

Help to Save Our Veterinarians: Policy Brief

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WRITER'S COMMENT: The issue of veterinarians mental health and high suicide rates is very important to me as I hopefully be part of the vet community one day. So, when Professor Stark presented the policy brief assignment for the UWP 104F class I could not pass up the opportunity to discuss this issue. As I researched and looked more into the problem, I got to learn how big and deeply rooted it is. Starting all the way from veterinary school to practice, veterinarians' mental health issues build up for years. With this writing I hope to raise awareness about the problem and hopefully bring some options for possible solutions. Although this is an issue that affects mostly veterinarians there are so many stakeholders that are part of both the cause and also get indirectly affected by it. I hope to continue the work on this subject in my future education and career.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: To my knowledge, Policy Briefs are an unusual genre in UWP 104F classes (Writing in the Health Professions), but this quarter my students researched the genre conventions and a specific health issue of their choice, looking for best practices and the latest research to write their policy recommendations. Oftentimes, information researchers learn doesn't reach audiences who can enact meaningful policies with real world impact based on those findings. My's policy work on the mental health of veterinarians reveals how much is known about the rates, causes, and possible solutions to address the poor mental health of vet students and professionals. In a condensed and useful format, her policy brief communicates a clear issue and shows what must be done to alleviate the burdens faced by our much

needed, but often unsupported vets. I can attest that while this policy brief takes a critical look at the education and experience of vets, My, as a future vet herself, is one of the most forward looking and invested students heading into the profession. With her clear and determined research writing, I have no doubt that she will strengthen the field both for animals and for our vet med professionals.

—Agnes Stark, University Writing Program

The Issue:

For many years, the issue of veterinarians' mental health has been swept under the rug. In recent years, more and more veterinarians have been bringing up the challenges they experience and how it affects their mental health. Some organizations like Not One More Vet help (Shirey, 2021).



Image Credits: <https://m.facebook.com/avmavets/photos/today-is-world-mental-health-day-in-the-veterinary-workplace-mental-health-is-an/10155252006018990/>

According to Dr. Megan Hughes (2021), people in the veterinary profession are 3.5 times more likely to die from suicide in comparison to the general population. To reinforce this point, a survey done by American Veterinary

Medical Association (AVMA) found that 1 in 6 veterinarians had suicidal thoughts during their career (Shirey, 2021). In addition, Alice Pettway (2018) reports that veterinarians are 1.5 times more likely to experience depression compared to the general population. This starts during vet schools. Pettway cites an article from AVMA that found that 67% of vet students experience depression and 5% were thinking about taking their own lives. In that report, a survey found higher rates of depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation in vets during their clinical year and an increase of 0.5% for every \$50,000 a student is in debt.

Solutions / Recommendations:

For the clients:

- Educate the clients about the struggle of veterinarians. Have posters / fliers in the vet clinics that ask them to be kind, supportive of their veterinarians, and share their positive experiences with them (Hughes, 2021).
- Teach the clients to plan ahead for their veterinary expenses (Hughes, 2021). Explaining the option of getting pet insurance. Handing out fliers regarding pet insurance might help as well.
- Refuse giving free services / consultation when asked (Hughes, 2021). This can help to balance the work-life balance with a clear no work policy after work hours.

For vet schools:

- Prepare students for interactions and communication with future clients (Pettway, 2018)
- Have mental health classes / programs incorporated into the vet school curriculum (Pettway, 2018)
- Change / build programs that allow students to have time off (Pettway, 2018)
- Have on campus, free counseling (Pettway, 2018)
- Find other ways to promote self-care and wellness in school (Pettway, 2018)

For the general population:

- Notice the vets around you (friend or relatives), and support them (Hughes, 2021).
- Talk about the struggles of veterinarians and raise awareness to the mental health issue in the profession.

Reasons:

Veterinarians' mental health is affected due to multiple reasons. A combination of classes, difficult clinical cases, exams, rotations, and peer interactions cause high levels of pressure in vet school (Pettway, 2018). Furthermore, this source suggests that the emotional challenges that vets experience in their career stems from the detachment between what is taught in vet schools and the real practice of veterinary medicine after graduation. The contrast between expectation and reality of the profession is drastic. The

majority of vets chose this profession because they love animals and want to help them. However, being a vet does not involve playing with different animals all day and saving every single life. Euthanasia and death are big part of the profession. Lacy Shirey (2021) mentioned a statement from Dr. Denette Cooke (a vet with 25 years of experience), who said that due to the short lifespan of their patients, veterinarians deal with death 7 times more than any other medical professional. Animals that can be saved are euthanized due to financial reasons or overpopulated shelters. Most vet schools do not teach students how to deal with a situation when a client cannot afford or does not want to pay for their pets' treatment. This leads to vets facing these difficult situations for the first time after their schooling and dealing with them alone (Pettway, 2018). Facing these types of challenges might lead to compassion fatigue and depression (Hughes, 2021).



Image Credits: ("These Veterinary Mental Health Statistics Will Change The Way You See The Profession.", 2021)

Following vet school, veterinarians also face the challenge of high debt to income ratio. While vets and physicians spend approximately the same number of years in school, veterinarians get a much lower salary compared to physicians, Dr. Megan Hughes (2021) claims. She also states that it might take a whole

career for a vet to pay off their debt. Statistics presented by the AVMA from 2016 finds the average veterinary student's debt to be about \$143,700 (Pettway, 2018). Alice Pettway continues to show findings from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, where the average veterinarian annual salary is \$88,770. In comparison, Pettway presents medical students' 2016 average student loan debt to be \$190,000, with an annual salary approximation of \$205,560.

Another reason for the mental state of veterinarians is the abuse they suffer from their clients. According to Dr. Megan Hughes (2021), clients can get angry at vets because of the veterinary expenses. Veterinary medicine and treatments, like human medicine, are expensive. Verbal abuse, social media bullying, and physical harm from the clients affect the mental health of the vets, Dr. Hughes asserts.

To add to the struggle, in the last few years there is a shortage of veterinarians. More veterinarians leave the profession than enter. This causes an understaffed problem which leads to overworked vets. Vets sometimes work multiple jobs and shifts (to cover the shortage and their debt). The long hours lead to a poor work-life balance that can cause stress and burnout (Hughes, 2021). A 2019 survey done in collaboration with the AVMA found that only 43% of veterinarians would recommend their career to others (Burns 2020).

LEADING CONCERNS OF VETERINARIANS IN 2019 AND 2017 (TOP FIVE ONLY)

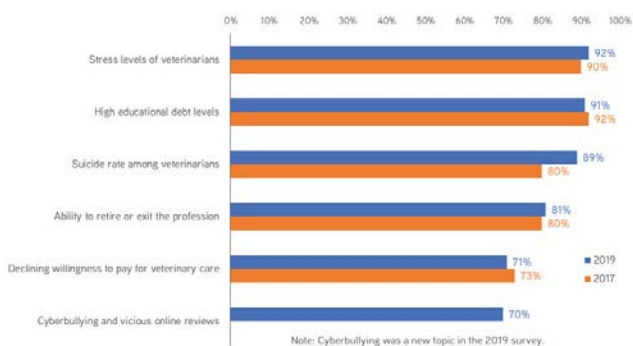


Image Credits: (Burns, 2020)

Why it is important / impact:

The toll that veterinarians carry is huge. Not being able to save a life, and even taking a life, is extremely challenging. Veterinarians are there for the pet and for the client (especially at their difficult last moments). A Perret et al. (2020b) research theorized that vets showing more compassion to clients results in higher client satisfaction. At the same time, the Perret et al. study implies that the same situation has a negative impact on the vets' own mental health due to the emotional labor that is required for showing empathy. There is a lack of support regarding the vets' mental health as they deal with the challenging situations of their profession.

When adding all of the mentioned reasons together, we get a destructive path that drags on for many years. Veterinarians have a long list of mental health issues such as depression, burnout, compassion fatigue, work overload, high student debt-to-income ratio, low wages, cyberbullying and mistreatment/disrespect from clients (Shirey, 2021).

According to a Perret et al. (2020a), research combining all of these factors with the vets' cultural acceptance of euthanasia, we find very high suicide rates in the veterinary community. It is mentioned in the Perret et al. (2020a) article that veterinarians' mental health and wellbeing are important because not only do they take care of pets, but they also facilitate food safety and support the agriculture industry.

In Summary:

We need vets to help and save our loved family members. We need vets for our own health, in the food and agricultural industry. But our vets also need us! Help to save our veterinarians.
#NotOneMoreVet

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