

News & Reports

Concern over mental wellbeing and stress

By Adele Waters

THE first ever global study of veterinary wellness – involving thousands of vet professionals – has confirmed a probable correlation between a career in veterinary medicine and an elevated risk of mental health issues.

It found that stress and reduced wellbeing is a universal problem across the professions and the likely cause is a combination of factors including working environment, personal characteristics and client pressures.

While it found older professionals were significantly more satisfied with their careers and vets more satisfied with their careers than vet nurses or technicians, it found the mental health of younger members of the profession ‘seriously at risk’.

Conducted by the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA), the study found the lowest levels of stress and diminished wellbeing across the regions in Oceania.

The findings are based on an online survey of 4258 vet professionals (mainly small animal, but some farm and equine too). Respondents completed a six-part online questionnaire and their responses were analysed by psychologists using the Kessler Psychological Distress tool, which measures anxiety and depression.

While researchers found no significant differences in mental wellbeing across the regions, they found significant differences in willingness to talk openly about mental health.

For example, findings indicated a reluctance to speak openly in Africa and Asia. When asked to estimate how many of their colleagues were suffering with wellness issues, far fewer respondents estimated high

numbers compared with those in North America.

Results of the survey were presented by Nienke Endenburg, a psychologist and co-chair of the association’s Professional Wellness Group (PWG), at its world congress in Toronto last month.

She said: ‘We are very concerned at the impact this is having on thousands of vet professionals worldwide and believe it must be addressed without delay.’

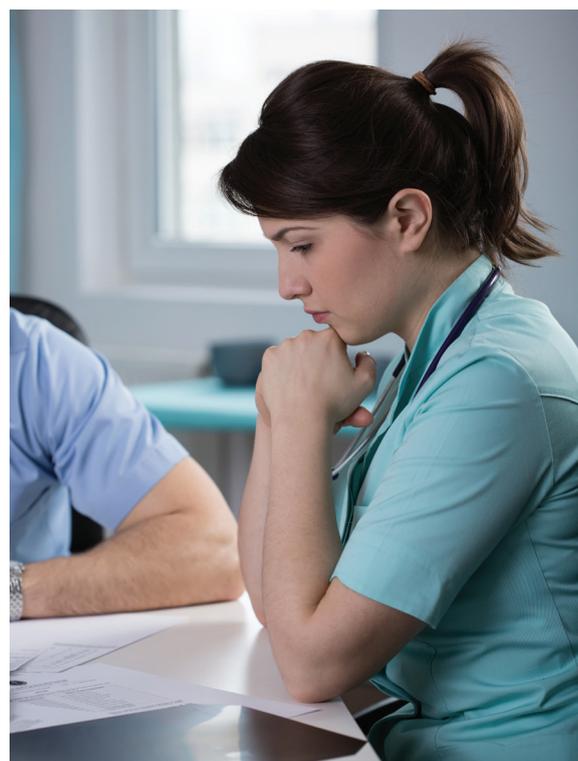
Endenburg, based at the vet school at the University of Utrecht, Netherlands, said the PWG would now analyse the data in more detail and develop an urgent action plan to draw up some professional wellness guidelines for presentation at the association’s 2021 world congress.

It will work with its member associations to create a repository of helpful resources and tools to ensure all veterinary healthcare team members can access help when they have – or ideally before they have – a mental health problem.

During a panel discussion following presentation of the findings, Jen Brandt, the American Veterinary Medical Association’s director of member wellbeing and diversity initiatives, encouraged vet professionals to take control of their wellbeing by making smart career choices, supporting their colleagues and committing to ‘self-care’.

‘When we refer to self-care, we aren’t just talking about behaviours and choices that are comfortable or easy. What we are really referring to is the intentional, consistent practice of taking an active role in protecting one’s own wellbeing, recognising when needs exist, and taking responsibility for addressing them,’ she said.

‘Sometimes, this requires making difficult choices, including leaving relationships or environments that are not a healthy fit. I often tell folks



that we cannot give away what we do not have. If we want our environment to be healthy, a key starting point is prioritising our own emotional and physical wellbeing.’

When asked by *Vet Record*, why vets were particularly at risk of mental ill health, Endenburg, who has worked as a psychologist in a vet school for 32 years, said: ‘Vets are like sheep with five legs. They have to do so many things and it’s a very complicated role.’ She said as well as the challenge of understanding how many animals function, they have to deal with difficult owners and also act as practice managers and make sure they get paid by clients.

‘But it is also sometimes very emotional because they have to deal – almost daily – with life and death. They have to euthanase animals and deal with sad, traumatised owners,’ she said. ‘I say to my students if you want a more straightforward profession, become a physician.’ ●



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