishes and preoccupations with death and suicide (Harmer *et al.*, 2023).

In 2014, a survey of 11,627 USA veterinarians found that 9% had current serious psychological distress; 31% had experienced depressive episodes and 17% had experienced suicidal ideation since leaving veterinary school (Tomasi *et al.*, 2019). In the USA, the annual prevalence of suicidal ideation in adults is 4% (Piscopo *et al.*, 2016).

In another national USA study conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic, one in 15 USA physicians had thoughts of taking their own life in the last year, which exceeded the prevalence of suicidal ideation among USA workers in other fields (Shanafelt *et al.*, 2021).

In a German study from 2020, suicidal ideation was found in 19.2% of veterinarians, compared with only 5.7% in the general population; 32.11% of veterinarians were classified as at increased suicide risk, compared with 6.62% in the general population; 27.78% of veterinarians screened positive for depression, compared with 3.99% of the general population (Schwerdtfeger *et al.*, 2020).

A key predictor of suicidal thoughts is serious psychological distress, which is associated with neuroticism, high debt and long work hours (Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study, 2020).

Poisoning is the most common mechanism of death among veterinarians (Witte *et al.*, 2019) consistent with the hypothesis that increased access to lethal drugs may explain a high incidence of suicides (Brscic *et al.*, 2021).

Impostor syndrome – Impostor syndrome is a psychological occurrence in which an individual doubts their skills, talents, or accomplishments and has a persistent internalised fear of being exposed as a fraud. Despite external evidence of their competence, those experiencing this phenomenon do not believe they deserve their success or luck.

An international survey exploring the prevalence and severity of Impostor Syndrome among veterinarians revealed that 68% of the participants met or exceeded the clinical cut-off score for Impostor Syndrome. Ordinal regressions found that residing in New Zealand or the UK, being female or having been in practice for less than 5 years increased the odds of having a high IS score (Kogan *et al.*, 2020).

Moral distress – Moral distress is a type of distress that results from engaging in, or failing to prevent, decisions and actions which conflict with one's personal values and beliefs.

It may occur when an individual has made a moral decision but is unable to act on it, often because of internal or external constraints. Moral distress occurs commonly in veterinary practice.

Studies show that veterinary surgeons regularly face ethical dilemmas and that they find these stressful. These conflicts, in association with other factors such as personality traits, can lead to the experience of moral distress (Montoya *et al.*, 2019).

A total of 57% of veterinary practitioners in a UK study reported that they faced one to two dilemmas per week, while 34% stated they typically faced three to five dilemmas per week (Batchelor & McKeegan, 2012).

Veterinarians report widespread ethical conflict and moral distress across many practice types and demographics. Most veterinarians have little or no training on how to decrease the impact of these problems. Ethical conflict and resulting moral distress may be an important source of stress and poor wellbeing that is not widely recognised or well defined according to a USA study (Moses *et al.*, 2018).

Work–life integration – Work-life integration is one important component of physician wellbeing. Work-life integration is a method of intermixing and synchronising all aspects of your life, from work to personal.

The term work–life balance may cause professionals to feel inadequate in pursuing a reality in which work and life each have equal importance. Instead, work–life integration is a more realistic term.

Work-life Integration instead is an approach that creates more synergies between all areas that define "life": work, home/family, community, personal wellbeing and health (Berkeley Haas, 2019).

Work–life integration does not look the same for everyone – and how an individual chooses to organise their time will depend on both their professional and personal commitments and aspirations. Work–life integration is a great way to give time and attention to all areas of life, without having to sacrifice one for the other. It is more realistic to achieve, and it brings a new outlook on work.

Intersectionality – Intersectionality has become a significant intellectual approach for those thinking about the ways that race, gender and other social identities converge to create unique forms of oppression.

Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins refers to intersectionality as a "matrix of oppression," and discusses the ways that some people (*e.g.* people of colour, women, LGBTQ+, dis/abled, etc.) are "multiply marginalised."

So, what does this mean for veterinary professionals? It means that if we do not consider intersectionality and how it affects people, those who are multiply marginalised will fall through the cracks (Nishi, 2022).

The profession can work to fully incorporate the insights of intersectionality and therefore contribute to making social justice and equity possible. Ways to do this may include: (1) engaging and collaborating with communities, (2) questioning societal structures, (3) working together/build coalitions, (4) teaching social justice (Rosenthal, 2016).

Checklist
• Are your staff members trained to recognise the impact of stressors (*e.g.* burnout, anxiety disorders)?
• Could you introduce activities to improve your capacity to recognise and monitor stressors in the workplace?
• Do you seek advice, formally or informally, from other external organisations with regard to identifying, monitoring and managing stressors?

SOLUTIONS AND RESOURCES

Introduction
All parts of the veterinary profession – the veterinary education sector, professional associations, academic institutions and veterinary businesses – have a role to play in improving general levels of wellbeing. In this chapter we will explore a range of support and prevention initiatives that are already being applied around the world to meet the challenges posed by the unique circumstances of our profession.

Wellness training and awareness for undergraduates
Veterinary teaching institutions are generally aware that their graduates are at higher risk of mental health challenges than the wider population. As a result, many have developed programmes to increase the awareness of this risk and to give their students useful tools to help them prevent or manage this risk as they graduate into the profession.

For example, Murdoch University Veterinary School in Australia has integrated a course into the veterinary undergraduate curriculum called Veterinary Professional Life (VPL), which trains students in self-awareness, psychology and communications skills (Mills *et al.*, 2006). One of the designers of this programme, Martin Cake, has also written on the importance of these skills in the employability of veterinary graduates (Cake *et al.*, 2019). The VPL programme was in part derived from, and partnered with, the Veterinary Leadership Experience (Veterinary Leadership Institute, n.d.) which has been used by the Washington State University College of Veterinary Medicine since 2002.

Other veterinary schools in the USA, such as North Carolina State University College of Veterinary Medicine, provide a comprehensive wellness programme for veterinary students (Royal *et al.*, 2017). The University of Florida Veterinary School publishes a page on health and wellness, providing links to resources on mindfulness and stress management (University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine, 2022).

Recognising that burnout and attrition are significant problems in the veterinary profession (Montoya *et al.*, 2021), James Cook University School in Australia has developed a programme to strengthen veterinary careers by encouraging resilience through acquiring knowledge and practical strategies to deal with the stresses of a veterinary career (Taylor, 2022).

Wellness support and training for professionals
Newer veterinary graduates face greater risks to their professional wellbeing compared to their more experienced colleagues (Volk *et al.*, 2018; WSAVA wellness survey (Manuscript in prep). In a profession which has significant wellbeing challenges, newly graduated veterinarians may have the additional burdens of inexperience, professional and social isolation and poor remuneration (AVA, 2021). These issues cause some veterinarians to consider leaving the profession that they have invested significant time, energy and resources in achieving.

To address the risks to wellbeing in new veterinary graduates, the AVA has devised a Graduate Mentoring Program (AVA, accessed 26 June 2022) to offer support during their formative years in the profession. The programme assigns trained mentors who are experienced veterinarians to mentor graduates and provide them with wellness, career and personal development support as well as to offer a "sounding board" for issues that they are struggling with. An important skill in which these mentors are trained is to recognise when their mentee has a problem that they, as the mentor, do not have the skills to deal with. They will then refer them to a person or organisation with the appropriate skills.

Other mentoring programmes are being developed. For example, a semi-commercial programme for veterinarians is available in the USA (MentorVet, 2022).

The wellbeing of veterinarians at any point in their career can be assisted by the programmes that already exist in many regions of the world. These programmes can assist in:

• Supporting the veterinary team to lead satisfying, prosperous and healthy lives (AVA, 2022a).
• Self-assessment of an individual's wellbeing (American Veterinary Association Mental Health [AVMA], 2022).
• Self-care and resources for veterinarians seeking help (AVA, 2022b; AVA Mental First Aid, 2022; AVMA, 2022a; Vetlife Helpline, 2022; Veto-Entraide; France, 2022; VetX, 2022).

- Training in wellness strategies and resilience (AVMA, 2022b; Mind Matters Training, 2022).
- Dealing with challenging conditions such as compassion fatigue (AVMA, 2022d; MMI Kite App, 2022) and conflict resolution (imatrix, 2022; MMI Kite App, 2022).

Workplace enhancement programmes

In the current environment where challenges to professional wellbeing are recognised as a significant issue in veterinary businesses, businesses themselves are beginning to evaluate the financial benefits of creating workplaces in which wellness is valued. Flourishing workplaces appreciate the benefits in productivity that instilling a value on wellness brings to the business (Fahrenkopf *et al.*, 2008; Oxtoby *et al.*, 2015).

Organisations such as the AVMA and AVA have created programmes to promote workplaces in which wellness is valued (AVA, 2022c; AVA Veterinary Association, Healthy Workplaces, 2022; AVMA, 2022c; British Veterinary Association (BVA), 2022; The National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace, n.d.).

To demonstrate its commitment to healthy supportive workplaces, the AVA has developed a programme called Employer of Choice (AVA, 2022d), which offers/enables practices to be certified that they meet standards of staffing management such as effective recruitment, engagement and retention strategies. This programme is not only a public affirmation of the importance of valuing the wellbeing of all veterinary team members, but also an opportunity for businesses which value these standards to gain public recognition for their efforts.

Wellness support and intervention programmes

Veterinarians and veterinary practices that wish to implement strategies to improve the wellness of their team members can access a variety of resources which can assist in achieving this outcome.

The AVMA provides podcasts to promote wellness strategies (AVMA My Veterinary Life Podcasts, 2022). The AVA has launched an initiative called "Thrive" to support members with resources to enhance the wellness of veterinarians (AVA, 2022a). A range of member organisations (Canadian Veterinary Medical Association [CVMA] Veterinary Health and Wellness Resources, 2022) and private providers offer resources (mainly online) to create or enhance wellness plans in the workplace.

These providers range from companies which offer broad practice management resources (Vetport International Programs, 2022); others which also offer more technical training modules (Improve Vet Practice, 2022) and those offering individual wellness enhancement (Critical Care Vet, 2022; Essential Wellness Yoga, 2022; The Wellness Journal for Veterinary Team Members, 2022).

The number of providers which offer services aimed at improving the wellbeing of veterinarians is testament to the importance of wellness being increasingly recognised by the global veterinary community. However, it is evident that the vast majority of these programmes are based in, or targeted to, veterinary teams in more affluent cultures where English is the dominant language (North America, the UK and Australia). By sharing programmes, tools and experiences on a global scale, the WSAVA aims to provide a hub for wellness support for the global veterinary community (Table 2).

Checklist

- Do veterinary curricula include awareness of personal wellness strategies?
- Are students aware of their core personal strengths and their effect on their future wellness and employability?
- Do veterinary businesses, professional bodies or regulatory bodies provide or encourage training or support for wellness strategies?
- Do early veterinary graduates understand the value of a mentor to assist with their early career?
- Is training available to ensure mentors understand this role and its value to early graduates?
- Are veterinary teams aware of the range of programmes available to improve wellness and work outcomes for veterinary teams?
- Are veterinarians and teams able to access support resources when individuals experience wellness challenges or crises?
- Do veterinary businesses and regulatory bodies encourage the use of resources to support team members in times of challenge or crisis?

CHAPTER 6 – SUMMARY

In this chapter we recap some key points and highlight the PWG's "Top Tips," which may be used as lists or reminders to individuals or teams to enhance their wellness strategies.

Checklists

Chapter 1 – introduction

- Are you familiar with the WSAVA Professional Wellness Group (PWG) and what it does?
- What are the main differences between wellness and wellbeing and how should you apply them to your mental health?
- How do you perceive the challenges to improving wellness within your working team(s) and within your professional group?

Table 2. Resources

Topic(s)	Title	Type of resource	Source	Reference/link	Country
Veterinary students					
Student communication skills	Development of veterinary communication skills at Murdoch University and in Other Australian Veterinary Schools	Scientific paper (Online)	Journal of Veterinary Medical Education	https://jvme.utpjournals.press/doi/pdf/10.3138/jvme.33.1.93 *	Canada
Student wellness	A comprehensive wellness programme for veterinary medical education: design and implementation at North Carolina State University	Scientific paper	International Journal of Higher Education	Vol. 6, No. 1*	United States
Student health and wellness	University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine Health and Wellness	Programme description	Online	https://education.vetmed.ufl.edu/dvm-curriculum/student-wellness/ *	United States
Graduate mentoring	Graduate mentoring programme	Australian Veterinary Association Program	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/about-us/programs-awards/graduate-mentoring-program/ †	Australia
Veterinary professional					
Resilience, employability	VetSet2Go: a collaborative outcomes and assessment framework building employability, resilience and veterinary graduate success	Programme report	Online	https://ltr.edu.au/resources/ID15-4930_Cake_FinalReport_2019.pdf *	Australia
Self-awareness, leadership	Veterinary leadership experience	Programme description	Online	https://veterinaryleadershipinstitute.org/programs/vle/ *	United States
Mentoring	MentorVet	Programme	Online	https://www.mentorvet.net/ ‡	United States
Wellness	Thrive	Programme	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/thrive/ §	Australia
Wellbeing assessment	Assess your wellbeing	Professional quality of life (ProQOL) assessment	Online	https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing/assess-your-wellbeing *	United States
Wellbeing study	Executive summary of the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study	Special report	Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association	Special Report 252 (10)*	United States
Wellness survey	Not titled as yet	Scientific paper	Journal of Small Animal Practice	In press	United States
Mental health	Resources to help you, and those around you	Information sheets Articles, organisations and surveys Other resources	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/member-services/vethealth/mental-health-information-sheets/ *	Australia
Mental health first aid	Mental health first aid course	Course	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/member-services/vethealth/mental-health-first-aid/ ¶	Australia
Wellbeing resources	Wellbeing	Articles, assessment tool, events, trainings, and CE opportunities, tips and tools	Online	https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing *	United States
Helpline	Vetlife	Anonymous phone and email support	Online	https://helpline.vetlife.org.uk *	United Kingdom
Self-care	Veterinary mental health: a self-care guide for vets	Website information on various topics	Online	https://www.vetxinternational.com/veterinary-mental-health-a-self-care-guide-for-vets/ *	United Kingdom
Helpline	Vétos-Entraide	Anonymous phone and email support (French)	Online	https://vetos-entraide.com/ *	France
Veterinary practices					
Team wellbeing	Tools to strengthen your veterinary team	Article with links to AVMA member articles	Online	https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing/tools-strengthen-your-veterinary-team *	United States
Mental health training	Mindmatters	Various training programmes and workshops	Online	https://www.vetmindmatters.org/training/ *	United Kingdom
Compassion fatigue	Work and compassion fatigue	Article	Online	https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing/work-and-compassion-fatigue *	United States
Mental health and wellbeing platform	MMI Kite App	App	Online	https://www.vetmindmatters.org/new-wellbing-programme-for-the-veterinary-profession-takes-flight-as-mmi-kite-app-officially-launches/ *	United Kingdom

Table 2. Continued

Topic(s)	Title	Type of resource	Source	Reference/link	Country
Conflict resolution	Guiding the veterinary team through conflict resolution	Blog post	Online	https://imatrix.com/blog/guiding-the-veterinary-team-through-conflict-resolution/ *	United States
Productivity effects	We need to talk about error: causes and types of error in veterinary practice	Scientific paper	Veterinary Record	177, 438 to 444*	United Kingdom
Productivity effects	Rates of medication errors among depressed and burnt out residents: prospective cohort study	Scientific paper	British Medical Journal	336, 488*	United Kingdom
Healthy workplaces	Creating healthy workplaces	Tip sheet	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/resources/vethealth/fact-sheets/creating-healthy-workplaces-cvi1300.pdf	Australia
Healthy workplaces	Healthy workplaces	Resources	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/library-resources/library/conference-proceedings/2015/practical-ideas-for-creating-emotionally-healthy-workplaces-and-staff-wellness-programs/Overfield%20R.%20Ideas%20for%20creating%20emotionally-healthy%20workplaces%20and%20staff%20wellness%20programs.pdf ‖	Australia
Healthy workplaces	Employer of choice programme	AVA Accreditation programme	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/education-events/employer-of-choice/ **	Australia
Healthy workplaces	Good veterinary workplaces	Informative website and webinars	Online	https://www.bva.co.uk/take-action/our-policies/good-veterinary-workplaces/ *	United Kingdom
Healthy workplaces	Setting up a workplace wellbeing programme	Articles	Online	https://www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing/setting-workplace-wellbeing-program *	United States
Healthy workplaces	National Standard of Canada for psychological health and safety in the workplace	Program	Online	https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/national-standard/ *	Canada
Healthy workplaces	Wellness plan for veterinary practice	Article	Online	https://www.vetport.com/veterinary-wellness-plans#:~:text=Through%20the%20medium%20of%20wellness%2C%20veterinarians%20can%20bring,seeks%20to%20widen%20these%20boundaries%20and%20include%20- ††	United States
Healthy workplaces	Mental health and wellbeing in veterinary practice – including veterinary receptionists!	Article	Online	https://www.veterinary-practice.com/article/mental-health-and-well-being-in-veterinary-practice-including-veterinary-receptionists *	United Kingdom
Wellness	Dr. Marie Holowaychuk Critical Care Vet	Blogs webinars	Online	https://marieholowaychuk.com/ ‡‡	Canada
Mental health support	The Wellness Journal for Veterinary Team Members	52-week daily journal workbook	Online	https://www.vetsupportstore.com/product/the-wellness-journal-for-veterinary-team-members/ §§	United States
Wellness	Yoga support for veterinary professionals	Yoga	Online	https://www.essentialwellnessyoga.com.au/veterinary-professionals ¶¶	Australia
Attrition from veterinary profession	Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Workforce Survey 2021 Analysis Report	Report	Online	https://www.ava.com.au/siteassets/news/ava-workforce-survey-analysis-2021-final.pdf *	Australia
Attrition from clinical practice	Risk factors associated with veterinary attrition from clinical practice: a descriptive study	Scientific Paper	Australian Veterinary Journal	99 (11), 495 to 501*	Australia

*Freely available
†While information on the programme is freely available, participation is only available to members
‡Information on the programme is freely available as are some support services. Full participation is a paid service
§The Thrive programme is in development. Current information is freely available. Future modules may only be available to members
‖Information on the course is freely available. Participation is restricted to members or paid participants
¶Available to members only
**Information on the programme is freely available. However, participation is restricted to members
††While information on wellness programmes is freely available and free trials on the VETPORT site are available, full participation is a paid service
‡‡This is a subscription-based service
§§This is a subscription-based journal
¶¶Although there are free sessions available, this is a paid service

• Can you more effectively identify and use resources to protect and improve your wellbeing and that of your veterinary team?

Chapter 2 – aspects of the person that can influence mental health

• How has your understanding of "you in your story" changed, if at all?
• What particular aspects of yourself, personal (inborn or hereditary) and environmental (life experience or exposure), do you see as influencing your mental health?
• What is it that you want to learn more about? How might this help you?
• Are there any steps that you'd like to take? What can you do to elevate "you in your story" to improve your mental health?

Chapter 3 – the environment – the veterinary ecosystem

• Do you have fair and transparent processes of recruitment and performance appraisal?
• Do you have a system of identifying and reporting incidents of discrimination?
• How do you ensure achievable workload and Work-life balance?
• Do you have a debriefing process for negative situations with colleagues or clients?
• Are your staff members trained to provide positive and/or constructive feedback?
• Do you have peer support/mentoring programme in place?
• Are there activities you could introduce to enhance professional development?
• How do you motivate your staff?
• How do you ensure an inclusive culture in your business?
• Are your staff members trained in client communication?

Chapter 4 – the impact of personal and environmental factors on worker wellbeing

• Are your staff members trained to recognise the impact of stressors (*e.g.* burnout, anxiety disorders)?
• Are there activities that you could introduce to improve your capacity to recognise and monitor the stressors in the workplace?
• Do you seek advice, formally or informally, from other external organisations with regards to identifying, monitoring and managing stressors?

Chapter 5 – solutions and resources

• Do veterinary curricula include awareness of personal wellness strategies?
• Are students aware of their core personal strengths and their effect on their future wellness and employability?
• Do veterinary businesses, professional bodies or regulatory bodies provide or encourage training or support for wellness strategies?
• Do early veterinary graduates understand the value of a mentor to assist with their early career?
• Is training available to ensure mentors understand this role and its value to early graduates?
• Are veterinary teams aware of the range of programmes available to improve wellness and work outcomes for veterinary teams?
• Are veterinarians and teams able to access support resources when individuals experience wellness challenges or crises?
• Do veterinary businesses and regulatory bodies encourage the use of resources to support team members in times of challenge or crisis?

WSAVA professional wellness group top tips

Happiness/wellbeing

• Investigate self-awareness resources and become familiar with your core strengths.
• Nurture friends and family members who you trust and can talk to about challenging issues.
• Enjoy your job – develop your role into areas that motivate you and that you excel at.
• Cultivate hobbies – activities that completely engage your mind.
• Do voluntary work that uplifts and fulfils you.
• Show gratitude as often as possible. Tell your team how much you appreciate them or something they have done for you.

Personal approaches to improve wellness

• Talk to someone you trust and discuss your fears and hopes as to how you would like things to be.
• Write down how you are feeling and your progress in a journal that you can reflect on.
• Set aside regular time for yourself and incorporate exercise into your daily routine.

- Overcome negative self-talk by replacing it with positive things drawn from the strategies above.
- Reduce your workload – the ideal workload should keep you interested, challenged, entertained and busy but not overwhelmed.
- Consider the bigger picture – ask yourself "how important is this? Will it matter in the long run?"
- If you feel you are not improving, seek professional help.

Organisational approach to improve staff wellness

- Teach your staff to recognise the signs of stress and effective ways of mitigating stress (a starting point might be the Vets in Mind Triage Tool).
- Promote a culture of self-care and provide resources to learn about mindfulness and self-compassion, and ideally a "sanctuary" – an area at work, where your team can decompress and practice self-care.
- Provide support/mentorship and opportunities for your team to discuss cases, difficult client interactions. Schedule regular check-ins as a safe space for open discussions.
- Encourage professional growth – regularly discuss opportunities for professional development, taking on different roles within the workplace and becoming mentors with your team.
- Promote a good work–life balance – encourage open discussions with your team about scheduling, workflow, flexibility and community engagement.
- Consider anonymous surveys/comments to gain an insight into the culture in your workplace.

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