Looking out for others

JANUARY 16 was this year’s ‘Blue Monday’. Falling on the third Monday in January, Blue Monday is so-called because it is supposedly the most depressing day of the year. The excitement of Christmas has faded and the better weather and lighter evenings of spring seem a long way ahead.

Every year on Blue Monday, the charity Mental Health Research UK runs its ‘Blooming Monday’ campaign, which encourages people to wear their brightest clothes to work. The aim is not only to brighten up Blue Monday, but also to get people talking about mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health and wellbeing have long been recognised as issues of particular concern to the veterinary professions but, until recently, efforts to understand and tackle the underlying causes and offer appropriate support have tended to be rather fragmented and piecemeal. However, the profession is now getting behind efforts to take a more strategic approach to understanding and improving veterinary mental health and wellbeing.

Two years ago, the RCVS launched the Mind Matters Initiative (MMI), a five-year, £1 million project that aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of all members of the veterinary team, including students, veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and practice managers. The initiative is being supported by a range of veterinary organisations representing all members of the practice team, as well as students. Momentum continues to build and, as members of the BVA Council were told at a meeting in December, the MMI is being held up ‘as an exemplar of how to manage mental health issues in professional working environments’ (see pp 63-64 of this issue).

Since its launch, the MMI has been active in running training for veterinary professionals to help them recognise signs of mental health problems in their colleagues and, perhaps, in themselves as well. The training also aims to give participants the ability and confidence to encourage someone to seek help. The MMI estimates that some 550 people have taken part in the training, and courses continue to be run across the UK.

However, vets also recognise that looking out for the welfare of others can extend beyond their immediate colleagues, and two recent developments illustrate this well.

The first of these is the launch of a film showing how professionals, including veterinary surgeons, can help to spot the signs of domestic abuse. Launched on January 12, the film, entitled ‘Harder’, has been made to support the training offered to professionals by Medics Against Violence. The Scottish organisation’s ‘Ask, Support and Care’ training programme (previously known as ‘Ask, Validate, Document and Refer’) has been running since 2010 and among the more than 2300 professionals to have taken part in it are some 60 veterinary surgeons. The training programme was expanded to include vets after a clear link was identified between cruelty to animals and domestic abuse and one of Medics Against Violence’s partners is the Links Group, a multiagency group with strong veterinary input that promotes the welfare and safety of vulnerable children, animals and adults. The Links Group offers training and a number of other resources for practice teams to help them know what to do when facing a vulnerable client in the consulting room or on farm.

The second development is the recent publication of a study by researchers from Plymouth University examining the issue of dementia among farmers and its impact on their businesses and home lives. From a veterinary point of view, the study is of interest because it suggested that farmers affected by dementia can find it hard to maintain standards of animal health and welfare. It also highlighted a lack of awareness and joined-up thinking among agencies that could help and support farmers. The researchers commented that ‘Often, there is no engagement by these agencies until a formal diagnosis of dementia is made, which can sometimes be quite late on, when the farm is already in crisis.’ They recommended that all agencies working with farmers should undergo dementia awareness training and become ‘dementia friends’. Many vets – and not just those who have contact with farmers – may be willing to become involved with this kind of venture.

The responsibility of looking out for the wellbeing of colleagues and clients may seem like yet another burden on veterinary professionals, and it is certainly not a vet’s job to diagnose medical or other problems in their colleagues or clients. However, in none of the situations above is the vet being asked to become an expert or to take responsibility for tackling the underlying problem. Looking out for others can mean something as simple as offering a cup of tea and a chance to chat, or having the contact details of an appropriate support organisation to hand. The main thing is to be alert for issues that might arise, and not turning away when they do.

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