NZVA
New Zealand Veterinary Association

Vets and Stress

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Welcome from Seed

Work, by its very nature, is stressful. Veterinary practice certainly has its share of stress, with veterinarians having to deal with difficult clients, cases that don't go according to plan, sometimes financial worries, ethical dilemmas or workplace tensions.

The pressures are there at the very beginning when students start down the path of veterinary training. Long hours of study and high levels of performance are required to pass exams each year and get to graduation. Some new graduates and veterinarians feel well supported in their work; others feel isolated and overwhelmed by heavy workloads and unrealistic expectations - their own or someone else's.

International research shows that stress in the veterinary profession is not new, or restricted to New Zealand. It is a worldwide problem.

The Vets and Stress free phone helpline service has been available for a number of years. In my view, as a provider of support services to veterinarians, one of the things I notice is that although veterinarians do use the service, the caller is usually at crisis point. So why is it that veterinarians generally avoid getting help until they have reached crisis point?

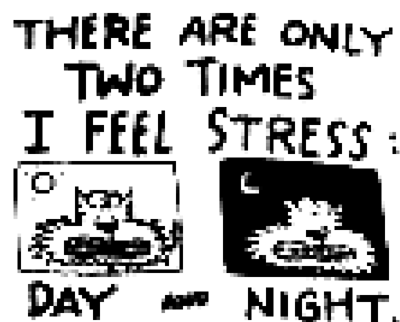
This poses an interesting question for a profession that promotes prevention as the best medicine. The earlier treatment is sought and started, the better the result.

Life is not, and never will be, problem-free. Getting onto a problem in its infancy can prevent a person reaching crisis point. Talking issues through with someone independent and professional can provide lasting results and build resilience.

I welcome this booklet and strongly encourage you to use it , and the Vets and Stress programme, to help you enjoy your work and live a balanced, fulfilled life.

And remember, we're only a free phone call away. Call us!

Carol Galloway
National Service Manager - Psychological Services
Seed



Welcome from the desk of the CEO - NZVA

Veterinary science, particularly clinical practice is a demanding, and at times very stressful occupation. Veterinarians operate under unique constraints not faced by their human medical counterparts and other professions. Financial, diagnostic, communication and therapeutic considerations potentially limit the accurate diagnosis of, and the full and correct treatment of, many clinical cases. Despite these obvious constraints, clients will often expect the same results of veterinarians at a cost that the human medical profession can offer through a State funded health system, when in reality this is just not possible.

As well, practitioners must always take into account and deal with the human/animal bond, and the ever present capacity for exaggerated emotional response associated with damage to that bond. A very potent source of claims and complaints comes from the anger stage of the grieving process, arising out of unexpected outcomes of medical and surgical interventions.

The public perception of a 'good' veterinarian often relates to the communication skills of the clinician. Better communicators by and large are able to 'carry' clients with them when dealing with cases; setting out the various diagnostic pathways, differential diagnoses, treatment options, prognoses and costs, in ways that maintain the confidence of the client.

Despite the most skilful communications, diagnostic and treatment abilities, it is inevitable that from time to time things will go wrong with cases, or the perceived handling of cases. In some of these cases clients will complain, or make a claim, against a veterinarian. Litigation, or the threat of, can be crushing. In other instances where cases go awry, veterinarians may feel extreme guilt and question their own competence.

Veterinary science is not for the faint hearted, and requires robust mental health for success on the part of its practitioners. At times workplace and non-work related stressors combine to put extreme pressure on some veterinarians.

The NZVA recognises this and has put a number of programmes in place to assist members cope with stressors. These include the Vets and Stress and Mentor programmes, and seminars for new and recent graduates.

This booklet provides some guidance to identifying and managing stress for veterinarians. It contains a wealth of wisdom that we hope you'll find useful.

And never feel you're alone. If you need to talk to someone, call Seed on their free phone helpline at any time of the day or night. They're there to help.

Julie Hood
Chief Executive Officer
New Zealand Veterinary Association

What is Stress?

Stress is the reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed upon them. It arises when they worry that they can't cope.

Stress is the whole generalised response of our minds and bodies to stressors, or those events in our lives that mean we have to change or cope in some way.
Winsborough Allen – *The Less Stress Book 1997*

The stress experience was first documented over fifty years ago by Dr Hans Selye. He discovered that the stress response of most people (which he called the 'General Adaptation Syndrome') is fairly consistent, and goes through three major stages.

1. **Alarm**
   The challenging or threatening situation leads to the triggering of biochemical messages from the brain. This results in increased respiratory rate, raised blood pressure, increased heart rate etc.

2. **Resistance**
   The biochemical reaction increases the individual's ability to cope. Adrenaline levels are raised and the resulting surge of energy can help to remove or overcome the source of the stress.

3. **Exhaustion**
   Resistance will eventually crumble if the source of stress is prolonged. If the stress trigger is prolonged or frequent, people are at risk of physiological or psychological damage.

Sources of Stress

Modern lifestyles are often demanding. There are a number of possible sources of stress in our lives which can be both work and non-work related. These include:

Work related stressors

- Physical environment stressors (eg. traffic jams, noise, poor lighting)
- Role related stressors (competing demands, uncertainty over role, high work loads)
- Interpersonal stressors (poor supervision, conflicts with coworkers)
- Workplace violence, aggression and harassment
- Job insecurity
- Sudden unexpected events (accident/natural disaster/trauma)

Non-work related stressors

- Relationship problems
- Financial difficulties
- Bereavement
- Environmental
- Sudden unexpected events (accident/natural disaster/trauma)

Stresses from both areas can of course compound to produce a significant and unmanageable stress issue whereas an individual may have managed a single issue successfully.

The underlying message of a negative or distress response is '**A call to action'** that is, do something about it!

There are two key signs that this is happening

- Change from a previous state
- Loss of sense of humour

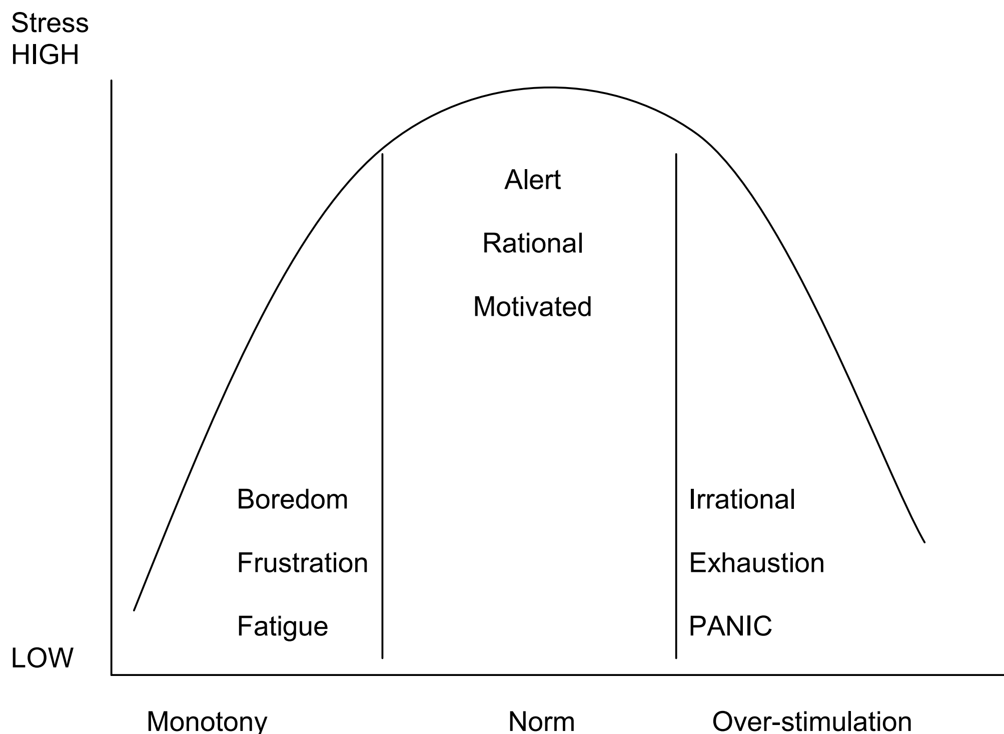
The psychological concept

Stress (stimulus) causes strain (response)

Stress is not a diagnosis... Stress is a feeling/response

Challenges are always present in life. Stress has positive elements that keep us motivated and working at our best, achieving seemingly without effort. However it is common to focus on the negative aspects of stress.

Stress is cumulative. On the one hand boredom and lack of stimulation causes negative stress. At the other extreme, high levels of stress, over time, will push an individual onto the far side of the stress curve and affect their ability to deal with complex or difficult tasks. Performance progressively diminishes and health is compromised.



Individuals vary in their response to stressful situations.

How do you respond to the following workplace challenges?

- A physically demanding task that will push your physical resources to the limit while striving to achieve a demanding goal.

- Getting caught in rush hour traffic on the motorway or behind a slowmoving vehicle on a country road.

- Filling the gap when another employee is on leave or sick.
- The long list of customers with expectations that you can fix their every problem.
- When the computer or telephone system fails and you can no longer communicate effectively.

What happens when you finally arrive home at the end of the day and there are still more demands from family and friends?

In the final analysis, it is your reaction to stressing situations that will decide how your body responds. There is only one person who can decide how you react to any situation - you! Everyone has a personal comfort zone. A little stimulation to move out of it today will make it wider tomorrow. A little extra stress can be a positive force. It's your comfort zone - are you currently inside it or outside it?

Have you moved your comfort zone lately? You can control its position if you want to!

Why are vets so stressed?

The psychological pressures of professional activities

Personal pressures in the profession include

- Whether you're single or married, with or without children, you have certain financial needs that must be met. This pressure is determined by how you feel you deserve to live.
- Staff income needs. This is a need to be surrounded by capable, highly motivated staff. The money to cover this cost must come from clients in private and Government service.
- Your work environment is another. Maintaining it, upgrading it, and researching new equipment are all constant pressures.

Client pressures include

- Price competition and client complaints about charges create panic that the practice or service is about to go under.
- Quality veterinary medicine. Your ability to practise quality veterinary medicine is dependent on your perception of what clients do or don't want. Also the amount you participate in continuing education will reflect the degree of competence you feel in your work.
- Fear of competition. Competition is not the problem most think it to be, but the fear that it often creates intense pressure.
- Fear of rejection and the human desire to be liked. The things some vets do to be liked cost considerably more than they can afford.

Pressure is good for you. The level of success you achieve in your career and personal life depends on what you need, want and believe you deserve. It isn't determined by education, legal or mechanical events. The desire to be without stress is unrealistic. But it is also bad if it takes over your life.

You can't succeed pursuing someone else's definition of success. If you do you might achieve it but it won't bring you a sense of 'that was worth it'. You are much more likely to experience fulfilment and a good quality of life if you pursue what is important to you as an individual. So develop your own definition, and once you decide, plan to stay flexible. Adopted from: Christine Stobbs 'In Practice' September 2000 - see Appendix 1.

There has been a considerable amount of research on stress and vets in New Zealand in recent years. Much of this information has been well summarised in a series of articles by Dianne Gardner published in Vetscript throughout 2005 - see Appendices' at back of this booklet.

There are a lot of factors in our job which lead to a build up of stress.

Emotions	Working Environment	Personal
Failure	Long hours	Inexperience
Helplessness	Responsibility	Burn-out
Guilt	Life and death situations	Relationship problems
Frustration	On call/shift work	Inability to relax and unwind
Anger	Lack of facilities	
Grief	Difficult conditions	
Feeling overwhelmed	Clients' unrealistic expectations	
	Lack of technical support people	

Stress in the workplace

Health and Safety in Employment Act

Stress in the workplace is now recognised as a hazard under the 2002 Amendment to the 1992 Health and Safety in Employment Act.

The purpose of the Act is to promote the prevention of harm to all people at work.

Further changes to this Act came into effect on the 5 May 2003. One change is the inclusion of stress and fatigue as identifiable hazards.

Dual Responsibility

The manager/employer has the responsibility for the health and safety of employees.

Employees have a responsibility to advise the employer of sources of stress and access tools and remedies made available.

- Both parties must take all practicable steps to identify and manage work related stress.
- Employers must give staff reasonable opportunities to participate in health and safety decisions.
- Cases in the UK where employers provided an EAP programme and education – onus of care on the employee to proactively manage stress.

A useful guide to managing stress in the workplace can be downloaded from http://www.workinfo.govt.nz/Article.aspx?catid=182

A number of stress reducing strategies are available in any work situation. These are summarised in the figure below and include:

1. Removing the source of the stress

Often providing a greater degree of employee empowerment so that they exert a real influence over their working environment will be a useful tool. Hours of work may provide a major stress in our profession. Consider introducing more flexibility, job sharing or personalising leave programmes.

2. Withdrawing from the source of the stress

This may be a temporary or permanent solution. It may involve nothing more than providing a staff room that is comfortable and hygienic so that staff can relax and switch off during breaks.

3. Changing stress perceptions

Individuals will perceive the same level of stress differently. Raising self esteem, positive mental imagery and helping a more optimistic outlook to develop can all change the way in which a stressful challenge is viewed.

4. Controlling the consequences of stress

Keeping fit, eating well, developing a balanced healthy lifestyle can help to control stress. Relaxation and meditation are also generally recognised as being of value.

5. Receiving social support

Support from family, friends, co-workers and others are among the most valuable components in the management of workplace stress. Such support helps employees feel valued, as well as helping to buffer the stress experience.

Staff status

If you're a manager or employer

- You'll probably be stressed yourself at times!
- You'll need to keep a lookout for signs of stress, personality changes etc. in your staff.
- Make yourself available for one-to-one discussions with staff on a regular basis eg. five minute Fridays.
- Organise rosters to allow everyone to get a break regularly. This is important at busy times of the year. Don't forget yourself - you need a break too!
- Do some serious business planning. A well worked out business plan is a great reducer of stress.

If you're an employee

- You will probably be stressed at times!
- Look out for signs of stress among your colleagues and be ready to provide support.
- Try to communicate your concerns clearly and early - don't bottle things up!. Try to provide a possible solution if you have a problem.
- Take a break regularly!

How do people react to negative stress?

Distress - This is the body's mechanism for responding to a perceived threat

It is either physical or psychological due to sudden, short or long term situation(s)

Fight/Flight Response Invoked

↓

Produces an increase in
adrenalin
heart rate
muscle tension
breathing rate
and can lead to distress

↓

Distress produces responses

Physical   Behavioural   Emotional   Cognitive

Constant Stress can produce

Irritability, low tolerance, exhaustion and apathy which can lead to

BURNOUT

Sudden Stress can produce

TRAUMATIC REACTIONS

Symptoms of Stress

Physical (in your body)

Headaches – tension or migraine
Backache
Constant fatigue
Dizziness
High blood pressure (hypertension)
Allergies
Heart palpitations
Hyper-ventilation
Muscle tension – neck/stomach/chest
Nausea
Increased pulse rate
Skin complaints
Tremors
Diarrhea
Change in diet
Constipation
Windy
Flushing
Sweating
Dry mouth
Shallow breathing/breathlessness
Ulcers
Frequent colds/flu
Indigestion
Vomiting
Double vision
Frequent urination
Nail biting
Change in sexual interest

Psychological (in your mind and emotions)

Agitation
Panic
Depression
Irritability
Anger
Fear
Worry
Anxiety
Dread
Low self-confidence
Moodiness
Inattention
Accident proneness
Forgetfulness
Nightmares
Fitful sleeping
Aggressions
Apathy
Loss of sense of humour
Restlessness
Defensiveness
Fault finding
Indecisiveness
Loss of perspective

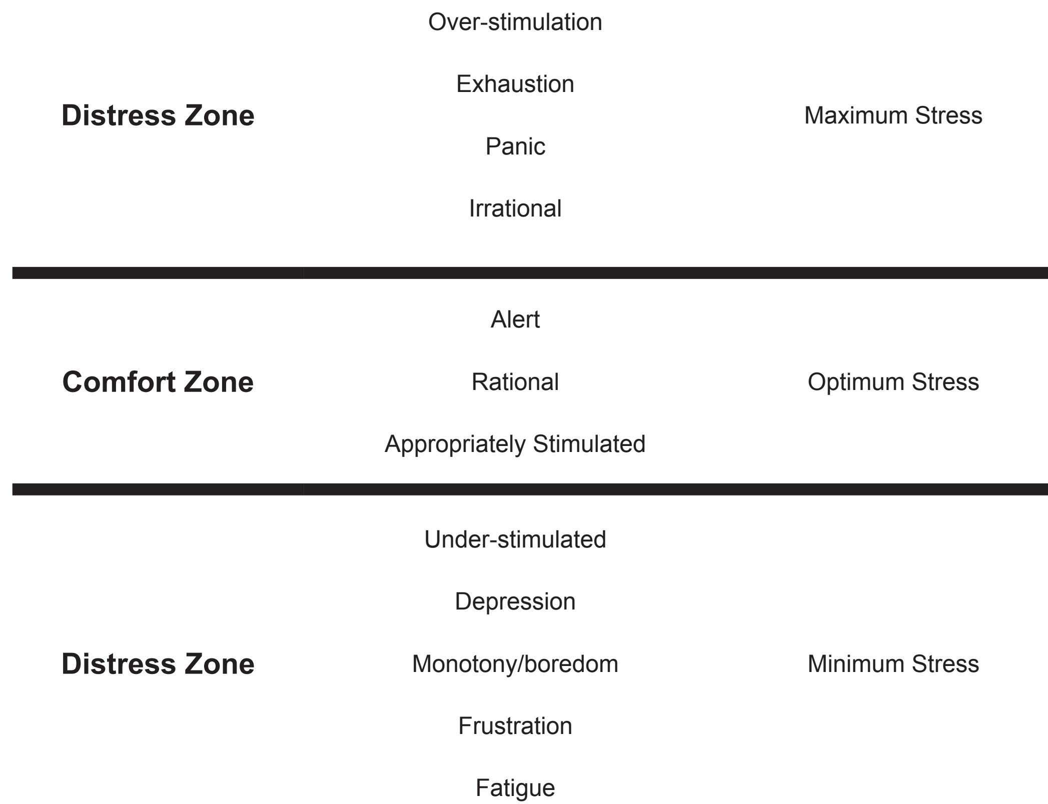
Organisational (in your work)

Communication breakdowns
High turn over
High absenteeism
High sick leave
Poor performance
Frequent accidents
Disorganisation

Private Life

Struggle to achieve personal goals
Relationship difficulties
Marriage and family tensions
Uncooperative
Increase in alcohol/drug use

Stress Zones



Positively Managing Stress

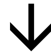
Once you have identified the negative stressor you have a choice abut how you respond.

The Usual Process

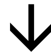
Stressor ...... > ....Interpretation ......>........> ... Stress Response

An Alternative Approach

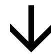
Reduce the stress response



Re-interpret the situation



Modify/remove the stressor



Stressor ...... < ......Interpretation ......<...... < ... Stress Response

Saying 'No'

Control your stress levels by learning to say 'NO'

1. The other person has a right to ask. I have a right to say 'no'.
2. I deny my own importance if I say 'yes' when I really mean 'no'.
3. Saying 'no' does not imply that I am rejecting the other person.
4. If I don't want to, or have decided not to, I should say that this is the case, and not just say 'can't' or 'not able to'.
5. If I really mean 'no', I will not give in to cajoling, begging, flattery or manipulation.
6. I may offer reasons, but I won't make excuses. It is I who choose to give reasons.
7. I will not be overly apologetic.
8. Saying 'no' is a skill. It is something that I can improve on.
9. Saying 'no' and not feeling guilty can be a habit which helps me grow as a person.
10. When I say 'no' I can have more time and energy to say 'yes' to the things I do want.

Being Positive

Instead of saying	You could say
There's nothing I can do	So relax… However, X or Y may be able to help
I'm too old to cope with this	Here is an opportunity to learn something new A problem shared is a problem solved
I have to do it	I have a choice here… Sooner started, sooner finished I will feel satisfied once it's done
This makes me so mad	Let me step back and look at it objectively I will take a walk outside before I decide
I hate this place	But hey, I do like… the location/the people/the work/ they make good coffee
This is a total shambles	From chaos comes order… I can offer some suggestions

The language on the left is the language of blame and undermines self-esteem.
It disempowers.

If you blame other people and external situations for the position you find yourself in it is likely that you will increasingly feel victimised or out of control.

Focus on where you want to go not on what you fear.

Use language that empowers you.

Manage Your Own Resilience

Veterinary work is often stressful (and rewarding) and carries a range of potentially negative stressors that can affect your every day life. You can take responsibility for how you deal with it.

Here are eight ways to increase your resilience.

1. Slow down, breathe and move more slowly.
2. Stretch – to reduce muscle tension – regular exercise.
3. Chunk your work – one task at a time rather than too much multi-tasking.
4. Minimise interruptions – turn off your mobile for a period of time.
5. Take regular breaks – to be and stay refreshed.
6. Cross-train – mix your activities from high intensity to less taxing work.
7. Schedule treats - have something reliably pleasant to look forward to each week.
8. Ensure you know what your real problem is – heavy drinking, gambling - obsessional behaviour needs professional help.

From Dave Winsborough on Resilience Training

More information

For Stress

Websites

osh.dol.govt.nz/order/catalogue/stress/managestress.pdf

osh.dol.govt.nz/order/catalogue/3.shtml

management.about.com/od/yourself/ht/ReduceStress05.htm

osh.govt.nz/publications/booklets/stress-tools2008/morale-distress-healthy-work.asp

Reading

Stress and Depression – Jane Bingham

Managing in Times of Change – Michael d Maginn

The Less Stress Book – NZ Department of Labour

For depression

Websites

depression.org.nz

blackdoginstitute.org.au

everybody.co.nz/page-75c9ff3f-7aa4-4b07-b63d-eaf5d92b88bb.aspx

blackdoginstitute.org.au

Reading

Depression. Causes and Treatment – Aaron T Beck

Living with a Black Dog His Name is Depression – Matthew Johnstone

Journeys with the Black dog – Edited by Tessa Wigney, Kerrie Eyers and Gordon Parker, 2007

Mastering Bipolar Disorder – Edited by Kerri Eyers and Gordon Parker 2008

Dealing with Depression. A common sense guide for mood disorders – Gordon Parker

Bipolar 11 Disorder. Modelling, Measuring and Managing – Gordon Parker

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Part of the Vets & Stress Programme

Appendix 1 - Dealing with emotionally stressful situations in practice

By Christine Stobbs

In Practice, September 2000

Working in veterinary practice can be emotionally stressful. It may be that experienced veterinary surgeons outwardly appear to be less affected by situations that they have dealt with so many times in their careers, but new graduates may find it hard to cope with the emotional pressures that general practice exerts. In this article, Christine Stobbs explores ways to help new – and experienced – vets cope with the emotions the veterinary practice generates.

Christine Stobbs is a qualified counsellor and psychotherapist. She has extensive experience of working in the public sector, and with charities and commercial organisations. Her son graduated from Bristol Veterinary School in 1998. Healthcare workers and police officers are just two examples of professionals who talk about the need to become "hardened" to the suffering they see – otherwise they would be unable to continue in their line of work. It is possibly true that somebody who goes around wearing their heart on their sleeve while in a professional role is less likely to be effective in that role for any number of reasons. Some vets may feel that they are not affected by the emotionally stressful situations, which their work presents on a regular basis. They are certainly not alone in holding this view – it is shared by many other professional people in caring roles. However, if they were being entirely honest, many might admit to some feelings of emotion in particular situations. The question is, if they cannot admit to, or show their emotions, what happens to the pent-up feelings?

This article will explore the issues surrounding emotionally charged situations, consider how to cope with them on an emotional or intellectual level, look at the 'squaring' of morals, professional ethics and client demands, and give some pointers which could assist in reducing the impact of long-term emotional stress, without the need to become emotionally stagnant.

What is meant by 'emotionally stressful'?

An emotion is a subjective experience because each individual's cognitive processes impact on the way he or she feels. Different people may put different interpretations on events and, as such, the emotion they experience is unique to them (see box opposite).

Stress is what happens when the thoughts that you have or the beliefs that you hold cause within you feelings of pressure which exceed your perception of your ability to cope. Your ability to cope with different situations will be influenced by your personality and different personality types will have different ways of coping.

Stressful situations

Often when presented with a patient in practice, the situation is perceived as a crisis by the client – which is why they have asked you to look at their animal. In a crisis situation, it is important for professionals to be able to detach themselves from the emotional aspects of the situation and to focus on the job in hand rather than be distracted by their own feelings.

Any event which may produce in you feelings of failure, helplessness, guilt, frustration, anger or sorrow, will be a potential cause of stress. It could well be that you experience all of these emotions on a regular basis throughout your working day.

As vets you will certainly have a number of potential stressors in your working life: long hours, responsibility, life and death scenarios, shift work or on-call situations, and, possibly, difficult working conditions on farms, and so on. Furthermore, you will be dealing with disgruntled partners or spouses who would like to see more of you than they do. Additional pressure may be generated by having to reconcile personal beliefs and values, and a professional code of ethics, with decisions that have to be made in practice. On top of all this is the fact that you are often confronted with a suffering animal and a distressed client. Little surprise, therefore, that vets may well be more emotionally vulnerable than they would like to be, particularly in the early days of their career.

Same Scenario – different emotions

A child arrives back from his first cookery lesson at school, and proudly presents his family with an indescribable mess on a plate for them to savour and enjoy. His parents may think that this first attempt at cookery by their son is wonderful, and will experience joy at the prospect of the feast ahead. On the other hand, the boy's older sibling, faced with the prospect of having to eat this awful concoction, may register only disgust. Each individual will react differently to the same situation. Emotions, thereore, are a very personal experience. your personality, social support network and so on, you may always feel some discomfort in this situation. This may be particularly true if the animal is one that you have seen a lot of, or whose owner you know socially.

Euthanasia

Arguably, euthanasia represents the most emotionally stressful situation for the vet. Many vets remember their first euthanasia because it is such a distressing experience. At college, you will have learnt how to euthanase an animal but it is unlikely that you will have been given much training in how to deal with a distressed client or, indeed, with your own distress. In the early days of practice you may find this very

difficult and, depending on a number of factors such as your personality, social support network and so on, you may always feel some discomfort in this situation. This may be particularly true if the animal is one that you have seen a lot of, or whose owner you know socially.

Something that comes with the territory?

Is this something that comes with the territory? Of course it is. Is it something to be ignored and just got on with? Well, that's up to the individual, but let's consider some of the emotions that you may experience on a regular basis.

Take guilt for example. Guilt can be all consuming and have an exhausting effect. Continual feelings of guilt can bring about stress and may even cause depression. Newly qualified vets, particularly, will often experience feelings of guilt and, perhaps, inadequacy, if a patient has died or if they have had to perform a euthanasia. These are feelings that need to be dealt with. Like all other professional people, you make a decision for the good of your patient, based on your skill and experience at the time and within the bounds of your professional code of ethics and, possibly, your own individual moral code.

In other words, you take what seems to be the right course of action at a given moment. That is all we as human beings can ever do – nobody can expect more. Life is unpredictable and sometimes things won't turn out as you would like them to. Just accept that and try not to beat yourself about the head!

Guilt

Guilt is not good for you, so:

- Don't feel guilty about performing your duties to the best of your ability
- Don't feel guilty about using humour to help you cope
- Do allow yourself to indulge occasionally and don't feel guilty about it

Conflicting moral and professional codes and client demands

A mismatch between your own moral code, your professional code of conduct and client demands can make you feel uncomfortable about a decision you have to make. This discomfort can turn to stress if the situation is not resolved. When making a professional decision there are, perhaps, four main areas to be considered.

- The condition of your patient and your professional assessment of its needs;
- Your professional code of conduct and all involved therein;
- The law – does it have any implications on your decision?
- Your personal moral code, based on your own beliefs, values and any religious convictions that you may have. (The significance of this in the decision-making process is, perhaps, debatable, but the significance in terms of how you feel about your decision is not.)

Take, for example, a case in which a client wants you to euthanase a perfectly healthy, but slightly nervous, young dog, because he or she is no longer able to keep it and feel it would not settle well with another family. In this situation you could easily have a mismatch of professional ethics, morals and client demands. You have already made your assessment of the dog's condition and decided that it is in good health; personally, you would feel uncomfortable about taking the life of a healthy, young animal when it could possibly be found a new home. You clearly have to work within the confines of your professional code of conduct and the confines of the law.

The RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct requires you to ensure the welfare of the animals under your care, while at the same time considering the wishes of your clients and recognising their freedom to choose. In law, the act of euthanasia of animals is not one of veterinary surgery. Not only are you permitted to perform this act, so is anyone else, provided it is done in a humane fashion. The animal belongs to the owner and they are at liberty to order its destruction. As a vet, you do not have to perform euthanasia unless you are bound by statutory powers to do so. In making your decision you will follow a set procedure as laid down by your professional body. This is your safeguard, both professionally and personally. Maybe your own moral code will come into play when there is a conflict between other considerations. If you are following a guideline, there may be more than one interpretation for any given situation. How you make your interpretation, while still working within the guidelines, will to some degree be based on your own set of values and beliefs.

Coping strategies

Given that emotional stress does go with the territory in a veterinary career, you will have to find a way of coping that is effective for you as an individual. The earlier in your career that you identify your best coping strategy, the better – and coping does not simply mean covering up.

Withdrawing

Some would say that the only way to cope on a daily basis is to cover up – close yourself off emotionally from the situation in hand, whether that is one that induces feelings of sorrow or feelings of anger, for example. This can work well in allowing you to perform your duties effectively. In effect, you are going on to automatic pilot – not thinking too much about the job, just getting on with it.

In 1982, a study by Maslach and Jackson showed that this type of withdrawing was an effective strategy for dealing with occupational stress suffered by health workers. A concern is that it may become habitual for you to behave in this way all the time, so that, even when it would be appropriate for you to grieve or be angry in your personal life, you are not able to display those emotions. You become emotionally stagnant, at least on the surface, and that could create problems in your personal relationships.

By all means, manage your emotions effectively, but remember that you have them and try to off-load them occasionally. We also know that to constantly hide one's feelings is not healthy. Indeed, studies have shown that it can have a detrimental effect on our health and well being.

Support of colleagues
Another beneficial practice that Maslach and Jackson found to be used by the health workers they studied was to look to colleagues, supervisors, and so on, for support, thereby reducing the feelings of isolation. I have no doubt that this is one of the most effective ways of reducing the impact of emotionally stressful situations.

Try to maintain good relationships with your colleagues at the practice and also ensure that you develop a good professional and social network, as this can be a source of support when you need it most. Peer group or manager supervision can be a valuable learning experience and offer useful support, particularly to those in the early stages of their career.

Humour
Often displayed in the most tragic of circumstances, humour can take the sting out of a difficult situation. However, it has to be used tactfully and only when appropriate. People will laugh at the silliest things at a funeral or at the bedside of a dying patient. There is no cruelty intended and the effect is like loosening the top on a bottle of fizzy drink after it has been shaken. Humour acts as a valve to release some of the pressure.

Pleasure
The Associates for Research into the Science of Enjoyment (ARISE) say that we should not feel guilty about indulging in pleasurable activities like eating chocolate and drinking wine because these are beneficial when enjoyed in moderation. In other words 'a little of what you fancy does you good'.

Research does indicate that pleasurable experiences can act as an antidote to a previous stressful experience and can also bring about a reduction in stress hormones (provided, that is, that you don't start to feel guilty about the pleasure you have just experienced!).

When you are working hard, working long hours and are frequently on call, a social life is not that easy to acquire or sustain, but having a good social life can give you an enormous boost in terms of stress reduction. Sharing dinner with a few friends or colleagues, or watching an absorbing film, can help considerably. Tests have shown that even popping bubble wrap has beneficial effects in terms of stress reduction!

Showing emotion at work
The workplace culture that became quite widespread in the 1980s and is, to an extent, still present in some professions today, was very much one of a reluctance to admit to feelings of stress when under pressure. Displaying signs of any 'negative' emotion would also be frowned upon. This hard-nosed working environment was probably more prevalent in the world of commerce and finance but the impact of this tough approach to life and business, along with the privatisation of public services, fixed-term contracts and profit generation, undoubtedly had a knock-on effect in many occupational settings.

In the workplace, there is often a perceived stigma attached to the open display of emotion, particularly that which may be expressed in the form of tears or temper. This does not make it easy for individuals to show emotion when they are particularly moved. While we are at work it is sometimes necessary to play a part as though we are acting on a stage. That's fine as long as we are allowed to be ourselves some of the time. How many times have you heard an actor or actress relating how they had to imagine themselves into a role so that they could give an authentic portrayal, and how exhausting and emotionally draining it is to play those parts?

Does it matter if you let slip a tear with a distressed client? Maybe you see tears as a sign of weakness of perhaps you think that your client will consider you weak. But have you considered that your client may actually be helped by an open display of emotion? Obviously, it would not be very appropriate or professional for you to sob uncontrollably, nor would it be very helpful either. However, failing to stop the tears welling up occasionally is no cause for concern. If this is something which happens frequently, of course, you may need to consider talking to your GP or seeing a counsellor as it could be a symptom of stress or depression. It is certainly no reason for you to experience feelings of guilt or inadequacy.

Considering changes
If you ever arrive at a stage where you feel that you are regularly having to 'go against the grain' in terms of your own values and beliefs and your professional practice, you may have to consider what you can do to change the situation. It is important that you enjoy your work but if a large part of it induces emotions that bring about stress which is not diffused, that enjoyment will be impaired, your health will suffer and so too might your patients.

If you haven't already done so, start building your support network now. Go to conferences and courses, and join a local club or team. Get out, meet people and have fun. Personally, I'm going to sit down with a rather large bar of chocolate and a sheet of bubblewrap!

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Appendix 2 - Work demands, coping, satisfaction and stress among veterinarians

By Dianne Gardner, School of Psychology, Massey University

Vetscript, October 2005

Previously in Vetscript I have outlined a model of the stress process, which considers how stressful situations are appraised and the coping strategies used to deal with them. In this article I will outline some findings from a survey of veterinarians in New Zealand that looked at how veterinarians appraise and cope with work-related stressors.

A survey was sent to 1847 registered veterinarians. Thirty-six percent (659) returned usable surveys. Fiftyfive percent of respondents were male and 42% were female; 3% did not indicate their gender.

Respondents were asked to specify a recent stressful situation at work and to answer questions about how that situation was appraised, the coping strategies that were used and the outcomes. The table lists the types of stressful situations and the percentage of respondents specifying that type of situation.

Stressful situation	% of respondents
No specific situation given	35
Difficult task	14
Difficult client	9
Workload/ working under time constraints/ understaffing	8
Finances/ business management	8
Problems with a co-worker/colleague/peer	7
The death of an animal	5
Problems with a manager or supervisor	3
Problems with a subordinate or employee	3
Experiencing a complaint or reprimand or having a diagnosis questioned	3
Making a mistake	2
Dealing with the distress of an animal's owner	1
Cases of animal cruelty	1
Problems with veterinarians from another practice	1
Other answers	1

Stressful situations

Thirty-five percent of respondents did not specify the stressful situation they had in mind but still answered the questions on appraisal and coping. There were no statistically significant differences between those who specified a stressful situation and those who did not on appraisal, coping and outcomes.

Appraisal

Appraisal means deciding whether a stressful situation is a threat (an opportunity to lose something), a challenge (an opportunity to gain something) or both. Respondents tended to see the stressful situation as a threat rather than a challenge but threat and challenge appraisals occurred together. Women were slightly more likely than men to appraise the situation as a threat and slightly less likely to appraise it as a challenge.

Coping

Adaptive coping strategies include actively dealing with the task or problem and seeking help or support from others. Less adaptive strategies include inappropriate expression of emotions and avoiding the problem or situation.

In this study respondents tended to use adaptive more than maladaptive coping strategies. There were no differences between men and women for task-focused coping but women tended to use more social support, emotional expression and avoidance than men.

Younger respondents tended to make more use of social support, emotional expression and avoidance than older respondents.

Those who saw the stressful situation as a challenge used more task-focused coping but those who saw it as a threat used more avoidance. Threat appraisals were also associated with more use of social support and social support in turn was associated with task-focused coping. This suggests that those who sought help from others were more likely to use adaptive ways to deal with the problem regardless of whether it was perceived as a threat or a challenge.

Generally respondents were satisfied with the way in which they had coped and with the outcome, especially if they had appraised the situation as a challenge and used adaptive task-focused coping.

Discussion

Stressful situations were often seen as both a threat and a challenge. Effective coping was more likely if the stressful situation was seen as a challenge more than a threat and if support from friends, colleagues and others was used to prompt active problem-solving.

Appraisal models of stress help explain how work demands can lead to satisfaction as well as to stress and they give helpful guidance for stress management strategies. Threat appraisals arise when people feel they lack the personal and other resources to deal with a demand whereas challenge appraisals arise when people feel that they have sufficient resources to meet the demand. Resources include health, effective coping strategies, time, financial resources, knowledge and expertise, emotional support, practical assistance, etc. Traditional 'stress management' programmes that emphasise healthy lifestyles can

help sustain personal resources but the stressors themselves need to be considered. Effective stress management needs to focus on reducing demands and increasing resources in order to help with challenge appraisals and effective coping.

A repertoire of flexible coping skills is also important and can be developed with experience and mentoring as well as training.

The veterinary profession is aiming to increase social support among veterinarians with mentoring and helpline assistance and these are very positive steps. Training in skills such as conflict resolution, managing client grief, assertiveness, communication, and business management skills for practice managers may also help but other issues including workloads, hours worked and isolation will be more difficult to resolve. Above all it is important to find ways to address stressors in order to enhance the satisfaction that veterinary work can provide.

Appendix 3 - What causes stress for veterinarians?

By Dianne Gardner, Massey University, Auckland

Vetscript, May 2005

In this report I present a further analysis of the data on work-related strain in veterinarians that was collected in 2000 by means of a survey carried out by VCNZ, NZVA and ACNielsen. This article focuses on the sources of strain that veterinarians face at work and follows the report in the March Vetscript on the forms of support veterinarians are using to deal with strain. This report includes data from 849 respondents who were working in New Zealand at the time of the survey; 62% were male and 38% were female, 30% worked in small animal clinical practice, 10% in large animal clinical practice, 33% in mixed clinical practice and the rest in other organisations including MAF, pharmaceutical/animal health, and universities/ polytechnics.

Stressors

The three categories of stressors included in the survey were:

- work-related factors.
- skill and expertise related factors.
- personal factors.

Overall, work-related factors were regarded as more stressful than the other two types.

Work-related factors

Respondents in clinical practice (small animal, large animal and mixed) were compared with those not in clinical practice. Clinical respondents experienced higher levels of strain that was due to:

- work hours,
- client expectations,
- unexpected outcomes.

Those not in clinical practice experienced more strain that was due to:

- colleague expectations,
- resources,
- senior staff support,
- professional support

There were no differences in the levels of strain due to communication with clients, workplace relationships and legal issues.

Female veterinarians reported significantly more strain than male veterinarians for:

- work hours,
- colleague expectations,
- client expectations,
- communication with clients,
- workplace relationships,
- resources,
- senior staff support,
- professional support,
- unexpected outcomes.

Younger veterinarians were more stressed than older ones by:

- work hours,
- client expectations,
- communication with clients,
- workplace relationships,
- senior staff support,
- unexpected outcomes.

One question asked about work-related factors that applied only to those in clinical practice.

- Physical demands were more of a stressor in large animal practice.
- After-hours work concerned those in large and mixed practice more than those in small animal practice.
- Euthanasia, responsibility for animals' lives and being in sole charge were less of a concern for those in large animal practice than in other forms of practice.

Female veterinarians in clinical practice reported more strain than male veterinarians in clinical practice for:

- after-hours work,
- euthanasia of animals,
- responsibility for animals' lives,
- being in sole charge.

There were no gender differences for strain associated with physical demands.

Younger veterinarians were more stressed than older veterinarians by after-hours work, euthanasia, responsibly for animals' lives and being in sole charge.

Skill and expertise factors

The only stressor related to levels of skill and expertise that differed between types of workplace was 'my level of technical skills'. Large animal practitioners experienced less strain on average from this than the other groups. Female veterinarians reported significantly more strain than male veterinarians from:

- level of technical skills,
- client management skills,
- keeping up with knowledge.

There were no gender differences for strain associated with communication skills, keeping pace with technology or understanding legal requirements.

Younger veterinarians experienced more strain than older ones that was due to level of technical

skill, client management skills, and keeping up with technological changes.

Personal factors

Concerns about debts/loans, income and suitable employment caused different levels of strain in different types of workplace. Income caused a high level of strain, especially for those in small animal practice. Finding suitable employment was a particular stressor for those not in clinical practice, while debts and loans were concerns for those in small animal and mixed practice more than other types of workplace.

Female veterinarians reported significantly more strain than male veterinarians for:

- personal relationships,
- their own health,
- self-esteem,
- debts/loans,
- own expectations,
- finding suitable employment.

Male veterinarians were more likely than females to report strain associated with addictive behaviours. There were no gender differences for strain associated with family health, family needs, income or managing finances. Younger veterinarians experienced more strain than older veterinarians that was due to self-esteem, debts and loans, income, managing finances and their own expectations.

Conclusion

Once stressors have been identified in a workplace, they need to be managed. The results from this study show some of the issues that may need to be considered. Overall the aspects of clinical work that seem to be causing the most stress are work hours (especially after-hours work) and dealing with clients (particularly unhappy, angry or distressed clients). Outside clinical practice the main stressors relate to interpersonal issues to do with colleagues and senior staff. All of these stressors can be identified and addressed.

Younger veterinarians and women veterinarians appear to experience strain from more sources than male and older veterinarians, and so these groups may need to be given careful consideration.

The health and safety legislation in New Zealand[1] requires that hazards (including psychological hazards that can lead to mental stress) are managed by identifying the hazard, assessing the seriousness of the hazard, and controlling the hazard. The law also requires that staff are consulted. This is good practice in any case; there are major differences in what people experience as stressors and so a team approach that looks at work demands, work-life balance and skills development can be a helpful start.

[1] The Occupational Safety and Health Service of the Department of Labour has published a great deal of useful information which can be downloaded from www.osh.govt.nz/hazards/stress/

Appendix 4 - What support do veterinarians use to manage workplace strain?

By Dianne Gardner, Massey University, Auckland

Vetscript, March 2005

This report presents more data on work-related strain in veterinarians from the 2000 survey by VCNZ,NZVA and ACNielsen. I focus on the forms of social support that veterinarians are using to help them deal with work-related stress. This survey reported data from 849 respondents who were working in New Zealand at the time; 62% were male and 38% female, 30% worked in small animal clinical practice, 10% in large animal clinical practice, 33% in mixed clinical practice and the rest in other organisations including MAF, pharmaceutical/ animal health, and universities/ polytechnics.

Forms of support

The survey asked about the support that respondents would use in times of stress. The ten forms of support listed were:

- family/friends,
- workmates,
- employers,
- other veterinarians (not employer/workmates),
- NZVA Mentor scheme,
- Vets & Stress phoneline,
- employer-funded counselling,
- private counselling,
- GP or other health professional,
- spiritual/pastoral.

Mostly 'informal' supports were used: family and friends, workmates, other veterinarians (not workmates). There was less use of health professionals (including GPs), counselling and other resources. The minimum number of supports used was 0; the maximum was 10 and the average was 8.4 (out of 10). Respondents in large animal practice tended to use fewest forms of support while those in small animal practice tended to use the most. Female veterinarians used more forms of support than male veterinarians. The number of forms of support used was not associated with levels of life or work-related strain or with frequency of feeling depressed, although respondents who reported they had been diagnosed with depression used more forms of support than those who had not. Respondents who reported they had a good network of family and friends tended to use more forms of support.

Support use by gender

There were significant gender[1] differences for seven of the ten forms of support.

[1] Significant means statistically significant at alpha =0.05.

- Employers: Fifty-two percent of female respondents and 44% of males had used their employers for support in times of stress.
- Other veterinarians: Sixty-four percent of females and 51% of males had used other veterinarians (not workmates or employers) for support.
- Mentors: Five percent of females and only 1% of males had used the mentor scheme.
- Phoneline: Six percent of females and 2% of males had used the phoneline.
- Private counselling: There were no gender differences in actual use of private counselling, but 65% of females and 57% of males said they would use it.
- Employer-funded counselling: This was the only form of support used more by males than females. Eight percent of male respondents and 4% of females had used it.
- Spiritual/pastoral: Although there were no differences in actual use by men and women, more men than women said they would use this form of support (36% male, 29% female).

Support use by age There were age differences in actual use for seven of the ten forms of support:

- family/friends;
- employers;
- other veterinarians;
- mentors;
- employer-funded counselling;
- health professionals and
- spiritual/pastoral support.

As age increased, use of support resources tended to decrease except for health professionals and perhaps pastoral and employer-supported counselling.

Support use by organisation type

There were organisational differences in use of support for six of the support types:

- family/friends;
- other veterinarians;
- employer-funded counselling;
- private counselling;
- health professionals and
- spiritual/ pastoral support.

Small animal clinicians tended to use more support from family/friends, other veterinarians and private counselling, while those not in clinical practice tended to use more support from employer-funded counselling, health professionals and spiritual/ pastoral sources.

Mental health and support

Those who reported more depression were less likely to say they would use their workmates or employers for support and were more likely to have used private

counselling, health professionals or pastoral/spiritual support than those who were less depressed.

One hundred and one respondents reported they had been clinically diagnosed as suffering from depression. Compared to those who had never been diagnosed with depression they were:

- more likely to seek support from family and friends;
- less likely to say they would seek support from workmates;
- more likely to seek private counselling or to see a health professional.

Thirty-five respondents reported they were currently suffering from clinical depression. Compared to those who were not, they were:

- less likely to say they would seek support from workmates and employers;
- more likely to say they have used or would use the Vets in Stress phoneline, private counselling or a health professional.

One hundred and thirty-six reported they had seriously thought about suicide. Compared to those who reported that they had not, this group was:

- less likely to say they would seek support from workmates;
- more likely to have used the phoneline, employerfunded counselling, private counselling; health professionals or pastoral/spiritual support. Twenty respondents reported they had attempted to commit suicide.

This group was:

- less likely to say they would seek support from workmates;
- more likely to have used the phoneline, private counselling, health professionals or pastoral/ spiritual support.

Seven hundred respondents (82%) reported they had a good network of friends and family they could talk to about stress-related issues. Those with a good network were:

- more likely to seek support from family/friends, workmates, employers, or other veterinarians;
- less likely to use health professionals.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings highlight the need for a wide range of initiatives to assist in dealing with workrelated strain. While many veterinarians rely successfully on their networks of friends, family and colleagues for support in managing work-related stress, the data suggest there is a need for confidential forms of support outside the workplace including mentors, helplines and possibly other resources, and health professionals may also play a valuable role in helping older veterinarians to deal with stress-related issues.

Appendix 5 - Levels of strain in veterinarians

By Dianne Gardner, Massey University, Auckland

Vetscript, January/February 2005

In 2000, VCNZ, NZVA and ACNielsen conducted a survey of the sources of strain that veterinarians face within their profession, the forms of support they use and the outcomes in terms of health. In this article I report some of the study's findings. In future issues I will report on the types of things causing strain[1] and the forms of support veterinarians use to deal with work-related strain.

The study

The survey was distributed to 2000 veterinarians. This report includes data from the 849 respondents who were working in New Zealand at the time of the survey. Of these, 62% were male and 38% were female; 30% worked in small animal clinical practice, 10% in large animal clinical practice, 33% in mixed clinical practice and the rest in other organisations including MAF, pharmaceutical/ animal health, and universities/ polytechnics.

Three types of strain were studied: the level of stress with life in general, the most stress felt in a typical workday and the stress of the single most stressful situation at work[2]. [1] 'Strain' is used to mean the result of exposure to stressors, as this is becoming the accepted terminology in this field. Where the term 'stress' is used it matches the wording of the original survey. [2] For these variables, the minimum score was 1 (not at all stressful) and the maximum was 6 (extremely stressful). [3] 'Significant' means statistically significant at alpha=.05.

Factors affecting levels of strain

Organisation type and size

Veterinarians in different types of workplace did not experience significantly[3] different levels of strain from their lives in general or their typical workdays. The most stressful situation at work was more stressful for veterinarians in small animal practice than for those in other types of work. The most stressful situations were caused by difficult, angry or unhappy clients, time demands, workloads, difficult cases, unexpected outcomes or interpersonal conflict. Work strain was generally higher for veterinarians working in larger organisations.

Age and gender

There were no differences between men and women for the levels of life stress and typical workday stress, although women reported being more stressed by the most stressful situation at work than men did. Younger respondents found more stress in their most stressful situation than older ones did, and also more stress in a typical workday.

Managing people and owning a financial share

Veterinarians responsible for managing other people had more life stress than those who did not, but they were not more stressed at work. Those who owned a financial share in the business were less stressed at work than those who did not own a financial share.

Depression

Respondents in small animal practice were more likely to report having been diagnosed as suffering from depression and having thought about suicide than those in other types of practice, although the rates overall were low. On the positive side, those in small animal practice were also more likely to report that they had a supportive network of family and friends.

Women were more likely to have been diagnosed with depression than men (17% of female and 9% of male respondents), but women were also more likely to report that they had a good support network of family and friends. Levels of support from family and friends were high overall, with 81% of men and 87% of women reporting good support networks.

Conclusion

There are clearly differences in the levels of strain veterinarians experience due to their work. Working in small animal practice, working for larger organisations and being female were associated with higher levels. The stressors in these situations need to be considered and managed. The high levels of social support available to most veterinarians (especially the most highly stressed groups) is very positive, as social support is a buffer against many of the negative outcomes that can arise from work-related strain. Data on the types of support veterinarians use to deal with work-related strain will be presented in a future issue of Vetscript.