

MMI RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

NOVEMBER
2021 REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Dear colleague



The third Mind Matters Research Symposium, which was held virtually for the first time, brought together a wealth of dedicated researchers from across the globe who all care passionately about improving the mental health of those working within the veterinary professions.

Featuring presentations from researchers based in the UK, the US, Hong Kong, Australia, Germany, and the Netherlands, the event served as an important reminder that the UK is not alone in facing these challenges – these are global challenges which we must address together. The symposium provided a perfect example of what can be achieved when we work together as a global community and, from this, we can glean great hope that a more positive future lies ahead.

This report, produced by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' Mind Matters Initiative, provides an overview of the day and contains summaries of each of the presentations.

It is common knowledge that the veterinary professions experience higher levels of mental ill-health compared to that of the general population, and that there are many complex factors that contribute to this. This is why research is so important, as it only through gaining a thorough understanding of these problems and their impacts that we can hope to progress. Hearing about the latest research in the field was hugely promising and, when informing evidence-based interventions,

will play an invaluable role protecting the mental health of those working in the veterinary professions both now and in the future.

As the Director for the Advancement of the Professions at the RCVS, the Department under which the Mind Matters Initiative falls, I am incredibly proud of how the day went and feel inspired that, despite the obvious challenges, positive change is afoot.

I would like to thank all the presenters for their brilliantly insightful future-focused presentations, which provided much food for thought. The day would not have been possible without those who presented and spoke about the research. I would also like to thank the delegates for supporting the event and being so actively engaged in the discussions – together we make up the past, present and future of the professions and all play an important part in making the veterinary world the best it can possibly be.

Finally, many thanks to Rosie Allister for co-ordinating a fantastic programme and to the wider Mind Matters Team, especially Lisa Quigley, and the RCVS Communications Team for organising such an insightful and valuable event.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Angharad".

Angharad Belcher
RCVS Director for the Advancement of the Professions

PLENARY SPEAKERS

When it is darkest: Understanding Suicide Risk

Professor Rory O'Connor PhD FAcSS,

Rory O'Connor PhD FAcSS is Professor of Health Psychology at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention and a Past-President of the International Academy of Suicide Research.

Rory leads the Suicidal Behaviour Research Laboratory at Glasgow, one of the leading suicide/self-harm research groups in UK, and the Mental Health & Wellbeing Research Group at Glasgow. He has published extensively in the field of suicide and self-harm and is author of *When it is darkest: Why people die by suicide and what we can do to prevent it* (2021).

Rory is Co-Editor-in-Chief of *Archives of Suicide Research* and Associate Editor of *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behaviour*. He acts as an advisor to a range of national and international organisations including national governments on the areas of suicide and self-harm. He is also Co-Chair of the Academic Advisory Group to the Scottish Government's National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group.

Summary

Rory introduced his talk saying he had worked in the field of suicide prevention for over 25 years. Rory said his latest book, *When it is darkest*, was a culmination of his research into understanding suicide risk and would serve as the basis for his presentation.

To begin, Rory gave some background into the global impact of suicide and its ripple effects.

He estimated that there are around 703,000 deaths by suicide each year, with each suicide affecting an average of 135 people who knew each person in some capacity. This means that globally each year around 95 million people are impacted by suicide. He said men are more likely to die by suicide than women and it was more common in disadvantaged areas.

He then went on to explain the elevated rate of suicide in vets, saying that veterinary surgeons were three to four times more likely to die by suicide than the general public.

Rory's recent investigation, the UK Covid-19 Mental Health and Wellbeing Study, looked at the immediate and medium-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which required social distancing and self-isolation, on people's mental health and wellbeing in the UK. He said data taken during the first stage of the pandemic didn't show any consistent evidence for an increase in suicide risk, but this could not tell us anything about the potential long-term impacts. However, rates of suicide ideation increased, with young people reporting the highest rates.

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Rory then covered some key myths surrounding suicide and what we could do to help. He started by highlighting that there was no evidence that asking someone about suicide would somehow 'plant' the

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idea in their head. In fact, there was evidence to the contrary. Asking someone if they plan on taking their own life would be more likely to prompt them to seek support.

Rory said that understanding suicide prevention was complex as it was a multifactorial subject. There were many factors associated with suicide risk, but it was important to understand how these factors impacted on the way in which individuals saw their past, present, and future. For many, suicide was driven by a feeling of entrapment in their mental pain.

Rory then explained the science behind this through the Integrated Motivational-Volitional (IMV) model of suicide behaviour, which served as a way of bringing together the different theoretical understandings of suicidal risk. The model argued that suicidal thinking emerges when someone feels humiliated and defeated and feels that they cannot escape this entrapment. This happens within the motivational phase and was the final part of a common pathway leading to the emergence of suicidal thinking or ideation. The sense of defeat and entrapment could also be driven by rejection, loss, and shame.

He then went on to explain how the factors that led people to becoming suicidal were different from the factors that helped us understand who would act on their thoughts. Entrapment and feeling like a burden on others were the key drivers for suicidal thinking over time, particularly feelings of internal mental pain, which could not be controlled. He said that in order to understand suicide risk, we first needed to understand the drivers of internal entrapment.

Rory spoke about how to reduce the risk of suicidal ideation turning into suicidal action. He said that whilst we could not predict suicide, we could better

understand who was more at likely to cross the line from suicidal thoughts to suicidal acts. It has been discovered that people were more likely to attempt suicide in the presence of the following eight factors:

- Access to means
- Planning
- Exposure to suicide or suicidal behaviour
- Impulsivity
- Physical pain sensitivity/endurance
- Fearlessness about death (relevant in veterinary context as often exposed to death)
- Mental imagery
- Past suicidal behaviour

He described a range of interventions that could interrupt the transition from suicidal thoughts to suicide attempts. These included psychosocial interventions, brief interventions (such as safety planning interventions), and pharmacological interventions.

To conclude, Rory highlighted that suicide was more about ending pain, and that ending one's life was often a result of entrapment. He said that preventing suicide took more than treating mental health problems, as there was a range of factors which needed to be considered such as tackling inequality, stigma, discrimination, and the Covid-19 pandemic.

In a veterinary context, high suicide levels could be explained by regular exposure to death as well as isolation, stress, and access to means. It was these factors which might make people more likely to progress from suicidal thoughts to suicidal acts. To end, Rory stated the importance of remembering that the factors that led to suicidal thoughts were different from those associated with suicide attempts/death.

SARAH BROWN RESEARCH GRANT TALKS

RG.1 - Experiences of racism and its impacts on mental wellbeing in Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people working and studying in the UK veterinary sector

Dr Victoria Crossley BSc BVM&S PGCertVetEd PhD FHEA MRCVS

Navaratnam Partheeban BVM&S BSc(Hons) PGCert(DHH) PIAGR M FRSA MRCVS

Victoria graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 2009 and worked for four years in small animal practice before taking up the post of Pfizer Feline Fellow at the University of Bristol. In 2014, she undertook a PhD investigating the aetiology of feline hyperthyroidism at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), where she subsequently worked as Impact Case Manager whilst teaching and tutoring on the BVetMed course. Victoria is currently Teaching Fellow in Research Impact and Cornerstone at Imperial College, London.

Navaratnam (Theeb) is a farm vet. He is dedicated to working to support the sector in helping attract people from non-traditional backgrounds. This has included being a trustee of a City Farm and the Country Trust. Navaratnam is a co-founder of the British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society (BVEDS) and a founding BiPOC Working Group member at the Land Workers Alliance (LWA). He was recognised as an Oxford Farming Emerging Leader in 2020. As a Nuffield Farming Scholar 2021, he is completing his project on looking at 'Promoting and supporting ethnic minorities in the agricultural, farming and veterinary sector'.

Summary

Victoria began the talk by explaining how lack of diversity was a huge issue within the UK veterinary profession. Only 3.5% of UK vets and 2% of vet nurses are from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) background. Discrimination and lack of awareness also pose huge problems. She cited a recent British Veterinary Association (BVA) survey in which 55% of vets said they weren't concerned about diversity and 44% stated they weren't concerned about discrimination. By contrast, in the same survey, 26% of BAME respondents stated they had experienced discrimination and over half of these people stated that these events hadn't been dealt with satisfactorily. Victoria said this highlighted the importance of understanding the barriers to inclusivity for the industry as whole, as attracting and keeping a diverse profession has shown to both improve performance and productivity in the workplace.

Victoria then explained that many non-vet specific studies had shown there was a strong association between experiences of racism and negative mental health and wellbeing, and that little research had been done on this in the veterinary profession.

Introducing their project, Victoria said the aim was to understand experiences of racism and its effects on the mental wellbeing of BAME people working/studying in the UK veterinary sector.

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In terms of the objectives, she said they were to:

- Describe BAME individuals' experiences of racism whilst working/studying in the UK veterinary sector;
- Describe the impact that experiences of racism have had on mental wellbeing and job satisfaction;
- Determine what BAME individuals thought could or should be done to tackle racism in the veterinary sector;
- And highlight issues for consideration in the design of appropriate interventions.

To carry out their research, the team created an anonymous online questionnaire that was disseminated through UK veterinary groups, societies, organisations and institutions. The survey, known as the Race Together Survey, was open to BAME people currently working or studying in the veterinary sector in any capacity in the UK. There were 265 respondents, the majority of whom were vets and vet students, but also included vet nurses, vet nurse students, academics, practice managers etc. Most people were from Asian or mixed ethnic backgrounds, with a small number of black participants and those of other ethnicities.

Theeb then introduced the three main themes obtained from the data. These were:

- Alienation and insecurity
- Homogenisation and 'inferiorisation'
- Disappointment and futility

After providing an analysis of each theme, Theeb explained how identity conflict could be defined as a common overarching theme across all the other three themes. He said the survey participants' own sense of identity, for example, being a British citizen, a good vet, an intellectual person, clashed with white people's perceptions of them, for example, as foreign, unsuitable for the veterinary profession, inferior. This perceptual mismatch then caused internal identity conflict.

Theeb used many research participant quotes to explain each of the identified themes and highlighted that it was the impact of comments that mattered, not the intent with which they were said. He concluded by summarising what lessons could be learnt by the sector from their research. The aim of the study wasn't to prove that racism was real and present in the UK veterinary profession, as it was evident that it was, but more about understanding how racism affected people.

The study showed that racism negatively affected BAME people's wellbeing both within and beyond their workplace. For the profession to change,

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Theeb highlighted the importance of good leadership, and the need for members of the profession to take responsibility for their own actions, the actions of others, and for actions within the whole sector. He emphasised that support was needed from allies as well as from people within the BAME community. He said that even if racism didn't affect individuals personally, it didn't mean people couldn't contribute to real change. He ended by thanking MMI, via the Sarah Brown Mental Health Research Grant, for helping to fund the research, the participants in the Race Together Survey, and the organisations who helped disseminate the survey.

Victoria and Theeb's research project is ongoing.

SARAH BROWN RESEARCH GRANT TALKS

RG.2 – Experiences and impact of moral injury in UK veterinary professional wellbeing

Dr Victoria Williamson

Victoria is a research fellow at King's College London (KCL) and the University of Oxford. At King's College London, Victoria's research focuses on psychological adjustment after traumatic events, including combat trauma, human trafficking and moral injury. At the University of Oxford, her research aims to identify effective approaches to screen for child mental health difficulties in schools and deliver an accessible intervention to support child adjustment.

Summary

To start her talk, Victoria introduced concept of moral injury describing it as the profound distress that can be experienced following a transgressive act that violates one's moral code. She said the vast majority of the research conducted so far on the concept had been within the context of the military but that it could also apply to medicine, policing, social work and, with their research, the veterinary field.

To provide further context, Victoria gave the main categories of potentially morally injurious events that could be experienced. Morally injurious events could come about through the individual's commission (ie doing something that should not have been done), omission (letting something happen without intervention), or betrayal (usually involving a higher authority failing to protect the individual's safety).

Victoria said there had been a recent uptick in research on moral injury and while it wasn't a mental health condition in itself, potentially morally injurious events could lead to negative feelings about yourself, others and the world as well as feelings of shame,

guilt, anger and disgust. These could in turn lead to the development of mental health conditions, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

In their research on the impact of moral injury on veterinary professionals, Victoria said her team at KCL had launched an online questionnaire and conducted 10 in-depth qualitative interviews. Both the surveys and the interviews were anonymous.

Although the research had not yet been published, Victoria gave delegates an overview of some of the key findings, covering the type of morally injurious events that occur in veterinary practice, the psychological impacts and the potential applications for the results they had garnered so far.

The research by Victoria and her team at KCL is ongoing but she said those who were interested could find out more at: kcmhr.org/moral-injury

RG.3 – How farm vets cope: an exploration of how vets cope with the daily challenges of farm animal practice and how best these coping mechanisms might be developed into tools which can be easily accessed by the livestock veterinary community

Dr Kate Stephen

Kate is an experienced qualitative social scientist and project manager. Based in the Epidemiology Research Unit, Inverness, in the Scottish Highlands, Kate's work involves an holistic view of human behaviour in the context of livestock disease, focusing on biosecurity practices and antimicrobial use. Informed by her research background in rural Public

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Health, she tries to adopt a farmer-/vet-centric approach and is involved in the development of preventative and self-management mental health interventions in farming communities.

Summary

In her presentation, Kate gave an overview of the first year of her work funded by the Sarah Brown Mental Health Research Grant.

She began by introducing her project's aims, which were to gather the views and experiences of farm animal vets to identify mechanisms that could be used to promote job satisfaction, and to break the cycle of negative thoughts that occurred during periods of poor mental wellbeing or in response to setbacks and failure. Kate and her team wanted to use a co-production approach to ensure the views of vets were incorporated into every part of the process.

They conducted 31 interviews in total and most of the participants were male and working in farm practice. The interviews were then transcribed and analysed.

Working with farmers for the first time could also be difficult as graduates were full of academic knowledge, but farmers didn't always value or respect this as they often felt their own experience had greater validity.

She went on to explain what they discovered, starting with the 'shell shock' new graduates faced when transitioning from the collaborative supportive environment of vet schools, into practice life, which

involved a lot of time spent alone on farms. Working with farmers for the first time could also be difficult as graduates were full of academic knowledge, but farmers didn't always value or respect this as they often felt their own experience had greater validity. Furthermore, the nature of the work could be repetitive and not overly intellectually stimulating compared to university. Therefore, it was important to manage graduate expectations.

Moving on from graduates, Kate explained that farm vets in general thought the best part of the job was lambing and calving. Peer and managerial support were also cited as important. Those who felt unsupported by peers and managers felt more vulnerable and isolated. Participants said continuing professional development (CPD) and working on other intellectually stimulating projects were useful in alleviating intellectual boredom.

Kate then moved onto how farm vets cope when things go wrong, ie animals dying because farmers failed to phone the vet in time, or animals dying from disease which could have been prevented had farmers followed previous veterinary advice. These situations could leave farm vets questioning their competency even if they were not in the wrong. Feelings of failure and frustration were also common, especially when having to deal with the emotional response of the farmers who were often angry at the vet even if it wasn't their fault.

Those feelings were complicated by the isolating nature of the job. For example, vets undertaking long drives home alone could be problematic as it gave rise to rumination. Working long hours and dealing with emotionally-challenging situations was physically and emotionally exhausting, which impacted overall wellbeing and health and safety.

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The research also found that working on a farm could be dangerous, as animal behaviour could be unpredictable. It could also be difficult for farm vets to say no to putting themselves in a dangerous situation, especially if they felt pressured to do so. If farm vets felt valued and supported, they were much more likely to feel empowered to say no, but if they felt their practice valued them less than the farmer client, they were less likely to look after themselves and stay safe.

Kate said that the research demonstrated that striking a healthy work-life balance was also important. Having set rotas was also useful in allowing vets to plan time off.

Kate explained there were three main trigger points in the study that indicated when farm vets were most likely to deteriorate. Trigger point one was as a new graduate due to the 'shell shock' of moving away from support networks and the difficulty of integrating into new rural communities. Trigger point two was around five years into a farm vet career when people started doubting their career choice. They compared themselves to others who were in the same stages of their careers but were often earning more money for doing seemingly easier work. This led to feelings of entrapment as they didn't want to let themselves or their families down by giving up on a career that they had worked so hard for. The third trigger point was for people starting managerial roles. Experienced farm vets were often placed in managerial positions without management training and found the added responsibility of supporting a team very demanding. This, in turn, made achieving a healthy work-life balance much more difficult.

To conclude, Kate gave her own thoughts on what difference it could make if people put the needs of their employees before the needs of their clients by truly valuing them and their work. She then spoke about what this might look like if this concept was extended to farmers. For example, if farmers were encouraged to treat farm vets with more respect and made aware of the benefits of putting the needs of vets first, then wider benefits for livestock health, for the farmers as clients, and for practices as businesses would be much more likely to emerge.

More information about Kate's project can be found on its website www.howfarmvetscope.co.uk.

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 1A

1A.1 – Cyberbullying and mental wellbeing of veterinarians in Hong Kong – an exploratory qualitative study

Camille K Y Chan BBus

Camille is a PhD candidate from the University of Hong Kong, and her research interest focuses on the mental wellbeing of veterinarians in Hong Kong. She developed her research interest because of her personal experience of working with medical professionals and her passion was ignited by the neglected distress observed among the veterinary profession. She has completed a qualitative study on cyberbullying and mental wellbeing of vets in Hong Kong and is currently exploring ways to improve vets' mental wellbeing. She hopes that her study's findings can enhance the mental health of the veterinary profession locally and globally.

Summary

To start, Camille introduced her research objective, which was to understand cyberbullying and mental wellbeing of veterinarians working in Hong Kong. She then listed her three main research questions:

1. How does business competition affect veterinarians in Hong Kong?
2. What role do clients play in veterinarian mental health?
3. To what extent was cyberbullying affecting the veterinary profession?

Camille then explained why she was carrying out the research, stating that no research had ever been carried out into suicidality and mental stress of veterinarians in Hong Kong, specifically.

To carry out her research, Camille invited a range of vets from different backgrounds working in companion animal practices for face-to-face interviews. There were 18 participants in total.

Results from the study showed that many vets were overbooked, generally being of the mindset that more clients created better profits. Practice owners found the highly competitive business culture stressful but necessary for staying in business, whilst young vets found it challenging to meet client expectations.

She then spoke about cyberbullying, stating that veterinary professionals believed social media had become a platform for collective anger, which could be easily magnified. The veterinary community in Hong Kong was very small and there was a constant fear of social media complaints because they allowed false public accusations to spread quickly. Nearly all research participants said they had been subject to cyberbullying, and all knew of someone in the profession who had been directly impacted.

To summarise, Camille concluded that cyberbullying was a critically important issue facing the profession in Hong Kong and that it influenced mental health as well as performance. Hong Kong was highly urbanised and this resulted in a competitive business culture which, in turn, led clients to regularly switch veterinary practices. If clients had a bad experience with a vet or at a practice, many took to social media as opposed to launching a formal complaint as that allowed for immediate gratification. In addition to Hong-Kong-specific stressors, veterinarians in Hong Kong also faced the common stressors reported in international literature, ie long working hours, moral dilemmas, compassion fatigue etc.

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Camille hoped that the research provided empirical data about veterinarians' mental health in Hong Kong and would help advocate for the inclusion of cyberbullying measurements in future mental health research. She aims to continue her research in this area.

1A.2 – Veterinary intern & resident wellbeing: we need change, STAT

Makenzie Peterson MSc

Makenzie serves as the Director for Wellbeing at the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC). She works to advance AAVMC's strategic goal of fostering a culture of wellbeing throughout academic veterinary medicine by promoting preventative systems-based initiatives.

Makenzie provides subject-matter expertise on the science and application of evidence-based wellbeing practices, as well as the development and implementation of strategic organisational changes to improve the overall wellbeing of academic communities. She speaks on a variety of wellbeing-related topics, and also currently serves on the Board of Directors for the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative. Born and raised in Alaska, Makenzie graduated from the University of Utah with a Master's degree in Health Promotion & Health Education and will complete her Doctorate of Social Work from the University of Southern California in 2022.

Summary

Makenzie began by introducing the large US-based research study carried out by AAVMC on veterinary residents and interns. She stated that it received a

25% response rate, and participants included people from veterinary colleges as well as those working in corporate and private practice.

Over 60% of respondents said they found it difficult to fit exercise into their schedule and over 70% of respondents said they wouldn't take a sick day.

Makenzie then went on to highlight issues surrounding physical wellbeing from the data collected, as over 60% of respondents said they found it difficult to fit exercise into their schedule and over 70% of respondents said they wouldn't take a sick day. Part of the reason for carrying out this research, Makenzie said, was to dispel common myths surrounding veterinary colleges, which were often deemed as wonderful places with structure and support. However, the data showed that those in veterinary colleges experienced less sleep and fewer days off than those working in corporate or private practice.

Next, Makenzie summarised her mental wellbeing findings, stating that over 80% of respondents had experienced symptoms of depression in the past two weeks. Those who identified as female, single and disabled were more likely to have higher depression scores than those who were male, in a relationship and without a disability. On the PHQ-9 scale (the Patient Health Questionnaire, used to screen for depression), the mean depression score of the general population in the US was little less than 6.4. Data from Makenzie's research

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showed the average depression score of 11.1 for veterinary medicine residents and 12.2 for veterinary medicine interns – both of which amount to moderate depression.

Results also showed that 80.6% of respondents had experienced an episode of depression during their residency/internship, with 66.7% of these stating this had been the first time they had experienced an episode. Makenzie highlighted that it was important to note that this study was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic, when stress levels were high, but that the results were still highly concerning. However, the study would continue to take place every two years, which would allow them to see if any data points shifted.

Makenzie then discussed other key elements affecting the mental wellbeing of interns and residents. This included access to mental wellbeing support, stressful life events, and experience of traumatic events within their programme. She said 30% of respondents screened positive for experiencing a traumatic event within their programme and 29.7% were shown to be having suicidal thoughts/ideation.

Burnout and workload satisfaction were also shown to have had a negative impact. Key issues included feeling emotionally drained from work and fatigued when getting up in the morning, unreasonable time demands, and the programmes not being worth the financial constraints.

Makenzie then revealed that interns had higher levels of learning environment satisfaction in private practice than in veterinary college, had lower neuroticism scores, lower PHQ (depression) scores, and higher workload satisfaction.

Residents working in emergency medicine/critical care had higher burnout scores, lower physical wellbeing scores, lower access to mental health support scores and lower workload satisfaction scores. Furthermore, residents in small and large animal surgery had lower physical wellbeing scores, lower access to mental health support scores, lower learning environment satisfactions scores and lower professionalism of supervision scores. Those specialising in diagnostic imaging/radiology, oncology, and clinical pathology had more desirable scores.

Programmes with higher satisfaction and lower satisfaction both had distinct sets of attributes. Programmes with higher satisfaction had quality mentoring, adequate staffing, and scheduled/respected days off and capped hours, whilst lower satisfaction had abusive communication styles, prioritised money over people, and had no limits to working hours.

Makenzie concluded that environmental factors were a major cause of stress, and that organisation-based intervention was more effective in reducing clinician burnout than intervention targeted at individuals. She stated that leaders must prioritise this issue and provide sustained support and that approaches needed to be tailored to each career phase, speciality and practice setting. She cited four potential areas for the profession to work on:

1. Addressing organisational culture
 2. Promoting and allowing for health and wellbeing
 3. Aligning supportive policies and systems
 4. Enhancing mentorship
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RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 1A

1A.3 – Understanding and supporting veterinary mental health

**Dr Nadine Hamilton BSc (Psych)
PGDipPsych MTrain&Dev EdD MAAPi**

Nadine helps veterinary professionals get on top of stress and conflict to avoid burnout and suicide, and works with practice managers and owners to increase wellbeing, productivity, and retention in the workplace. She has successfully completed doctoral research into veterinary wellbeing and is the founder and CEO of the charity 'Love Your Pet Love Your Vet'. She released her bestselling book *Coping with Stress and Burnout as a Veterinarian* in 2019 and won the Blackmores Mercie Whellan Women+Wellbeing Award in 2020. Dr Hamilton works tirelessly to advocate for veterinary wellbeing and the paradigm shift she believes is needed to facilitate positive change within the profession.

Summary

Nadine began by giving an overview of the current veterinary mental health landscape, including what the research showed and what the veterinary community could do about it.

She highlighted that there was a disproportionate rate of suicide within the profession. In the UK, the suicide rate was up to three times higher than the general population, in Australia up to four times higher, and in the US 3.5 times higher for female veterinarians and 2.1 times higher for male veterinarians.

Studies have shown that there are high attrition rates for veterinary professionals working in Australia in New Zealand. According to a study conducted around two years ago, the attrition rate was at approximately 38%. Australia and New

Zealand were also suffering a vet shortage leaving clinicians unable to find new staff. However, Dr Hamilton highlighted that this problem was not unique to Australia and New Zealand – it was a global problem. She also drew attention to the fact that this wasn't exclusive to vets stating that other veterinary and animal workers were also affected.

“Studies have shown that there are high attrition rates for veterinary professionals working in Australia in New Zealand.”

However, there was yet to be any solid research on those statistics.

Nadine then talked through findings from her own research, looking at why the profession had such a high rate of burnout and suicide. She found there to be five main contributing factors which were performing euthanasia, compassion fatigue, financial issues, unrealistic expectations, and difficult clients.

To finish, she spoke about what could be done to better support veterinary mental health. She cited five main ways of doing this:

- Don't suffer in silence
- Take part in coping and wellbeing programmes (she had created her own programme which she tested as part of her doctoral research which proved to be effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and depression)
- Utilise a workplace Employment Assistance Programme
- Independent counselling
- Reach out for support

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 1B

1B.2 – Integrated mental health awareness in the veterinary undergraduate curriculum

Brad Hill BVetMed MRCVS FHEA

Brad is an equine vet who has over ten years' experience within the profession as a practising clinician having worked in several different workplace settings. At the University of Nottingham he sits within the mental health team, is a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) instructor and an EDI champion. He also has written a blog for BVA sharing his experiences of mental health, stigma and the need to endeavour to make cultural change. He is passionate about preparing graduates for practice, ensuring they feel capable and confident of bringing their whole selves to their chosen careers.

Summary

Brad started by explaining that he was part of the team at the University of Nottingham, that also included Kirstie Pickles, George Bladon and Sabine Töttemeyer, which was responsible for introducing a mental health awareness component into the veterinary curriculum.

He said this component had been designed by the Mental Health Matters team, comprising faculty staff with mental health first-aid qualifications, interests in mental health and/or lived experience, and that the content was based on both student experiences, and the most up-to-date current research and literature.

Feedback was gained from each session of teaching to allow for continual evolution of the content and materials, and it was hoped that the teaching would help lay the foundation for future careers in veterinary mental health, while also underpinning and supporting

the mental health and wellbeing of Nottingham graduates as they entered the world of veterinary work.

He said that mental health awareness was now an embedded module in the curriculum, but had started with his colleague Sabine running Vet Society teaching talks for students outside of the normal work/study day. These sessions were built on with students, and other faculty members then came on board and brought their own knowledge and experiences.

In terms of the structure of the mental health component of the curriculum, Year-One students would receive a peer-facilitated resilience session before being introduced to mental health awareness teaching. He said the programme for Years Three and Four were currently under development but Year Three would have 'Thriving in practice' as a theme, including discussions on protected characteristics and mental health in the workplace, while Year Four would have a mental health flex day. In Year Five students would be taught about resilience in clinical practice.

In terms of the structure of the mental health component of the curriculum, Year-One students would receive a peer-facilitated resilience session before being introduced to mental health awareness teaching.

Focusing first on the Year One resilience session, he said it was about helping students with the transition to university, the realities of veterinary practice and

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importance of having a flexible mindset, sources of advice and support, and thinking about coping strategies that could be used to mitigate stress. For the Year One mental health awareness sessions, he said these looked at the impact of Covid-19 and its associated restrictions, the stigma that surrounds mental health, common challenges, the nature of anxiety and depression, and sources of support. He said the feedback from students had been positive, saying that many felt less isolated as a result and that it put into context their own personal mental health.

For Year-Two students, there was further mental health awareness teaching that built on understanding of common mental health conditions such as eating disorders. The key feedback there was that students found they were given the tools to help others with support.

While the Year Three mental health curriculum was still in development, Brad said that it would focus on protected characteristics and would use some of the BVA's recent work around microaggressions as a basis for small group discussions.

The Year Four 'Mental Flex' day had already been run twice for students before they went on clinical rotations, acknowledging that these rotations can sometimes be a struggle in terms of changing practices and peer groups. The flex day gave Year Five (final year) students an opportunity to come together as a group and talk to a facilitator and their peers and engage in tasks such as creating quality-based learning experiences, examining their own personal values and how they align to their own career goals, and talking about the importance of self-compassion. Feedback from the students was that the day helped make them more resilient and that there was a feeling of solidarity thanks to there being an honest and open conversation with peers.

The Year Five resilience in clinical practice aspect of the curriculum was an afternoon session with two facilitators: one clinical and one non-clinical. During this session students were encouraged to think about their strengths and challenges and how they react to stress. As part of the process they did a personality test, revisited advice around the importance of self-compassion and discussed what tools they had in their 'resilience bucket' to keep themselves at optimum wellbeing in high-pressure environments.

1B.1 – Perception and impact of online mental health awareness teaching in Year One during the pandemic

**Sabine Töttemeyer DipIBiol PhD MA
(Higher Ed) SFHEA**

Sabine joined the School of Veterinary Medical Science, University of Nottingham, in 2006, just before the first vet students arrived, and has been involved in facilitating professional skills and student wellbeing sessions from the beginning. She trained as a MHFA instructor in 2017 and is the MHFA lead for the vet school and a member of the MHFA team. The team plan, evaluate and deliver teaching as well as MHFA events for staff and students. Sabine is the module convener for the integrated module 'Student wellbeing and mental health awareness' and loves to engage students in the topic by co-creating teaching materials and using gamification and peer facilitation.

Summary

Sabine's talk followed Brad Hill's explanation of how mental health awareness had been integrated into the curriculum at Nottingham. Her research was an evaluation of the impact of this teaching

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 1B

in Year One of the course. She said she conducted her research with the aid of two students – Tullia Emmanuel and Charli Twyford – as well as her colleague Georgina Bladon.

First, Sabine discussed some of the barriers to the access of mental health support, using studies from the US and the UK. Identified barriers included stigma (including both self-stigma and external stigma), issues with the services provided, and veterinary medicine culture and identity. Regarding this culture and identity, some of the perceived factors around not seeking mental health support were a culture of presenteeism, an ethos of autonomy and therefore not needing any help, and perfectionism. Other personal factors affecting uptake of mental health support were lack of time and not prioritising mental health over, for example, study or revision time. Sabine said that the challenge, therefore, for their teaching was to address stigma, raising awareness of available services, and raising understanding of mental health conditions.

In terms of the Year One teaching on mental health awareness, Sabine said they decided to make it compulsory to ensure all would attend and engage. They also co-created the materials with the students and made sure it was peer-facilitated to make it a more friendly discussion. She said they aimed to make it supportive and positive, including developing interactive games to make it more engaging and using video clips to help explain common mental health conditions.

Sabine's study looked at the delivery of the teaching to the first two cohorts – delivered in March/April 2020 (just after the announcement of the first lockdown) and in October/November 2020 respectively. Each cohort had six workshops with around 25 students in each and, after each session,

they were given an online feedback questionnaire which had an overall return rate of 73%. These questionnaires asked for students to self-evaluate whether their knowledge and understanding increased after attending the sessions, as well as having some scenario-based questions about how they would support a peer with their mental health, and open questions about what they found most useful about the sessions.

With regard to the understanding of stigma, stress, sources of support and their own wellbeing, all those who undertook the sessions reported increases in understanding. Even students who said they already had high levels of knowledge about stigma, stress and support, reported an increase in their knowledge thanks to the teaching.

Regarding the scenarios, the four that were put to the students via the questionnaire were based around:

- A friend with homesickness,
- A friend who had become withdrawn,
- A friend who had concerns about extra-mural studies (EMS) placements, and
- A friend who had concerns about social isolation and an overwhelming workload.

For each scenario, the students were asked how they would respond to the situation using categories such as providing personal support to their friend or signposting them towards specialised support services. In terms of the open questions about what the students found most useful – the increased knowledge, the interactivity of the exercise and student engagement were highlighted. While engagement was mostly positive, some students did raise issues about technical problems, that the sessions were too long, and having to engage with mental health issues which they found stressful, among other factors.

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In summary, Sabine said that both cohorts reported an improvement across all areas of knowledge after undertaking the training session, with an increase in the number of students who rated their knowledge and understanding as high, especially around available support. In terms of the scenarios, Sabine said the vast majority of suggestions were appropriately supportive of the friend in the situation. She said that all the themes and scenarios within the teaching were perceived as useful by students in both cohorts, and that they particularly enjoyed the opportunity to discuss mental health strategies with their peers as it made them realise they may not be the only ones struggling. Finally, Sabine said that the most important element of the course was that it was co-created with students and that regular updating of the materials and peer facilitation were essential to keep the sessions relevant.

1B.3 – The effects of an exercise programme on the mental wellbeing of veterinary students

Fergus Mitchell BVMedSci (Hons)

Fergus is a Year Four vet student at the University of Nottingham and, as part of his undergraduate degree, researched how regular exercise can have an effect on veterinary students' mental health and wellbeing. Fergus' work was inspired by the results of the VetFit Study and, as a strong advocate for improving mental health within universities and the wider profession, he enjoyed undertaking the research. Away from university life, Fergus loves running, walking, cricket and playing music.

Summary

Fergus introduced the talk by saying it was based on his undergraduate research project, which had looked at different coping strategies to help students with their mental health. Setting out what lay behind his research, Fergus highlighted two facts that he found while conducting his literature review: that 22.2% of recent new veterinary graduates had been affected by mental ill-health, and that poor work-life balance was deemed acceptable by veterinary students.

22.2% of recent new veterinary graduates had been affected by mental ill-health, and that poor work-life balance was deemed acceptable by veterinary students.

Before moving on to the details of his study, Fergus first highlighted why it was commonly accepted that exercise was good for mental health, including the reduction of risk of stress, anxiety and depression through the release of cortisol; that exercise boosts moods and leads to better self-esteem; that it allows us to connect with people; and, that it leads to better sleep. He added that the NHS recommends that adults should do at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity, or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity, every week.

In terms of his study, he said its overall aim was to investigate the effects of an eight-week exercise programme on the mental wellbeing of first-year, female veterinary students at the University of Nottingham. The 12 students who participated in the research were self-perceived 'non-exercisers'

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and they each took part in three sessions per week – a high intensity interval training (HIIT) session, an introduction to sport session and a stretching session.

Participants in the programme were given three questionnaires to fill in – one at the start of the programme, one halfway through and the other after the programme finished. These questionnaires asked 14 questions based on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWEBS) for which participants were asked to rate their wellbeing. They were also given free-text questions written by Fergus and his supervisor, which were assessed using the Likert Scale.

For the WEMWEBS results, five students demonstrated, over the course of the three questionnaires, an unequivocally meaningful positive change to their wellbeing thanks to the exercise programme, while two demonstrated a possibly meaningful positive change to their wellbeing; three demonstrated no meaningful change to their wellbeing and one demonstrated a possibly meaningful negative change to their wellbeing. One participant did not fill out the final questionnaire.

The Likert Scale survey found that participants enjoyed spending time with each other throughout the programme and found it an enjoyable process. They also praised the quality of the high intensity interval training and introduction to sport sessions.

In terms of the analysis of the research project, Fergus said that four overarching themes came out of it: awareness of mental wellbeing; sense of community; appreciation of the importance of exercise; and, suggestions for potential improvements. Each of these overarching themes had a number of additional sub-themes.

In conclusion, Fergus said that the quantitative and qualitative data proved that exercise programmes have a positive impact on mental wellbeing; that community was important, as all the participants enjoyed each other's company and forged friendships; that the participants' expectations were exceeded; and that veterinary students still struggle with their mental health and wellbeing.

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 1C

1C1 – Do registered veterinary nurses feel stigmatised by acknowledging stress and accessing support?

Anna Garrity BSc (Hons) VN RVN

Anna is currently Head Veterinary Nurse (HVN) at Medivet, Orrell Park. She studied at Myerscough School of Veterinary Nursing and qualified in 2017 with an FdSc Veterinary Nursing and proceeded to top up to her Bachelor of Science Honours. Since leaving university, she has gained experience in small animal practice before accepting her HVN role. She has held the position of Wellbeing Champion since 2019 and has a strong passion for this area since her dissertation research. She is planning on carrying out further study for her Master's degree and aims to further improve wellbeing and mental health within the veterinary sector.

Summary

Anna opened by telling delegates that she conducted this research as part of her BSc and that it was completed a few years ago, in 2018. She conducted the research due to her pre-existing interest in mental health stemming from the professional and personal lives of members of her family. The research was based around listening to perceptions and experiences of veterinary nurses and using that to understand how to better support the RVN community. She said the research had a strong inter-professional component as much of the pre-existing research that fed into her own project was around human medical nurses.

The background to her research was the increasing demands and pressures placed on the RVN community which, in turn, needed the provision of relevant and useful support for veterinary staff. She said such support needed to be in place and that veterinary

managers also needed to give consideration to staff morale and job satisfaction. Anna said the overall rationale for her research was that, while everyone was aware of the stressors affecting all members of the veterinary team, there were relatively few specific statistics relating to veterinary nurses as compared to veterinary surgeons. She added that from her research about human medical nursing, Registered General Nurses (RGNs) had been stigmatised for accessing services, despite the fact that they would often be responsible for recommending such services to their patients and others.

The aim of the research was to attempt to establish an overview of the attitudes of RVNs towards seeking help for mental ill-health as well as the available sources of help.

Anna said the aim of the research was to attempt to establish an overview of the attitudes of RVNs towards seeking help for mental ill-health as well as the available sources of help. The research used a quantitative questionnaire to provide effective and useful data on the topic and was accessible via social media platforms commonly used by veterinary nurses. The questionnaire focused on perceptions of stress, how well colleagues understood mental ill-health, the accessibility of help and support, and the perceptions of management towards seeking support.

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There were 138 respondents to the survey and some of the key findings were that:

- Nearly 90% of the RVNs found the workplace stressful;
- Over 50% believed that veterinary nurses should not just have to cope with stress as a matter of course;
- That well over half of veterinary nurses were happy in their workplace;
- That around 20% of veterinary nurses thought their colleagues would think less of them if they sought support for stress; and
- Almost 35% said their workplace would give the necessary support if asked.

Anna said that while the study was limited by a relatively small sample size, there were conclusions to be drawn including the fact that veterinary nurses were generally happy with their work and that there was a near-even split on whether they thought management would be supportive or not regarding them seeking help for stress.

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 2A

2A.1 – The relationship between patient safety culture and staff burnout: conundrum or cure?

Mark Turner BVSc MRes MRCVS

Mark graduated from Liverpool Veterinary School in 1996 and entered small animal practice in London, where he still lives. After several first-opinion posts and a spell running a practice, he became interested in patient safety and quality improvement (QI). In 2017, he graduated from the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) with a Research Master's degree in patient safety culture, and currently splits his time between clinical work and writing on the subjects of patient safety and QI. He is also interested in the relationship between veterinary patient safety culture and staff engagement, wellbeing and productivity.

Summary

Mark began by introducing himself and his research into patient safety culture at the RVC. He said he was also interested in the possible links this had with burnout, so decided to explore both topics in his talk.

To introduce the topics and the relationship between them, Mark began with an anecdote about a new graduate whose first unsupervised operation went horribly wrong and how this left the graduate feeling worried, embarrassed and ashamed. Mark explained that his session would cover the relationship between the way that accidents were dealt with in practice, and the feelings of vets and vet nurses surrounding these types of events.

He introduced burnout and defined it in three dimensions:

- Feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion;
- Increased mental distance from one's job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one's job; and,
- A sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.

He said that statistics showed that burnout was particularly prevalent in the veterinary profession.

Mark then explained the Job-Demands-Resources model, which could be used to explain burnout in any industry. He explained how job demands and job resources balance each other out and that if there was a mismatch between the demands and resources available to the worker, then the worker was much more likely to slide into burnout.

Mark then spoke about Patient Safety Culture, which he defined as 'A group of shared beliefs, competencies (knowledge-based practices) and behaviours that support and promote patient safety at work.' He then defined the key elements of Patient Safety Culture including as having:

- An understanding of the high-risk nature of medical and surgical care;
- Routine reporting of incidents and routine auditing of these incidents and staff involvement in decision-making;
- Open communication;
- Supportive team leadership;
- Non-punitive responses to accidents and mistakes;
- Teamwork, including defining clear roles; and,
- Appropriate workloads.

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He then presented his research into Patient Safety Culture in the veterinary profession, which he carried out by using an online modified medical safety questionnaire. The survey was completed by 335 participants and a range of veterinary professionals from different backgrounds.

Results showed that two-thirds of non-managerial participants agreed that they sometimes had to work in crisis mode, and only 59% of staff felt they would 'always' or 'most of the time' freely speak up if they saw something that might negatively impact patient care. Some 48% said they 'always' or 'most of the time' discussed ways to prevent errors from reoccurring, whilst 33% agreed that if a mistake occurred, it felt like the person involved was being investigated, not the event.

Results showed that two-thirds of non-managerial participants agreed that they sometimes had to work in crisis mode

This displayed the presence of high workload and work pressure as well as decision-making and levels of supervisor support, all of which linked back to the Job-Demand-Resources model. Mark concluded that patient safety culture in the veterinary profession was composed of a number of key behaviours that mirrored the Job-Demand-Resources model of burnout, and that the current state of veterinary patient safety culture may be contributing to burnout, and lower levels of engagement in vets and vet nurses. He said that if the profession could drive up the level of safety culture than it could improve job satisfaction and reduce levels of burnout.

2A.2 – Mindset, resilience and perception of/reaction to workplace challenge in RVNs

**Charlotte Bullard (Hons) PGDip VetEd
FHEA EEBW**

Charlotte originally began her career in equine science before finding her niche in education. Initially programme managing for an equine training provider in Suffolk, where she oversaw and taught equine therapy and veterinary nursing students, Charlotte later joined the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) as Education Manager in 2019. She is due to complete her MSc in Veterinary Education from the Royal Veterinary College in autumn 2021, where she completed research in mindset and resilience in RVNs. Charlotte is particularly interested in collaborative working within VN education, alongside the relationships between training, career resilience and retention within the VN profession.

Summary

Charlotte began with the context for her research, stating that whilst workplace stressors within the veterinary workplace and within RVNs were well reported, little was known about the responses that these stressors or challenges elicit in RVNs.

She said the work of RVNs, could be split up into intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. She said veterinary nursing was an intrinsically motivating career in that it comprises meaningful work, but extrinsic motivators, such as working conditions and pay, can often leave veterinary nurses feeling out of control and challenged.

She then explored the veterinary nursing mindset and how this related to facing challenges in the workplace.

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 2A

According to existing research carried out on veterinary students, the presence of a growth mindset had beneficial effects on psychological wellbeing, stress, anxiety and fear of failure. However, little was known about this in RVNs, whose approaches to learning in the workplace were likely to differ.

Charlotte then defined resilience which, in the context of her study, she defined as having the ability to respond to stress in a healthy way at 'minimal psychological and physical cost'. She stated that the aim of her project was to achieve an overview of what a growth mindset and high resilience looks like in practice for RVNs.

The aim of her project was to achieve an overview of what a growth mindset and high resilience looks like in practice for RVNs.

To collect her data, Charlotte disseminated a questionnaire and received 52 responses. The average mindset score obtained from the data revealed a general growth mindset amongst respondents, whilst the average resilience score came back as average (low end of average). Significant positive correlations were found between both mindset scoring and career satisfaction, and between resilience scoring and career satisfaction. Those identified as having a growth mindset were also shown to perceive a greater proportion of motivating events in the workplace.

However, a significant number of respondents who identified themselves as having a growth mindset, didn't actually demonstrate any key growth mindset traits in their responses. Charlotte

noted this could be due to a 'false growth mindset' meaning that individuals may claim to, or genuinely believe, that they have a growth mindset because they feel they are supposed to, but do not reflect the defining characteristics in their actions or behaviours.

Similar results were gained when it came to resilience, which Charlotte said could be explained by espoused theory (factors individuals think drive their behaviours) vs theory-in-use (factors which actually drive behaviours, which often involve a lesser degree of awareness). For example, a veterinary nurse might think they are resilient but will then put the needs of their colleague above their own, which may top them from being able to employ resilience strategies in an effective manner. This could be addressed through the critical analysis framework and reflective practice.

Charlotte concluded by stating that results found positive outcomes associated with growth mindset and resilience in RVNs and that this supported their inclusion in a professional curriculum, even though no relationship was found between the two.

2A.3 – Explanatory research on satisfaction in Dutch veterinary practices

Kris van den Bogaard MSc

Kris is a Marketing Manager for MSD Animal Health in the Netherlands and obtained his Master's degree in management at the Open University in the Netherlands (OUNL). With his Master's thesis on the relationship between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction in Dutch veterinary practices, Kris opened a new value-added service on satisfaction provided by MSD Animal Health.

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 2A

Summary

Kris first introduced his Master's thesis '*Do Happy Employees Make Happy Customers?*' and began by explaining the concept behind his research.

Relationship marketing was closely linked to satisfaction and had been investigated many times in other industries but never in the veterinary sector. The aim of Kris' research was to demonstrate this connection for veterinary clinics with a specific focus on Dutch veterinary practices and their customers. His three main variables were employee satisfaction, customer satisfaction, and communication type.

He then moved onto the literature review. Kris gave some definitions of employee satisfaction, which broadly came down to evaluating the general quality and satisfaction that people gain from their current jobs. Satisfied and motivated employees were likely to stay employed for longer and generally resulted in more satisfied customers (who were therefore willing to buy more).

Next, he explained his research model used to measure employee satisfaction (ES) and customer satisfaction (CS). To measure ES, Kris carried out a survey within vet practices that measured five different variables: salary, opportunity for growth, relationship with co-workers, managerial team, training and education. The survey also included an overall satisfaction rating. To measure CS, Kris conducted a survey amongst veterinary practice clients/animal-owners which included three constructs to measure customer expectation, perceived value, and perceived quality. This survey also included questions about overall satisfaction and how pet owners viewed employee satisfaction in vet practice. Kris added communication type as a moderating effect into the overall research model to see if this also impacted employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction.

The survey was sent out to 1,000 Dutch companion animal veterinary clinics who each received an employee satisfaction survey to share with their employees, and a customer satisfaction survey to send to their clients.

Some 84 clinics registered to take part, of which 15 did so. Kris received a sufficient amount of pet owner feedback but didn't get enough responses from employees to use as valid data. Therefore, to help fill out the model, he used the question in the pet owner survey on how they perceived the employee satisfaction of those working at the clinic.

To conclude, Kris explained that through his model he had proven that employee satisfaction had a positive influence on customer satisfaction, and that the positive relationship between employee satisfaction and customer satisfaction was strengthened most by face-to-face communication and least by receiving a letter or card.

He said that happy employees did make happy customers in vet clinics in the Netherlands and overall satisfaction was high. Kris ended with some recommendations for vet clinics, explaining that the way companies communicate was changing and that understanding which kind of communication customers prefer was key – this could be done through research and annual employee and customer satisfaction surveys. He ended the presentation by stating that the best way to increase customer satisfaction was first to invest in employee satisfaction.

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 2B

2B.1 – Students’ perceptions of using two mental health apps during the Covid-19 pandemic

Kirstie Pickles BVMS MSc PGCert (Couns Skills) PhD CertEM (IntMed) DipECEIM MRCVS

Kirstie joined the University of Nottingham in September 2020 as a Clinical Assistant Professor in Equine Medicine. She graduated from the University of Glasgow in 1996, completed a residency and PhD at the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh and became a diplomate of the European College of Equine Internal Medicine in 2009. She has worked in both clinical practice and academia in the UK, USA and New Zealand and is passionate about teaching, equine medicine, and neurodiversity and wellbeing in the veterinary profession.

Summary

Kirstie explained this was a pilot study set up shortly after she joined the University of Nottingham in September 2020 when the country was already in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. She said that there was already clear evidence from studies that levels of depression, anxiety and stress had increased in the first four-to-six weeks of lockdown and that this had disproportionately affected those aged 18-to-24. Because of this, the university decided that an internet-based intervention such as a smartphone app may help students get around barriers to seeking help – including lack of time and stigma – while supporting them during remote learning.

The study received ethical approval from the University of Nottingham and then a call to participate in the study was put across to veterinary students across all year groups in October 2020. Anybody who replied to say they were interested in the study was given a virtual briefing and shown how the apps would work.

If they were still interested, they would then give their informed consent while also being made aware of all other available support networks.

The apps chosen for the study were a meditation-based app called Smiling Mind and a cognitive behavioural therapy-based app called Mindshift, which also allowed for mood tracking. Participating students were randomly allocated to one of these apps for a period of eight weeks and then would swap over to the other app for a further eight weeks.

In the Smiling Mind app, students were asked to complete an introduction to mindfulness module and then access the app as much or as little as they wanted, while sharing their data usage, for example, time spent meditating, with the researchers for the purposes of the study. With Mindshift, participating students were asked to rate their current levels of various different feelings including, for example, stress or anxiety, while giving specifics about why they felt this way. Students were asked to log mood on at least a daily basis to allow for real-time tracking of thoughts and feelings.

During the study, the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWEBS) was used to measure wellbeing. Participating students were asked to provide their thoughts and feelings anonymously at the start of the study, midway and then at the end of the study. Surveys gauging their thoughts on the apps were also distributed to participating students.

Kirstie said that 28 students participated in the study with 20 of those completing all 16 weeks of the study, with 17 of those returning a full WEMWEBS score. For the majority of participants, there was a clear personal preference for one app over the other, with only four of the participants remaining fully engaged with both of the apps.

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Positive comments about the Smiling Mind app were that students liked the meditation exercises and found them calming and an aid to sleep. Positive comments about Mindshift was that it was quick to use and allowed them to better reflect on their current mood.

Negative feedback voiced by participating students about Smiling Mind was that it was time-consuming and there was a lack of engagement with the meditation exercises. For Mindshift, negative feedback included that it was complicated, and actually made some students feel more anxious.

When asked what they gained from using the apps, 10 of the 17 students who completed the study said the apps had improved their wellbeing, three said they had no effect, three said they did not improve wellbeing and one said they negatively impacted their wellbeing. Looking at the free text answers, eight of the participants said the apps improved their self-awareness, three said they led them to become more mindful, and two said they improved their sleep.

The final part of the study was a survey sent to participants 12 months on from completing the study, to see who was still using either of the apps. Sixteen participating students completed this follow-up survey and, of those, two were still using the Smiling Mind meditation app, none were using the Mindshift app, while five had shifted towards using another wellbeing-based app called Headspace.

To conclude, Kirstie said that there were some limitations to the study, including a small sample size, the overwhelming impact of Covid-19 and the associated restrictions, and the sheer amount of data generated which was difficult to track. She said it was clear there was no one-size-fits all approach

to using apps for wellbeing, and that people may need to try several different ones until they find something that suits them best. She also said there could now be further focus group discussions to better understand what students felt about the apps.

2B.2 – Using a co-created interactive game to engage students with mental health awareness

Sabine Töttemeyer DipIBiol PhD MA
(Higher Ed) SFHEA

Georgina Bladon BVSc PGCert (VetEd)
PGCHE MRCVS SFHEA

Sabine Töttemeyer's full biography can be found on Page 15 of this report.

After qualifying from the University of Liverpool in 2016 as a vet, Georgina Bladon worked in a small animal first-opinion practice for two years. She discovered her love of teaching when helping vet students and owners in practice, and so undertook a Postgraduate Certificate in Veterinary Education at the University of Nottingham. Georgina now works as a teaching associate at the University, and has a particular interest in supporting student wellbeing and preparing students for potential challenges they may face in clinical work.

Summary

Georgina led this talk which also related to the mental health awareness training that had been integrated into the University of Nottingham's veterinary curriculum, as discussed in two previous talks during the morning sessions (see pages 14 and 15).

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The specific focus of her talk however was on the design of a board game designed to help share the importance of mental health awareness with the students. In designing the game, they started with an initial planning stage to come up with what they wanted it to look like, based on a few starting principles: that it would be a group activity, that it would be a physical board game with physical counters, and that it would have different scenarios to discuss, including potential crisis scenarios. However, their initial vision had to change due to the pandemic so that everything could be delivered online.

In order to adapt to the circumstances of the pandemic, they used an open-source online platform to create the scenarios and used peer facilitators to share the game over video-networking platforms with their small group. When they decided on how to design the content of the game, the framework was set to follow the progression and development of a veterinary student over a period of time. In order to make this realistic, they had students to help them trial the game and come up with realistic scenarios and discussion points.

As to why they used student co-creators, Georgina said the University was lucky to have a pool of 21 students across the year groups who were interested in mental health and peer-coaching, and they were used to provide the feedback on what would and wouldn't be successful and relevant. The student peer-facilitation process itself involved students who were further on in their course, helping to guide small groups of five-to-six first-year students through the game. This factor was important, as the peer facilitators were seen as more relatable and approachable than faculty members.

In terms of the game content, it was designed to follow a fictitious student through their first year in

vet school. The students in the group would pick up a scenario for the fictional student in the game that would either add or remove stress in the character's 'stress bucket'. These scenarios also served as discussion points for the group to talk about how they might help or intervene if a friend encountered one of the stressful situations. Sometimes the students would also be asked to decide on an outcome from the scenario.

“Students taking part in the game were asked to think about what would be in their ‘wellbeing toolbox’ to help deal with the scenarios encountered”

Students taking part in the game were asked to think about what would be in their 'wellbeing toolbox' to help deal with the scenarios encountered – including both short-term measures, for example, taking a dog for a walk, talking to a friend, to make them feel better, and long-term strategies, for example, exercise, new sleep routine, improved diet, to improve their wellbeing.

There was positive feedback about the game with 65 out of 88 of the initial comments from students saying they were enjoying the game. Reasons cited for this included that it led to natural conversations about wellbeing, made them aware of support services, felt relevant to them and their lives, and helped to reduce stigma. Negative or challenging comments from some students were that it was too long, would be better delivered face-to-face, and that it was presenting a simplistic or unrealistic view on student mental health and wellbeing. The peer

RESEARCH TALKS SESSION 2B

facilitators fed back that, overall, it was a rewarding experience for them, although levels of discussion could vary from group-to-group.

In terms of what the university learned, Georgina said the discussion opportunities that arose from the scenarios were invaluable. They were now planning to continue to play the physical game in small groups, and were looking at adapting it for other courses and universities.

2B.3 – Emotional intelligence and its relationship with work engagement amongst veterinary surgeons in UK veterinary practice

Sharon Cooksey BVSc MBA MRCVS

Sharon began working as a houseman at the Royal Veterinary College Equine and Large Animal unit and then moved into mainly equine practice for 16 years. In the late 2000s, a move into the pharmaceutical industry brought experience in technical, sales and marketing management roles and led to a desire to understand more about particularly the human component of businesses. In December 2020, she gained an MBA distinction from the University of Liverpool and was awarded student of the year. In 2021 she began a PhD to discover a robust measure for, and the drivers of, wellbeing (engagement) in UK-practising vets.

Summary

Sharon started her talk by explaining the three fundamental principles behind emotional intelligence (EI):

- Emotions play an important role in daily life;
- People may vary in their ability to perceive, understand, use and manage emotions; and,
- These variances may affect individual adaptation in a variety of different contexts, including the workplace.

She added that EI was distinct from cognitive intelligence, as it encompassed both our personalities and how we behave, and could also be termed ‘emotional self-efficacy’. She said EI was created and continually remodelled by how we see ourselves.

She said that one of EI’s key theoreticians, Professor K V Petrides, argued that EI can be advantageous in some situations and roles but not others, and that there was a ‘dark side’ to individuals with high EI as it could lead to greater mood deterioration in some circumstances and could also sometimes be associated with narcissistic tendencies.

She explained that, though it’s not a widely accepted interpretation of EI, it has been seen by some as a ‘personal resource’ like self-esteem. She said this was because EI was related to how well we can control our own environment and the resources at our disposal to buffer against negative emotions around stress and burnout, while boosting the desirable impact of challenging job demands on our motivation.

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In terms of her research in measuring an individual's EI, Sharon said that this was done via a questionnaire that broke down EI into four quantifiable factors, which were further broken down into facets. These were:

- Wellbeing: self-esteem, trait-happiness and trait-optimism
- Sociability: social-awareness, assertiveness and emotion management
- Self-control: stress management, emotion and impulse control
- Emotionality: emotion perception, emotion expression, relationships and trait-empathy

As part of her research, Sharon also measured work engagement amongst participants, defined as 'the mental state where employees feel free with physical energy (vigour), are enthusiastic about the content of their work and the things they do (dedication), and are so immersed in their work activity that time seems to fly (absorption).' In order to measure work engagement, study participants were asked to complete The Utrecht Work Engagement Scale for Students (UWES-9S).

For her study, which was conducted via anonymous questionnaire in April 2021, Sharon had a total of 424 participants, of whom 348 gave full responses that qualified for the study results. The participants were drawn from across the veterinary sector and different age groups, and also included non-UK graduates (17%). In analysing the results, the first aspect Sharon looked at was the correlation between the EI scores and work engagement scores amongst participants. The strongest correlation was between the well-being factor within EI and the overall level of work engagement.

She then looked at whether individual EI trait factors were a good indicator of positive work engagement scores. Sharon found that on a simple analysis all high

levels amongst all EI factors were positively correlated with high work engagement scores. However, a more detailed analysis confirmed that, within the EI factors, high well-being was the most correlative with high work engagement. She said that this may indicate that there was a particular EI profile was based around high wellbeing that was particularly well suited to the veterinary practice setting. As for other factors, Sharon found there was no statistically significant difference in the age of participants as regards EI and work engagement scores, noting that this bucked the trend amongst the general population, where EI tends to increase with age.

Sharon then considered whether her research demonstrated that EI could aid in improving mental health amongst veterinary surgeons and left delegates with some thoughts to consider. These included that individuals with EI may be more willing to seek help with mental ill-health such as depression and anxiety, and the fact that high EI tended to be associated with personality traits such as confidence, cheerfulness and life satisfaction.

STRATEGY AND CLOSE

Mind Matters Initiative 2022 to 2027 Strategy and Close

For the final part of the day, Professor Susan Dawson, Chair of the Mind Matters Taskforce, gave an update to delegates on the upcoming five-year strategy for the project, explaining that, since the project's launch in 2015, it had grown significantly in scope and reach, and that the initiative's strategy and areas of focus needed to change accordingly.

Susan said the strategy, which will be published alongside an evaluation of the impact of the first five years of MMI, will serve to:

- Celebrate and promote the work of MMI;
- Support continued engagement with key stakeholders;
- Clarify MMI's key areas of focus for the next five years; and,
- Identify and communicate key KPIs which will serve as a measure for success and assist with future evaluation

Susan then went on to outline the key areas of strategic focus for the next five years, noting that Covid-19 and the post-pandemic recovery was a theme cutting across all of MMI's work, as demonstrated by the introduction of virtual/hybrid events.

Research

Susan said the first key area of strategic focus was research, noting that the volume of research into veterinary mental health and wellbeing had significantly grown since MMI's launch, and that therefore the initiative needed to play a role in learning from, engaging with, and promoting this research in order to achieve better mental health outcomes for the professions.

The Sarah Brown Mental Health Grants and the SVN Wellbeing Survey were two key current activities that came under this focus and that, in the future, MMI was planning to further develop its resources to include key pieces of research relevant to the initiative's work and aims. There were also plans to increase the support available to researchers and bring this within the scope of MMI's core activities.

Students

For the next strategic priority, Susan reiterated that MMI is for the entire veterinary community and that veterinary and veterinary nursing students, as the future of the professions, were an area that the initiative wanted to prioritise in terms of support. This was particularly the case because Covid-19 had made learning much more challenging and left many students feeling isolated.

She said that recent student-focused events and projects such as VetKind, the Student Veterinary Nursing Wellbeing Survey, and the discussion forums for both veterinary and veterinary students would be used to inform future work.

Other student-focus projects included a student-specific version of the MMI Kite App, which was due to be released in 2022.

She added that, in delivering on this strategic aim, MMI would continue to work closely with the Association of Veterinary Students on the MMI Taskforce and was also now welcoming Macaulay Gattenby, who was joining the Taskforce as a British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) Student Representative.

STRATEGY AND CLOSE

The veterinary nursing profession

The next area of strategic focus was the veterinary nursing profession. She said that some of the initiative's biggest supporters have been veterinary nurses who had been vital in helping to get messages out to the professions about mental health and wellbeing. For example, more than 50% of those who have attended MMI training sessions and webinars were VNs.

However, she added that there was sometimes an impression that MMI was 'just for vets' and that it was therefore not enough to say nurses were included in the project, but that they needed to feel like they belonged to it, hence the initiative would be actively seeking their views and input.

This was why the mental health and wellbeing of nurses and student nurses was being made a priority area of strategic focus, and the outcomes of the SVN Wellbeing Survey and Discussion Forum would be key in helping to inform future work with RVNs and SVNs.

Susan told delegates that MMI would be addressing the issues that affected VNs either specifically or disproportionately such as time for self-care, financial struggles, and juggling caring responsibilities with work and study.

Referencing the survey, she said its results had highlighted incivility and bullying within the professions as a serious problem and that, as a result, MMI and BVNA had worked together to take a stand against bullying as part of Anti-bullying Week in November 2021, including with a dedicated webinar. She added that MMI would continue working with BVNA on tackling bullying and incivility.

Equality, diversity, inclusion and civility

In talking about this strategic priority, Susan said that research demonstrates how inequality and discrimination contributes to mental ill-health and that, likewise, people with mental ill-health are frequently subject to discrimination. She said that, with equality, diversity and inclusion being so inextricably linked with mental health, it was important for MMI to make it an explicit priority and to vocally champion these issues.

Veterinary leaders were often the people who others go to for advice and who are expected to have all the answers, but that they also needed sources of support if they themselves were struggling.

Earlier this year MMI had announced its new 'Championing Equality' training course, in collaboration with the British Veterinary Ethnicity & Diversity Society (BVEDS), the British Veterinary Chronic Illness Society (BVCIS), Vetlife, and the British Veterinary LGBTQ+ Society. She said this course would run throughout 2022 with each of the above groups contributing to the development and delivery of the course, including providing case studies on how inequality, stigma and discrimination can impact mental health. MMI would also continue to work closely with the RCVS Diversity & Inclusion Group to make progress in this area.

STRATEGY AND CLOSE

Leadership

The next strategic priority Susan spoke about was leadership, focusing on making sure veterinary leaders were equipped with the tools to manage conversations around the mental health and wellbeing of their staff, as well as being able to look after their own mental health and wellbeing.

She said that veterinary leaders were often the people who others go to for advice and who are expected to have all the answers, but that they also needed sources of support if they themselves were struggling. She added that this was a trend that became particularly apparent throughout the pandemic as leaders were the ones who had had to stay strong for the rest of the team.

Earlier in 2021, Susan said MMI had held an online 'Campfire Chat' on leadership in the pandemic, and the challenges which came with it, to give leaders the chance to connect and discuss the best ways to deal with certain situations.

Widening the conversation: beyond mental health awareness

For this strategic priority, Susan said that MMI and other organisations had done important work in encouraging open conversations around mental health and wellbeing. Raising awareness had been a key priority of the initiative from its very outset and, although work remains to be done, there had been great success in this area, for example, mental health and wellbeing now featured prominently as a discussion topic at most veterinary congresses.

However, she said that in order to move the conversation on, MMI was now proposing a move beyond a focus on mental 'health' and wellbeing and instead looking at a more open discussion of mental *illness*, including severe mental illness. She

said this would ensure that the initiative does not alienate those experiencing these conditions and is relevant to them and their lives.

She added that, as part of this priority, MMI would aim to lead the way with conversations about neurodiversity, including supporting neurodiverse individuals within the veterinary workforce.

Conclusion

In her conclusion, Susan thanked all those who attended the Symposium, saying that everyone there clearly cared deeply about the mental health and wellbeing of the veterinary professions and had the great privilege of hearing fascinating insights into the current research going on the field.

She said Mind Matters would continue to work with different organisations from across the veterinary industry both in the UK and beyond to keep mental health at the forefront of people's minds in order to break down stigma and move towards a more positive future.

In her final remark she said that a mentally healthy veterinary workforce was important not only for the industry, but for the animals the veterinary professions cared for.

Susan said everyone wanted the best for the industry and those who work so tirelessly to keep it going. If their mental health is not adequately addressed, it's not just those people who will suffer, but the animals that rely on the veterinary professions to keep them safe and well.



mind matters

The Mind Matters Initiative is run by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

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