

Editorial

Guarding your wellbeing

‘I THINK that the increased focus on mental health issues in the veterinary profession is due to most vets being women. Women are more anxious and neurotic than men.’

That was how one 28-year-old male vet from the UK responded to a global survey to assess wellness in the veterinary professions.

He told researchers he felt mental health problems are being exaggerated across society and that stress should not be categorised as a mental health problem. Instead, we must accept that adult life is difficult for everyone.

I think we could all agree with his final point – no adult escapes difficulty. But his claims of mental health problems being exaggerated are undermined by the results from that survey – the first ever global study of veterinary wellness – conducted by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) (p 154).

Based on an online questionnaire completed by thousands, it found that stress and reduced wellbeing is a universal problem across the professions. It also found a probable correlation between a career in veterinary medicine and an elevated risk of mental health issues.

While it found older professionals are significantly more satisfied with their careers and vets more satisfied with their careers than vet nurses or technicians (as nurses are sometimes known in the USA), it found the mental health of younger members of the profession ‘seriously at risk’.

These results chime with previous reviews of mental wellbeing in vets. Published last year in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*,¹ the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study found wellbeing among US vets to be lower than in the general population. And even those vets with high levels of wellbeing experienced frequent feelings of depression, anxiety, compassion fatigue or burnout.

And UK vets have regular reminders in the pages of this journal – as well as in their own networks – of the terrible toll that mental distress can take on lives and family units.

That is why this week’s issue has a special focus on wellness. We publish an open letter from vet Johanna

Sharples, who has successfully navigated her way through a period of mental ill health (p 176). Bravely sharing her story to help others, she describes the tough road back to starting to feel herself again.

And we also hear the view of a young male vet Henry Lamb who argues that self-compassion and self-care are just as essential as self-sacrifice (p 177).

In light of its global survey findings, WSAVA has now committed to developing an urgent action plan and will aim to create wellness guidance for all vet professionals to use. We can expect to see it produce a repository of useful resources in 2021.

But there are steps that vet businesses and individuals can take right now. In our Balance section this week (pp 178-181), we reveal how Willows Veterinary Centre and Referral Service in Solihull has dedicated space to creating a wellbeing room for its 175 members of staff to use to escape. It is all part of the business’ stated aim of ensuring the care offered to clients is matched by the support offered to staff.

Our Balance section also hears from three individuals on how they retain a sense of wellness, from Ebony Escalona’s lessons from a recent safari trip, to Anne Fawcett’s joy in valuing quiet time, to vet student Alexia Yiannouli maintaining a bullet journal.

All sources of help and advice are welcome here. Jen Brandt, the American Veterinary Medical Association’s director of member wellbeing and diversity initiatives and a member of an expert panel that is guiding the WSAVA’s wellness work, is clear that the profession must take its wellness seriously. ‘We need a shared understanding of wellbeing and what constitutes good wellbeing,’ she advises.

We can begin by challenging views that diminish or close down acknowledgement of this problem.

1 Volk JO, Schimmack U, Strand EB, *et al*. Executive summary of the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study. *JAVMA* 2018;252:1231–38

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