

# Mental Well-Being in the Veterinary Profession

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# Objectives

- ◆ Recognize why the veterinary profession is stressful
- ◆ Recognize the most common circumstances that cause ethical dilemmas
- ◆ Explain the term moral stress
- ◆ Understand contributors to stress
- ◆ Understand methods to mitigate and cope with stress



# Publication

## Factors that influence small animal veterinarians' opinions and actions regarding cost of care and effects of economic limitations on patient care and outcome and professional career satisfaction and burnout

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### **OBJECTIVE**

To determine small animal veterinarians' opinions and actions regarding costs of care, obstacles to client education about veterinary care costs, effects of economic limitations on patient care and outcome and professional career satisfaction and burnout.

### **DESIGN**

Cross-sectional survey.



# Publication

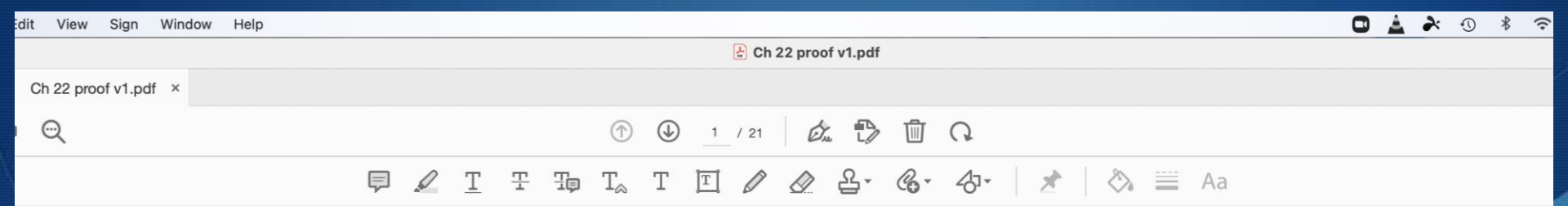
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**PAPER**

## Ethical dilemmas encountered by small animal veterinarians: characterisation, responses, consequences and beliefs regarding euthanasia

Barry Kipperman,<sup>1</sup> Patricia Morris,<sup>2</sup> Bernard Rollin<sup>3</sup>

Small animal veterinarians' opinions were investigated regarding the frequency and nature of ethical dilemmas encountered, beliefs regarding euthanasia and balancing client and animal interests, prevalence and value of ethics training and proposals to mitigate the stressful effects of ethical dilemmas. The majority (52 per cent) of 484 respondents in the USA indicated via an online survey experiencing an ethical dilemma regarding the interests of clients and those of their patients at least weekly. Scenarios involving client financial concerns were commonly reported causes of ethical conflicts. While only 20 per cent of respondents indicated that other practitioners prioritise patient interests, 50 per cent of respondents characterised their own behaviour as prioritising patients. Most respondents (52 per cent) indicated that euthanasia was a leading cause, or are one of many equal causes, of work-related stress. Veterinarians and associate veterinarians were more likely to encounter situations they defined as ethical dilemmas, and female respondents were



# 22

## Moral Stress

*Carrie Jurney and Barry Kipperman*

### What Is Moral Stress?

The term moral stress (also referred to as moral distress) was introduced in the human nursing profession to describe a circumstance “when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action” (Jameton 1984). Moral distress has been defined as “The experience of psychological distress that results from engaging in, or failing to prevent, decisions or behaviors that transgress, ...personally held moral or ethical beliefs” (Crane et al. 2013). Moral stress is therefore recognized as a consequence of experienced conflicts involving work-related obligations or expectations that do not coincide with one’s values (Rollin 2006; Fawcett and Mullan 2018).



# Case Example: Euthanasia Request

- ◆ 4 Chihuahuas
- ◆ Family loss
- ◆ Economic crisis
- ◆ Euthanasia request



# Stress-Prevalence among DVM's

- ◆ 50% high burnout scores (Ouedrago et al. 2021)
- ◆ 49% moderate-substantial burnout (Kipperman et al. 2017)
- ◆ 31% high burnout (Volk et al. 2022)
- ◆ 10% serious psychological distress (Volk et al. 2022)

# Moral Stress-Prevalence among Veterinary Students

- ◆ 284 veterinary students from 4 US schools
- ◆ 81% experienced moral stress in relation to how animals were treated
- ◆ 46% received training re tools for coping with stress

Kipperman, B. et al. 2020. Veterinary student opinions regarding ethical dilemmas encountered by veterinarians and the benefits of ethics instruction. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education*.





# Stress and Animal Welfare

- ◆ If the mental health of veterinarians is diminished, then our potential to improve the health and welfare of animals is in turn compromised.
- ◆ Patient safety/Medical errors
- ◆ Attrition
- ◆ Examples



# DVM Interests/Advocacies

- ◆ Animal
- ◆ Owner
- ◆ Veterinarian
- ◆ Employer
- ◆ Financial compensation
- ◆ Public health/Referring DVM/Publications



# Ethical Dilemma-Definition

- 1-Competing responsibilities or interests
- 2-Equal moral weight
- 3-Absence of clear rules to define best course of action (Morgan 2007)



# Ethical Dilemmas-Types

- ◆ A fundamental ethical problem in veterinary medicine is whether veterinarians should give primary consideration to the animal or to the client (Rollin 2006)



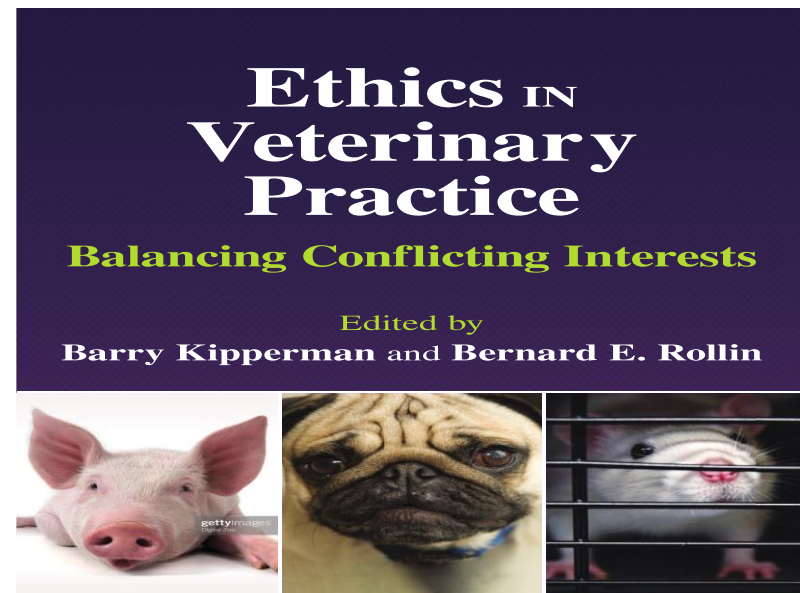
# Common Themes of Ethical Dilemmas

- ◆ Differences in beliefs regarding the importance or value of animals
- ◆ Differences in beliefs regarding human responsibilities to animals
- ◆ Differences in beliefs regarding the best interests of animals
- ◆ Differences in beliefs regarding the primary allegiance of the DVM (Morgan 2007, Kipperman 2018)
- ◆ Influence of money on decision-making



# Common Types of Ethical Dilemmas

1. Economic limitations compromise the quality of care you can provide for the patient
2. Economic euthanasia
3. Convenience euthanasia
4. Non-beneficial intervention
5. Depopulation/Culling/Sacrifice
6. Whether to report abuse/neglect



# Ethical Dilemmas-Consequences

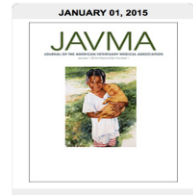
- ◆ Moral stress: “A sense of discord and tension between what one is, in fact, doing, and one’s reason for choosing that field, between what one feels ought to be and what one feels oneself to be, between ideal and reality” (Rollin 2011).



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**JAVMA**news  
January 01, 2015

**Moral stress the top trigger in veterinarians' compassion fatigue**  
Veterinary social worker suggests redefining veterinarians' ethical responsibility

# Moral Stress

- ◆ Moral stress results from engaging in, or failing to prevent, decisions and actions which conflict with one's beliefs.

Managing moral distress in practice. Fawcett, A, et al. 2018. In Practice. 40.



# Ethical Dilemmas and Stress

- ◆ Scoping review of 21 studies in vet med from 2000-2021
- ◆ “High prevalence of psych stressors in vet practice”
- ◆ Risks of burnout...are higher...than in the general pop and other occupational groups
- ◆ Working hours and **ethical dilemmas** stand out as major sources of stress

# Contributors to Stress: Occupational

- ◆ Long work hours/workload
- ◆ Client complaints/employer expectations
- ◆ Euthanasia decisions
- ◆ Economic limitations





# Contributors to Stress: Occupational

- ◆ Pandemic-related
- ◆ Medical errors
- ◆ Pressure for successful outcomes
- ◆ Inadequate support/low autonomy



# Risk Factors for Stress

- ◆ Younger DVM's
- ◆ Debt/Financial pressures
- ◆ Females > Males
- ◆ Companion animal vets > than food animal/equine (Volk et al. 2022)

# Risk Factors for Stress-Personality

- ◆ Perfectionism
- ◆ Neuroticism
- ◆ Depression

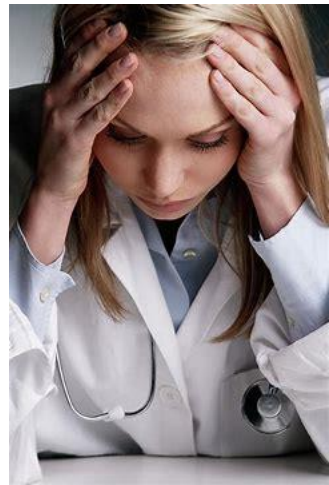
Holden, C.L. (2020). Characteristics of veterinary students: Perfectionism, personality factors, and resilience. *J Vet Med Education*

Killinger, S.L., et al. (2017). Stress and depression among veterinary medical students. *J Vet Med Education*



# Consequences of Stress

- ◆ Diminished well-being
- ◆ Career attrition/Dissatisfaction
- ◆ Emotional distancing as adaptive mechanism
- ◆ Emotional exhaustion/Depression
- ◆ Burnout/Compassion fatigue



# DVM's and Suicide Risk

- ◆ Numerous studies in different countries have documented increased depression & suicide rates among DVM's compared to comparable occupations and general population (Platt 2010, Bartram 2008, 2010, Tomasi 2019, Witte 2019, Volk 2020)
- ◆ 1/6 DVM's (11.6K sample size) reported suicidal ideations after vet school (Nett 2015)
- ◆ 31% experienced depression/9% serious distress
- ◆ 19% receiving treatment for mental health condition

They can't rescue you  
if they don't know you  
need it. Ask for help  
to fight another day.



Suicide Prevention Quotes  
[www.geckoandfly.com](http://www.geckoandfly.com)





# DVM's and Suicide Risk

- ◆ Death records of 197 vets from 2003-2014
- ◆ DVM suicide risk 2x higher than general population
- ◆ Pentobarbital poisoning most common

- ◆ Witte, et al. Suicides and deaths of undetermined intent among vet professionals 2004-2014. JAVMA. 255;5, 2019.

Suicide does not end the chances of life getting worse, suicide eliminates the possibility of it ever getting better.

# Mitigation of Stress

- ◆ Moral resilience : “The diligent, resolute and thoughtful ongoing effort to live in alignment with one’s own principles and value commitments.”
- ◆ Education in veterinary ethics-inconsistent in US vet schools
- ◆ Online assessment tools available to assess core values
- ◆ Assessment of personality traits

# Coping Strategies

- ◆ Problem-based: Reducing or removing the cause of distress
- ◆ Emotional-based: Regulating the emotional responses to a problem
- ◆ Use of systematic framework to address ethical dilemmas

# Steps in Addressing Ethical Dilemmas

1. Define relevant interests
2. Define the options/choices and consequences
3. Determine how to balance interests-theory
4. Pursue or advocate for a course of action or inaction

# Coping Strategies

- ◆ Physical and emotional self-care
- ◆ Reasonable work hours
- ◆ Exercise
- ◆ Sleep
- ◆ Hydration
- ◆ Self-care plans and distress (Volk et al. 2020)



"Barking sometimes helps me relax.  
But then it drives the neighbors crazy."

# Workplace and Stress

◆ The 2 techniques most predictive of high wellbeing, low burnout, and absence of serious psychological distress were: having a healthy coping mechanism for dealing with stress and working in a practice with a healthy work culture.

◆ Organizational strategies to improve well-being:

1. Understanding of stress
2. Offering support services via health insurance or EAP
3. Healthy culture
4. Adequate time for appts and patient care (Volk et al. 2022)



# Veterinary Mental Health Initiative (VMHI)



Shanti's Veterinary Mental Health Initiative (VMHI) offers complimentary mental health support services for veterinarians and veterinary technicians.

- Professional Peer Support Groups
- One-to-One Sessions (veterinarians)

VMHI services are:

- Confidential
- Virtual via a HIPAA-compliant platform
- 1-hour in length
- Facilitated by kind and understanding doctorate-level clinicians with specialties in depression and anxiety, grief and loss, work-life balance, trauma, pet loss, and suicide prevention and response

Program of Shanti Project



Photo: Today's Veterinary Business

## Elements of Peer Support Groups Shown to Reduce Depression, Anxiety, and Suicidality

- ✓ Groups facilitated by mental health experts
- ✓ Delivery of timely and evidence-based coping skills
- ✓ Identification and support of individuals at greater risk
- ✓ Confidentiality

# The Role of Coping Skills in Peer Support Groups

“Coping” means to invest one's effort into solving both personal and interpersonal problems.

Coping Skills: the tools and techniques you can use to help you effectively do this.

Coping skills can aid you in taking the next steps in shifting the thought and behavior patterns that are causing stress and suffering.

Important Caveat: only a mental health professional who has received formal training should introduce and share certain coping skills.

Example: TIPP skill in DBT







Photo: Alabama News Center, Mark Almond

## Current VMHI Groups

General Group for Veterinarians

Experienced Veterinarians

Early Career Veterinarians

Multicultural, Diversity, Equity, Representation, and Inclusion Issues in Vet Med

Colleagues who have Died from Suicide

Veterinary Technicians



## VMHI Pilot Study

Two 10-week groups based on scheduling and availability for participants.

Comprehensive, confidential survey before group start, and at conclusion:

- Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)
- Professional Quality of Life Scale (ProQoL)
- Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10)
- Subjective ratings of anxiety and overwhelm.

Qualitative feedback after every session.

Perceived level of felt support after every session.

## Clinical Discussion

Overall, the pilot demonstrated efficacy as a professional peer support program.

Participants reported significant increases in felt support.

Participants' levels of anxiety and overwhelm decreased throughout the course of the pilot.

The pilot exhibited a moderate impact on overall life stress, job satisfaction, burnout, and vicarious traumatization.





# Hope and Stress

- ◆ Prolonged or recurrent moral distress often results in feelings of helplessness that prevents objective identification, analysis and action towards resolution of ethical dilemmas=“Moral Residue”
- ◆ When dealing with moral distress, believing in our own agency to impact the cause of our distress can moderate that distress.
- ◆ “Physician, Heal thyself”: Luke 423



# Veterinary Mental Health Initiative (VMHI)

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