

Mind Matters International: impact of Covid-19 on mental health in the veterinary team



A report of an international online roundtable Tuesday 16 March 2021

Welcome and introduction

The event started with Lizzie Lockett, Chief Executive of the UK veterinary regulator the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), welcoming delegates on behalf of the RCVS and the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), who were jointly hosting the occasion.

Lizzie said she was delighted that there were delegates registered from all across the world, including Australia, Canada, India, Lithuania, New Zealand, Nigeria and Uganda, in addition to the UK and USA, as well as representatives of international bodies.

She said that the impact of the pandemic had been global and that, likewise, the impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the international veterinary profession had been profound and universal. Delegates were invited to consider learning points from the mental health and wellbeing issues that had been either caused and/or exacerbated by the pandemic and be focused on finding solutions during the course of the day.

The event had also been organised under the banner of the RCVS Mind Matters Initiative and Lizzie introduced the project as being set up by the RCVS in 2014 as part of its remit in ensuring a healthy and sustainable veterinary profession. She outlined its three main streams of activity – prevent, protect and support – and said that international collaboration has increasingly become a focus, with the RCVS producing a joint statement on veterinary mental health with the AVMA in 2018. Since that statement was first published a number of other organisations, including the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE), the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA), the American Association of Veterinary State Boards (AAVSB) and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA), had joined as signatories.

Lizzie then handed over to Jen Brandt, AVMA's Director of Wellbeing, Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives, for an overview of the day.

Overview of the day

Jen said that the AVMA had a broad reach of working on behalf of veterinary professionals around the world and had an emphasis on wellbeing, in particular looking at mental health crises prevention and intervention through a systems lens.

She said that the event was an opportunity for different organisations and individuals to share what they were working on in terms of mental health and wellbeing and look at where there could be greater collaboration.

At this point the delegates split up into four breakout groups, each looking at different aspects of how the pandemic may have impacted veterinary mental health and wellbeing. The topics considered by the groups were as follows:

- Workplace shortages due to the pandemic, and mitigating the impact within the veterinary community
- Financial impacts of the pandemic, and how to support the veterinary community
- Anxiety, burnout or compassion fatigue within your veterinary community and how to address it
- The impact of the pandemic on relationships between your veterinary community and clients/ the wider public

Each delegate took part in two 25-minute discussions on different topics. A facilitator then gave an overview of the discussions across the groups on each topic.

Group 1: Workplace shortages due to the pandemic, and mitigating the impact within the veterinary community

The overview of this group's discussion was given by Adrian Hochstadt, AVMA's Deputy Chief Executive.

He said there was a consensus amongst the group that severe staff shortages existed before the pandemic but that the pandemic had exacerbated the situation with the impact being most severe on small animal practices.

There were also some regional differences and he cited a recent study in Canada that indicated that 80% of veterinary professionals were experiencing considerable burnout. Some Asian countries on the other hand had experienced Covid very differently, some had been hit hard while others managed to minimise deaths and infection rates.

He said that the group found that telemedicine had been used more during the pandemic but now clients were returning to in-person consultations. One group member stated that he did not believe that telemedicine would experience a lasting continued high level of use. There was also a feeling that in non-clinical settings (including in associations) virtual work had been a mixed bag and that it had definitely not resulted in a lower workload.

There was a discussion about steps taken to address the mental health impact of veterinary workforce shortages, including leveraging the support staff, delegating more tasks, and increasing their pay and benefits. The group considered that some practices were increasingly focusing on their employees, not just the clients, which had traditionally been their focus. This meant a growing realisation that working 24/7 was neither healthy nor realistic, and some practices were reducing hours and prioritising clients and cases as they realised they could not do it all.

There was also a feeling amongst the group that associations should be doing all they could to support recent graduates, especially as they transitioned from college / university to practice, and that this was both a huge educational responsibility but also an opportunity for associations.

Allied to this was the fact that the group identified a growing interest in continuing education offerings in non-technical areas, such as mental health, communication, and leadership skills development.

The group found that, if there was a silver lining to the pandemic, it was that people seemed more comfortable discussing their wellbeing virtually. In addition, Covid helped highlight the mental health stress experienced by all, across society, perhaps showing veterinarians that they were not alone grappling with these challenges.

Group 2: Financial impacts of the pandemic, and how to support the veterinary community

The overview of this group's discussion was given by Professor Susan Dawson, Chair of the Mind Matters Initiative.

The group had discussed the fact that the pandemic had actually brought increased financial income to some practices due to an increase in pet ownership and the fact that clients still needed and were willing to pay for veterinary services. However, this increase in turnover had also led to an increase in workload and an increase in stress and burnout amongst veterinarians as a result.

There was a discussion on how this might also have a longer-term impact on the balance between small animal and farm/large animal practice. As demand for small animal veterinary work increased, so too might the wages that would drive people from farm/ large animal practice, which was already under pressure, into this more lucrative area of work.

Alternatively, the group discussed that some vets had found that turnover was down leading to financial worries. Operating in a Covid-safe way also took longer and was more expensive, meaning that working hours could be longer. In terms of restrictions, curfews in particular made working very difficult, if not impossible. It was also identified that familial financial pressures had meant that vets who had been able to continue working had felt more pressure had been on them to do so.

In terms of steps taken to mitigate the impact of financial pressures on veterinary mental health and wellbeing, the group identified that some practices had been working hard to recruit more staff and, in doing so, put in place measures to improve wellbeing and encourage recruitment. For example, some practices had had a focus on limiting working hours, which has been beneficial, while others focused on team building, with a particular emphasis on induction for new staff. There had also been some

international acts of kindness, for example, some vets had paid fees due for vets in other countries that were under more severe financial difficulties.

The group discussed that the pandemic had had an impact on volunteers as many different veterinary associations and organisations depended on volunteers from within the professions who often do this because it brings benefits in terms of meeting people, networking and socialising. But, as restrictions had reduced these activities, volunteering had become a more burdensome role, especially as it often involved extra Zoom calls in an evening after a day of doing Zoom calls! It was recognised that, once restrictions ease, there would be a need to re-engage and rebuild the volunteer base.

Group 3: Anxiety, burnout or compassion fatigue within your veterinary community and how to address it

There were two groups looking at this topic. The first overview was given by the AVMA's Jen Brandt.

She identified four main themes amongst the group's discussion. The first was that the impact of the pandemic on burnout, anxiety and fatigue was not all negative as people had used it as an opportunity to reassess their work and how their practice worked. There had, of course, however, been negative mental health impacts due to extra pressures not being matched by extra support.

The second theme was that regulators had played an important role in terms of the messaging they had given out to the profession and their reach. The fact that regulators had made it clear that they were not out to punish people for changing certain aspects of how they operated during the pandemic and had told practices to do the best they could within the guidelines had been reassuring.

The third theme was that, while the beginning of the pandemic was very disruptive, there was a high degree of emotional capital and tolerance, now conflict and negative behaviours were escalating, particularly from clients eg complaining about having to wait outside or refusing to wear masks. In this respect the pandemic had revealed and magnified existing issues with communication in respect of conflict and problem resolution.

The fourth theme was that there had been an important emphasis on relationships and communication and the need for structures to be in place for people who might be struggling with their mental health. This could include activities informed by evidence in terms of offering support as well as education on reducing the risk of suicide and even the use of social media as a forum to talk about health and wellbeing amongst veterinary professionals.

An overview of the second group's discussion was given by Lizzie Lockett and she started by highlighting how the situation had affected veterinarians in different parts of the world. Delegates from Uganda, for example, reported that, despite an increase in anxiety – including financial anxiety due to a big loss in veterinary revenues – amongst vets and the population at large during the first lockdown, many mental health centres were taken out of operation to be turned into Covid centres.

In contrast, delegates from Australia, the Republic of Ireland and the UK reported there had been a big rise in pet ownership, but this came with its own impact on veterinary mental health as increased demand for veterinary services coincided with staff being furloughed, national/regional lockdowns

making it difficult to employ locums, fewer people to do the same amount of work, and the difficulties of treating patients and providing service to clients in a Covid-safe way.

However, solutions to mitigate against some of these stressors were found in all the countries, many of which involved giving veterinarians the opportunity to share their anxieties and experiences with colleagues who were going through similar circumstances. In Australia, for example, delegates reported a focus on pastoral care including the use of online spaces to discuss, for example, what the rules were, clinical issues, support issues, some discussion of emotional impact. Similarly, in Uganda veterinary WhatsApp groups had been helpful, particularly for those working in isolation.

In both the Republic of Ireland and the UK, the regulators and associations had played a pro-active role in helping the professions navigate the complexities of veterinary work during the pandemic and its associated restrictions and recognised the additional stress this may cause. In Ireland health and wellbeing guidance was posted to all Veterinary Council of Ireland registrants and practice mental health champions were also being trained. In the UK, the RCVS Mind Matters Initiative had published an A-Z of Help & Advice for Covid-19 and had held a number of online events including mental health awareness training sessions and reflection time events – facilitated spaces where veterinarians could come together to reflect on broad themes related to the emotional aspects of their work.

Group 4: The impact of the pandemic on relationships between your veterinary community and clients/ the wider public

Groups on this topic were facilitated by Lizzie Lockett and Angharad Belcher, the Director of the RCVS Mind Matters Initiative, who also gave the overview of the group's discussion.

Angharad said that the experiences detailed in her group showed that there was a degree of variation in terms of how clients reacted to the necessary changes that practices had had to introduce in response to the pandemic (eg kerbside care and telemedicine) and some of the impacts of the pandemic (eg fewer staff and fewer appointments, longer wait times etc). Some clients reacted empathetically and patiently but there had been cases of verbal and physical assault from clients who wanted care in a specific way or were upset with not being in consult rooms or animals being out of sight. There was also a huge increase in complaints to the regulators and practice managers / owners.

Group members identified similar situations in some of the Scandinavian countries with kerbside care meaning some younger vets had struggled to communicate with clients especially as the owner was not there while pets were examined and then they had to explain everything afterwards or at the end of the day. Complaints then came in as clients didn't have as the full discussion in a timely fashion or in the way they had expected.

An additional point was raised around new pet owners who might lack the knowledge and abilities to look after their pets properly.

In terms of the impact, a salient point for group members was that we were still in the middle of the crisis and did not fully know what the long term impact would be. However, there was also a

discussion around the fact that client communications before the pandemic also weren't perfect and there were challenges with them being in the consult room (or not being there!) then as well.

One positive thing noted by the group was that the pandemic had opened up opportunities to talk to clients about One Health, as vets could educate clients on the role of veterinarians in public health, and there had also been positive news stories about the veterinary contribution to the pandemic eg donation of ventilators and PPE to healthcare services.

There was also a discussion around new graduates and their lack of confidence in dealing with clients, particularly if the circumstances were difficult, and the consequent need for greater support. Sometimes this had led to an increase in complaints due to frustrations and communications challenges and there might be a need to provide individual veterinarians and practices with practical tips on how to effectively deal with complaints, including if they happened via social media.

When asked what they would have done differently, group members said that they felt a lot of pride in how veterinary teams delivered during the pandemic, for example, by providing help and equipment to medical colleagues, delivering high quality services in less than ideal situations and so on. Other positives that were identified included organisations and associations working together internationally.

Debrief and discussion

Following the group presentations, Jen Brandt opened the floor for delegates to have a general discussion on the topics that had been discussed and their thoughts on the pandemic and its mental health impact.

Something that came across strongly in the discussion was the advantages for organisations of sharing mental health resources, training programmes and so on with international partners, which could then be adapted to local circumstances and customs, rather than each country having to do its own thing (especially if resources were limited) and reinventing the wheel.

Another point of agreement was the need for a greater emphasis on those non-technical skills, such as communication, emotional intelligence and wellness, and the need for more CPD, peer-to-peer support and peer review in those crucial areas. It was discussed that this was particularly crucial for new graduates who needed that additional support in particular.

It was also agreed that the pandemic had put a spotlight on One Health and the role of vets in public health and that this presented an opportunity to put this more into the public discourse and to develop more ways of collaborating with human medicine. A partnership between the World Veterinary Association and the World Medical Association was cited, as the WVA had an early-years doctor on its One Health Focus Group and they were currently looking at putting together a joint One Health seminar.

Lizzie Lockett then summed up the main learning points of the event saying that those countries with more resources and knowledge may be able to help colleagues where there may be fewer resources, less knowledge and greater stigma around mental health issues.

The organising group will now be reviewing what was learned from the sessions and how the event was run and what any future events involving delegates from across the world may involve.

Lizzie said that there may also be a role for a specific international group on veterinary mental health as it's a technical and medical subject and needs to be approached in a comprehensive and evidence-based way. She encouraged those attending to consider signing up to the joint RCVS/AVMA statement on mental health, details of which were circulated after the event.

She then, on behalf of the RCVS and AVMA, thanked all those who attended.

Post-event feedback from delegates

Following the event both quantitative and qualitative feedback was gathered from those who attended. Of the 12 who responded the feedback for all aspects of the event was overwhelmingly positive, although a majority thought that more time could have been dedicated to the breakout sessions and that more time was needed overall.

Other comments included that there could be a wider range of countries and veterinary sectors (for example, farm, research, government sectors) for future events.

However, all those who responded said that their objectives in attending the event – which mostly concerned sharing best practice and understanding what other countries were doing – were met and respondents were excited about where continued international collaboration will go in the future.