

# MMI RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

THE SECOND MIND MATTERS  
INITIATIVE RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

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**VETERINARY MENTAL HEALTH:  
THE EVIDENCE BASE**

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REPORT

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24 SEPTEMBER 2019  
CHURCH HOUSE, WESTMINSTER



# MMI RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

## INTRODUCTION

### Dear colleague

The second Mind Matters Research Symposium, held in the picturesque Church House in Westminster, focused on delving into the evidence base informing and underpinning mental health support in the veterinary professions.

The event was a fantastic opportunity to bring together a wide variety of experts and individuals invested in supporting positive mental health outcomes for veterinary professionals. It was great to hear from speakers from across both the veterinary and other professions, and from around the globe. With speakers from the UK, USA, Canada and the Netherlands, the conversations had recognised that the issues we face in this area are truly global. It was a good reminder that by collaborating and working together we stand the best chance of bringing about positive change within both the domestic and international veterinary community.

This report, produced by the Mind Matters Initiative, is just a short summary of the presentations given and I hope that it gets across some of the key issues discussed on the day.

We know that the veterinary professions experience higher than average rates of depression and suicide, with many complex factors contributing to the prevalence of mental ill-health. During the course of the Symposium it was encouraging to see a range of studies that seek to further pinpoint factors contributing to mental ill-health, in addition to research considering ways in which to minimise these and contribute to positive shifts in wellbeing.

As incoming Chair of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Mind Matters Initiative at the time of the event, I am incredibly pleased with how the day went. It was inspiring to hear from and be involved in conversations with passionate people who are striving to make a positive difference with regards to improving mental health and wellbeing. It was particularly great to discuss exciting research that will support us in developing systems and interventions that have the potential to shape the future of mental health and wellbeing for those in the veterinary team.

Although it is early days and much work still needs to be done to tackle all of the challenges confronting the veterinary professions with regards to mental health, this Symposium was a heartening reminder that we are taking and will continue to take strides towards a brighter future.

I'd like to thank all of the presenters for their thought-provoking and future-focused talks – the day could not have been possible without your contributions. I would also like to thank all of the delegates for the important role you played on the day, contributing to the discussions that could very well shape the future of mental health support in the veterinary professions.

Finally, many thanks to Rosie Allister for coordinating an exciting programme for the day and to the Mind Matters Team, especially Lizzie Lockett and Lisa Quigley, for organising what was an important and stimulating event.

Best wishes



**Professor Susan Dawson**  
**Chair, RCVS Mind Matters Initiative**



This Symposium was a heartening reminder that we are taking and will continue to take strides towards a brighter future.





# PROGRAMME

24th September 2019 | Church House, London

## Veterinary mental health: the evidence base

0930-1000	Registration
1000-1010	Welcome: Lizzie Lockett
1010-1050	Plenary 1: Stuart Reid The Mind Matters Initiative - what we've achieved so far Professor Stuart Reid
1050-1110	Coffee and assemble for research sessions

STREAM A HOARE MEMORIAL HALL	
1110-1210	Research sessions
1110-1130	Government Veterinarians Wellbeing - A Veterinary Profession Wellbeing Case Study Dr Rebeca Garcia Pinillos
1130-1150	Positive and negative mental health impacts of experiences associated with livestock veterinary practice Dr Kate Stephen
1150-1210	Aspects of work influence new graduate mental health: opportunities for intervention Dr Rosie Allister
1210-1220	Assemble for plenary
1220-1300	Plenary 2: The impact of veterinarian suicide on colleagues Dr Alexandra Pitman

STREAM B BISHOP PARTRIDGE HALL	
1110-1210	Research sessions
1110-1130	2018 WSAVA Mental Health Survey results. How the VetsinMind app will support the identified issues Dr Nienke Endenburg
1130-1150	Improving Resilience in Veterinary Students: A Final-Year Resilience Rotation Dr Colleen Best
1150-1210	Evaluation of Workplace Wellbeing and Culture Across the Veterinary Profession through Supported Practice Surveys Carolyne Crowe

1300-1400	Lunch and poster viewing - Posters available to view during lunch:  Small Animal Practice Veterinary Surgeons' Quit Intentions: A Qualitative Investigation Jo Kelly - Author available at poster 1330-1345 for questions
1400-1440	Should clinicians always do what they can? - utilising the Animal Welfare Assessment Grid as a decision-making tool to improve mental health. Rachel Malkani and Professor Sarah Wolfensohn - Authors available at poster 1330-1345 for questions
1440-1500	Plenary 3: Sustaining resilience at work - what does the evidence tell us works? Professor Neil Greenberg
1500-1600	Refreshments
1500-1600	STREAM A HOARE MEMORIAL HALL
1500-1520	Research sessions:  Suicides and Deaths of Undetermined Intent Among Veterinary Professionals, National Violent Death Reporting System, 2003-2014 Dr Randall Nett
1520-1540	Key Findings of the MSD Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study John Volk
1540-1600	Mental Health of Veterinarians in Canada Dr Colleen Best
1500-1600	STREAM B BISHOP PARTRIDGE HALL
1500-1520	Research sessions  Burnout in veterinarians; a critical review of the prevalence, contributory factors and interventions Dr Joanna Dyer
1520-1540	The relationship between psychosocial work environment and mental health in veterinary practitioners: a scoping review Dr Linda Hoinville
1540-1600	How unease and stress can become confidence and harmony through non-technical competencies continuing professional development Dr Tierney Kinnison, Professor Stephen May
1600	Assemble for final session
1600-1630	Closing session: Susan Dawson

# PLENARY SPEAKERS

## The Mind Matters Initiative – what we've achieved so far

**Professor Stuart Reid and Lizzie Lockett**



Professor Stuart Reid



Lizzie Lockett

**Professor Stuart Reid, Principal, Royal Veterinary College; outgoing Chair of the Mind Matters Initiative**  
 Professor Stuart Reid is Principal of the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), University of London and is an RCVS recognised specialist in veterinary epidemiology and in veterinary public health by the European Board of Veterinary Specialists. He is an RCVS Fellow, in addition to being a Fellow of the Royal Society of Biology and the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

Stuart was President of the RCVS in 2014-15. He has also been president of the European College of Veterinary Public Health and Hon Secretary of the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. In his public service, he has been a trustee of The Donkey Sanctuary since 1996 and Chairman of Trustees since 2007. He is a Trustee of the University of London and sits on the Board of the Food Standards Agency in the UK.

His interest in mental health and wellbeing is both personal and professional; he raised £14k for mental health charities by running the London Marathon in 2015 and chaired the Mind Matters Initiative for the RCVS from 2017 to 2019. He was made a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2018 for services to the veterinary profession and higher education.

### Lizzie Lockett, RCVS Chief Executive and Director of Mind Matters Initiative

Lizzie Lockett joined the RCVS in February 2005 as Head of Communications, bringing with her 13 years' experience working in marketing, public relations, communications and public affairs both in the UK and across Europe.

In autumn 2014, Lizzie set up the Mind Matters Initiative (MMI), alongside its then Chair, Neil Smith. Lizzie took up the role of Acting CEO in September 2017 and was appointed CEO in November 2017. Lizzie is an Accredited PR Practitioner with the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and holds a degree in English Language and Literature from St John's College, Oxford, a postgraduate qualification in journalism, and diplomas in the History of Art, also from Oxford.

### SUMMARY

Stuart and Lizzie opened the Symposium with a presentation that reflected on the activities and achievements of the Mind Matters Initiative so far.

Stuart spoke first, touching on how the three MMI work streams (Prevent, Protect, and Support) have underpinned all research and collaborative activity within the initiative. He then went on to highlight key MMI activities from the last five years, including:

- Around 60 mental health awareness courses
- Online courses with the Webinar Vet, including two mindfulness courses with nearly 2,500 views across five countries
- A pilot of the Schwartz Rounds reflective process with seven practices
- A pilot of four resilience courses which have led to a yearlong series of events with the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA)
- Distribution of mental health awareness resources including publishing 'A guide to enhancing wellbeing and managing work'
- 'Medical Mind Matters' conference with members of the veterinary, pharmaceutical, dental and medical professions
- Support of Vetlife (providing over £110k per year in financial support)
- Four years of the Vet Wellbeing Awards, run in partnership with the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS)
- A series of wellbeing in practice roadshows, run in partnership with the Veterinary Management Group (VMG) and SPVS
- Support of a range of student-led activities including the Association of Veterinary Students (AVS) Vetkind Online Wellbeing course, and a Veterinary Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Roundtable
- Set up Mind Matters International and signed a joint statement with the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) (with others to follow soon)
- RCVS signed the Time to Change mental health pledge

Following this, Lizzie then took to the stage, opening with acknowledgment of the challenges associated with the regulator

leading a mental health initiative and the need to navigate this compassionately. She highlighted the need to be cognisant of mitigating the stress we can cause as a regulator, whilst still addressing the important issue of mental health – both within the professions and internally within the RCVS. Lizzie stressed that the RCVS takes seriously the issue of supporting members of the professions to flourish and be the best they can be – and the crucial role mental wellbeing has to play in achieving this.

She then spoke about MMI's impact over the past five years, including:

- Raising awareness around mental health, with conversations about this important topic taking place at all levels of the professions and of organisations
- Breaking down the stigma existing around mental ill-health with the sharing of mental health stories through the &Me campaign, run in partnership with Doctors' Support Network
- Giving people the tools and knowledge they need to have the confidence to support others with regards to their mental health
- Giving people the confidence to seek help for themselves – calls to Vetlife Helpline have gone up 500% in the last five years and we have heard many positive stories around help-seeking
- Encouraging people to come forward and share their stories
- Inspiring people to run their own projects (for example, student wellbeing weeks)
- Demonstrating the power of collaboration and the impact working together can have
- Encouraging RCVS staff to share their own mental health stories and seek help when needed so that we can better support the professions to thrive

Lizzie finished by noting that there is still work to be done with regard to supporting mental wellbeing within the veterinary professions, but that MMI is making good progress, as evidenced by its activities and achievements so far. She emphasised the need for continued research and evaluation in this field to continue to support the change in conversation surrounding mental health.

"We want veterinary professionals to be supported and to think about thriving in the professions, instead of surviving in the professions," she concluded.

# PLENARY SPEAKERS

## The impact of veterinarian suicide on colleagues –

### Dr Alexandra Pitman

**Dr Alexandra Pitman, Associate Professor in Psychiatry in the UCL Division of Psychiatry and an Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust**

Dr Alexandra Pitman is an Associate Professor in Psychiatry in the UCL Division of Psychiatry and an Honorary Consultant Psychiatrist at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust. Her research interests are in the epidemiology of suicide and self-harm, particularly in relation to suicide loss, loneliness and social isolation, and in developing approaches to prevent suicide. She is funded by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to investigate mediators of suicide risk after suicide bereavement and co-leads, with Professor Sonia Johnson, the ESRC-funded Loneliness and Social Isolation in Mental Health network.

#### SUMMARY

Dr Pitman opened her presentation with information from varying studies about the extent of exposure to suicide, highlighting that suicide can affect many people through family, social and work networks.

She then explored the lasting adverse health and social outcomes associated with suicide, including:

- An increased risk of both genetic and non-genetic suicide and an increased risk of suicide attempts
- Post-traumatic stress disorder, mood disorders, psychotic disorders, personality disorders and psychiatric admission
- Compared with the general population, a higher risk of cancer, sleep disorders, chronic lower respiratory tract disorders and spinal disc herniation
- An increased risk of complicated grief after specifically violent deaths and this is associated with increased risk of idealised suicide
- Elevated scores on grief measures
- Adverse social outcomes including increased probability of

receiving benefits, increased probability of marital breakup, decreased level of social functioning, increased probability of occupational drop-out, and increased probability of delays in receiving support

Dr Pitman then turned the focus of her presentation towards the veterinary professions. Her hypothesised contributors to the comparatively higher occurrence of veterinary suicidality included factors such as high workload, managing client expectations, procedure-specific stressors and practice management responsibilities. She also mentioned that the stigma associated with mental illness and the fact that the ones who need the most help are often the ones who are reluctant to seek it, are challenges that could contribute to prevalence of suicide.

She spoke about some suggested approaches with regards to suicide prevention including:

- Better promotion for support services
- Formal support for recent graduates
- Improving employers' attitudes toward work-life balance
- Promoting connectedness
- Teaching coping and problem solving skills

She then spoke about some suggested approaches with regards to 'postvention' (meaning minimising adverse outcomes following a suicide), including:

- Insuring the news is covered accurately, using language aligned with the Samaritan language guidelines
- Offering support to all practice staff
- Arranging a reflective event to help people understand what happened and offering support
- Identifying key clients who may have been affected and offering support
- Identifying professional networks and offer support



Dr Alexandra Pitman

- Providing people with the resource: 'Finding the words' (a co-produced resource available for free-download)

Dr Pitman then provided some advice for delegates on what to do if a colleague may be suicidal, acknowledging that this can be very difficult as it is always dependent on both the person and the situation. She mentioned that one key intervention can be to encourage the colleague to seek help and help them to access the support that they might need. She also mentioned that in a practice situation, reviewing on-call responsibilities and sharing out

this responsibility can help reduce stress levels. The key thing is to let people know that they are supported.

Dr Pitman closed her presentation with some questions for delegates to think about and take back to their practices:

- Are you aware of support systems locally?
- Have you ordered copies of 'Help is at Hand'?
- Does the practice have an Employee Assistance Programme?
- Are managers/seniors open to discussion about mental illness?

# PLENARY SPEAKERS

## Sustaining resilience at work – what does the evidence tell us works? – Professor Neil Greenberg

**Neil Greenberg, Professor of Defence Mental Health, Consultant Academic Psychiatrist at King's College London, Chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' (RCP) Special Interest Group in Occupational Psychiatry**

Professor Neil Greenberg is a consultant academic psychiatrist at King's College London. Professor Greenberg served in the United Kingdom Armed Forces for more than 23 years and has deployed to a number of hostile environments including Afghanistan and Iraq. He took up the Chair of the Royal College of Psychiatrists' (RCP) Special Interest Group in Occupational Psychiatry in October 2018.

In 2008 he was awarded the Gilbert Blane Medal by the Royal Navy for his work in supporting the health of Naval personnel through his research work. He also led the team that won a military-civilian partnership award in 2013 for carrying out research into the psychological health of troops who were deployed and was shortlisted for the RCP Psychiatrist of the Year in 2015. He was awarded an RCP Presidential Medal for his work with trauma and veterans in 2017.

Professor Greenberg has published more than 200 scientific papers and book chapters. He has presented to national and international audiences on matters concerning the psychological health of the UK Armed Forces, organisational management of traumatic stress and occupational mental health. He has been the Secretary of the European Society for Traumatic Stress Studies and the President of the UK Psychological Trauma Society. He is the current RCP Lead for Military and Veterans Health, a trustee with Walking with the Wounded, an independent director of the Forces in Mind Trust and a principal advisor for Hostage UK.

### SUMMARY

Professor Greenberg began his presentation by exploring the two-way relationship between mental health and work, concluding that work can certainly be good for your health but that work pressures can be sustaining and damaging as well. With mental health being linked to work-related stress and impacting ability to function, Professor Greenberg said that there was a strong case and lots of good reason for employers to proactively support staff.

Professor Greenberg then spoke about mental health treatment, noting that it can often be a complex process with many barriers to accessing help. A common barrier for accessing treatment was stigma – including self-stigma and public-stigma. Self-stigma was the internal judgement and conflicts individuals may experience due to issues with their mental health, and public-stigma often involved concerns about being seen as weak or being treated differently by others.

Professor Greenberg spoke about what leads people to overcome these barriers and seek help, with two main reasons being that a crisis has happened or that a significant other has supported the seeking of help. He also noted that when people do seek help, they usually do this informally with peers, hence the importance of equipping people to support those experiencing mental ill-health.

For the last third of his presentation, Professor Greenberg focused on prevention and intervention at different stages of mental health journeys. With regards to prevention, he explored the importance of both primary and secondary prevention.

Primary prevention involves policy-level interventions (clarifying responsibilities and detailing support options), and supervisor and leadership mental health training specifically aiming to forge mutually supportive teams. Professor Greenberg stressed the importance of line managers and direct supervisors being informed when it comes to mental health and wellbeing support, with research indicating that the impact of this direct supervisor is significant with regards to mental health. He then



Professor Neil Greenberg

sited a survey of military personnel in Afghanistan in 2010, where soldiers who scored their managers as poor with regards to mental health support experienced a ten-fold difference in rates of probable mental ill-health. The same effect was also seen in a general health questionnaire, indicating a correlation between quality of leadership and rate of mental ill-health.

In comparison to primary prevention, secondary prevention involves early detection of emerging difficulties and proactively asking the right questions of staff who may need support.

Professor Greenberg warned delegates about the seduction of pre-screening for vulnerability to mental ill-health as this concept isn't proven to work. He also mentioned that post-incident

screening can also be problematic, with stigma, labelling and confidentiality hindering benefits.

He also spoke about tertiary intervention – the treatment stage. Professor Greenberg noted that this is where medication may well have a role to play, and where varying psychotherapies can support improved wellbeing. He also said that we cannot ignore the psychosocial context of the individual – stressing that solving the difficulties in the social context that they exist in (ie. at home or at work and the level of support provided by their manager) is essential for ensuring other treatment options are effective – linking back to the complexity of mental health treatment.

# SHORT TALKS

The following abstracts are ordered alphabetically by surname, for the running order, please refer to the programme on [pages 6-7](#).

## Aspects of work influence new graduate mental health: opportunities for intervention

### Dr Rosie Allister

Dr Rosie Allister qualified from The University of Liverpool vet school. For over 10 years she has been based at the University of Edinburgh researching veterinary professionals' mental health with particular interests in professional identity, the transition to practice, support, and what helps. She manages Vetlife Helpline and has been a volunteer with Samaritans for 14 years.

#### SUMMARY

At the beginning of her talk, Dr Allister told delegates that the paper that she was presenting was based on the Veterinary Transition Study, a project she had just finished which investigated how vet students transitioned to life in practice and the attrition of vets who have been in the profession for less than 10 years. She thanked those who participated.

The qualitative study saw 100 interviews conducted over a three-year period and questioned some of the assumptions we make about the transition while asking participants about mental health, support and identity.

One key finding of the research was that veterinary training and work often had unintended consequences which affect wellbeing - one of these is the dissemination of a culture that can sometimes increase the risk of mental health problems. Dr Allister said that the issue with the culture is that support mechanisms can be seen as incompatible with self-perception as a vet – and so the question she posed was around changing the cultural script so that people aren't stuck with a toxic viewpoint.

The research found that wellbeing did not immediately decline in transition but around 18 months to two years into the job and that, though some people had pre-existing conditions, much of the deterioration in mental health and wellbeing related to work. An area of veterinary work that was identified in undermining mental health was the mismatch between their experience and the amount of responsibility they were expected to take on, which went well beyond their core Day One Competences.

Dr Allister then made a series of recommendations stemming from her research. For employers, her recommendation was that they can help reduce the attrition rate of recent graduates by putting in place effective support, supervision and induction mechanisms for new vets rather than expecting them to just 'get on with it'. She also recommended reducing the cultural barriers to support – insisting that you can be a good vet while still seeking help.

Her recommendation for universities was that veterinary students should have greater contact with non-vet students and a more balanced social experience to give some greater perspective



Dr Rosie Allister

about veterinary identity, as well as being clearer about the separation of pastoral and academic support. Universities should also think about ways of accessing more informal supports - for example, access to pets and animals in pre-clinical years.

Her conclusions were that mental health can deteriorate in the first few years in practice but that, when the support is right, veterinary work can be good for mental health and even protective of it. Rosie said that the identity of 'being a vet' was very important to members of the profession. However, there was a need for an alternative script about what it is to be a vet that includes being able to ask for and seek help in cases of mental ill-health.

## Mental health of veterinarians in Canada

### Dr Colleen Best

Dr Colleen Best earned her Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and PhD from the Ontario Veterinary College (OVC). After completing her DVM degree, she practised equine medicine before returning to OVC to complete her PhD in interpersonal relationships in equine practice, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies. She has presented at a number of international conferences about her research, as well as veterinarian-client and collegial communication. She is a certified compassion fatigue professional, a member of the board of the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association, and trained in mental health first aid and suicide intervention.

#### SUMMARY

As in other countries such as the UK and the US, Dr Best said there was a realisation in Canada that veterinarians were at increased risk of suicide and negative mental health outcomes, but that there was

also a need to get better data on the extent of the issue. Online questionnaires were produced in both English and French and social media and veterinary organisations were used to invite people to take part in the study. The criteria for inclusion was that they were a Canada-based veterinarian, but they did not have to be actively practising.

Roughly 10% of all Canadian vets responded. Of these, three-quarters of respondents were women, the vast majority of respondents were in active practice and there was also adequate participation in the survey across all Canadian provinces.

Dr Best said that the survey used 10 different psychometric scales to measure perceived stress, anxiety, depression, compassion satisfaction, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, resilience, and suicidal ideation, as well as questions regarding suicidal ideation and additional data to describe the study population.

The survey found that secondary traumatic stress – the stress that is felt by individuals when dealing with first-hand trauma – was very high compared to the general population and other caregiving professions, with women more likely to experience this than men. The survey also found that suicidal ideation was very high for both men and women and that resilience levels were low compared to the general population.

Dr Best pointed out that there were some limitations to the data-set such as a response bias (ie those who have experienced poor mental health are most likely to respond) and the potential over-representation of women but also that, overall, the research confirmed a high prevalence of poor mental health outcomes and the need for action accordingly.

## Improving resilience in veterinary students: a final-year resilience rotation

### Dr Colleen Best

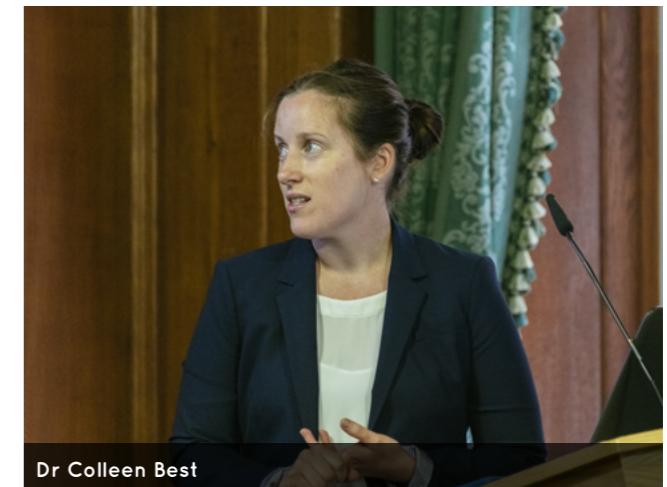
See above for biography.

#### SUMMARY

Veterinarians face a myriad of occupational stresses and poor mental health is of increasing concern in the veterinary profession. Resilience can be taught to help people bounce back from adversity, yet few resilience programmes have been evaluated in the veterinary population and, specifically, in the veterinary student environment.

This led Dr Best to ask the research question: can a one-week experiential learning rotation effectively improve wellness and resilience outcomes in final-year veterinary students?

Dr Best's presentation, which explored her research into this



Dr Colleen Best

question, started with an outline of the objectives of the research. The first objective, which fell directly out of the research question, was to create, implement and evaluate a one-week rotation to help final-year veterinary students develop skills, knowledge, and attributes that support their wellness and resilience.

The second objective was to provide students with an opportunity to gain competency and skills in non-technical areas of practice, such that they can achieve the work-life balance they desire and thrive upon graduation. This would then support the third objective which was to ease the transition from student vet to grad vet, and to assist students in developing a foundation that will support professional and personal success following graduation.

Dr Best then went on to look at the method she used when carrying out the research. The rotation was created using an experiential learning model with emphasis on student discussion and engagement. This model involved interactive sessions, evaluating post-rotation wellness goals and an end assignment. This was combined with leadership activities, and sessions on strengths, boundaries, assertiveness, self-compassion, yoga, nutrition, money management, meaning and purpose.

Content throughout the various sessions centred on emotional intelligence (including the five pillars of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills) and eight wellness dimensions (emotional, spiritual, intellectual (includes creativity), physical, environmental, financial, occupational, and social).

An important part of the research, Dr Best emphasised, was completing daily reflection questions to stimulate thought around what had been covered in the day's rotation and support content integration.

Preliminary results of the study indicate that the provision of

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a rotation focused on the practice of resilience skills is a valuable addition to the veterinary curriculum.

Feedback from rotation evaluations indicated that students found the rotation beneficial and that they recommended to the rotation to their peers, resulting in enrolment numbers remaining constant or increasing.

One participant said of the study: "We were taught valuable life skills that will help us not only be better veterinarians but also better happier versions of ourselves."

Dr Best closed her talk by remarking that, to build on anecdotal and reflective feedback from students, a formal evaluation of the rotation's effectiveness is underway.

## Evaluation of workplace wellbeing and culture across the veterinary profession through supported practice survey

### Carolyne Crowe

Carolyne Crowe is an experienced equine vet, award-winning personal performance coach, international speaker, researcher and lecturer. Carolyne works as a training consultant with the Veterinary Defence Society Training (VDST) Team; developing training and coaching individuals, teams, and practices to be the best they can be and to thrive both personally and professionally. After successfully running her coaching and training business for several years, Carolyne works as a training consultant with the VDS Training (VDST) Team; developing training and coaching individuals, teams, and practices to be the best they can be and to thrive both personally and professionally.

### SUMMARY

Carolyne's presentation centred on the issue that there is currently no single source of data on workplace stress within the veterinary professions.

She then went on to explain that this means that trends are therefore extrapolated from either non-veterinary data or from surveys carried out at individual rather than organisational level. This makes it hard to establish and implement best practice across the veterinary professions or to deliver targeted interventions.

To address this, Carolyne and the team at VDST aim to create a database of information on wellbeing and culture that will identify trends and challenges across the profession, within different sectors and within various types of practice.

In addition to supporting informed interventions and a profession-wide evidence-base on veterinary mental wellbeing,

the associated data-gathering tool will also be available for use at practice level. The hope is that this will provide employers with robust relevant information on workplace stress and wellbeing in their practice - to support solutions for risk-assessing and improving workplace stress in an easy to implement way.

Carolyne said that, since June 2019, surveys had been available to practices through an anonymous online tool developed by VDST, and based on the HSE Management Standards indicator tool, WHO-5 and Utrecht 3 questionnaires.

Data collected through the survey tool will be collated from all members of the practice to allow the key risks for each team to be identified. VDST will then provide tangible, relevant data to the practice about their specific strengths and challenges around all aspects of workplace stress and wellbeing - developing employers through the process as well as supporting local ownership of mental health and wellbeing support.

The data collected will also be used to inform wider discussions across the profession and will benchmark effectiveness of interventions and initiatives at a local and national level.

At this stage in the research, VDST is encouraging all practices to partake in the survey process. This will help build on profession-wide data on veterinary wellbeing, as well supporting individual practices to develop tailored support for their staff.

To get involved or find out more information practices are encouraged to visit the VDS Training website.

## Burnout in veterinarians; a critical review of the prevalence, contributory factors and interventions

### Dr Joanna Dyer

Dr Jo Dyer graduated from Bristol University and has been in small animal practice ever since. She has always had an interest in the mental wellbeing of veterinary professionals, which has led to her getting involved with Vetlife in various ways, and being elected to RCVS Council with a focus on the welfare of vets. She has also recently completed an MSc in the Psychology and Neuroscience of Mental Health with King's College London, which included a dissertation on work-related stress and burnout in veterinarians.

### SUMMARY

Dr Dyer's talk focused on a literature review around burnout in the veterinary professions.

At the start of her speech, Dr Dyer covered the definition



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of burnout – a condition that can occur because of chronic workplace stress – and noted that it has been described as an ‘occupationally specific dysphoria’. The three aspects of the syndrome are emotional exhaustion; the development of negative attitudes towards clients (depersonalisation); and the perception of reduced personal efficacy.

Dr Dyer told delegates that the practising UK veterinary profession is suffering a retention crisis where burnout levels are reported to be high and veterinarians report higher levels of work-related stress than the general population.

With this in mind, the aims of Dr Dyer’s review were to delve into literature relating to burnout in veterinarians, including the prevalence, contributory factors and interventions which have been assessed for prevention or reversal of the condition.

Before covering the results of this, Dr Dyer mentioned that the review was performed using a combination of search strategies in order to achieve a comprehensive critical review.

The results found that a burnout rate of between 27% and 50% was found in veterinarians studied, depending on the measurement method used. This was, on average, higher compared to the general labour force.

Age and gender were found to correlate with burnout scores in some instances. For example, vets who have been in the profession longer tend to have lower burnout scores.

Contributory factors to burnout were found to be workplace stressors including long working hours, client expectations and negative work-home interaction. Dr Dyer also said that there was some evidence of correlation with personality trait contributory factors, but that these results were more controversial and did not prove causation.

With regards to interventions to address burnout, Jo found that few interventions had been assessed. Those that have include individual interventions such as resilience training and mindfulness-based programmes.

Interventions that are yet to be studied include workplace-related interventions (such as organisational changes to working conditions, limited working hours and change of workload), the effect of providing psychological support and the effect of putting boundaries in place.

Finishing her speech, Dr Dyer concluded that work-related stress and burnout are found to be at higher levels in veterinarians than in the general population. Her review found that, so far, studies into interventions have all been individual-focused and non-UK based. Therefore, there is a need to study workplace-based interventions in the UK in order to better understand burnout in the UK and reduce levels of burnout which are damaging individuals and veterinary businesses.



## 2018 WSAVA Mental Health Survey results; how the ‘Vets in Mind’ app will support the identified issues

### Dr Nienke Endenburg

Dr Nienke Endenburg is a child and health psychologist who, since 1991, has been carrying out research on the welfare of humans and animals, their relationship in different contexts and cultures and how to optimise welfare. Dr Endenburg is also the owner of her own psychology practice, and counsels veterinary students and practising veterinarians about professional wellness. She is member of the Dutch Council for Animal Affairs, the co-chair of the Professional Wellness Group of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) and a member of the Animal Welfare Guidelines committee.

### SUMMARY

Dr Endenburg started her presentation by acknowledging that the personal and professional wellness of veterinarians and veterinary staff are rightly receiving increased attention – with recent suicides of veterinarians and veterinary nurses causing consternation within the profession.

However, she noted that most scientific studies regarding professional wellness have so far been done in the western world (specifically the USA, UK and Australia) and that, to date, little has been from other parts of the world.

To address this, Dr Endenburg explained, the aim of her research was to build an in-depth understanding of the issues related to vet wellness and, in particular, to explore regional and cultural differences with regards to this.

To meet this aim, Dr Endenburg conducted an online survey which was translated into seven languages (English, Russian, Spanish, French, Portuguese, Chinese and Korean) and launched at the WSAVA World Conference in Singapore. The survey was promoted to WSAVA and Federation of Companion Animal Veterinary Associations (FECAVA) member associations and through to their members during the four month data collection period ending 31 December 2019.

The survey explored demographic details, the Kessler Psychological Distress scale, satisfaction with life scale, and satisfaction with career scale – to build a rounded picture of veterinary wellbeing.

Presenting the results, Dr Endenburg told delegates that 4,306 veterinarians responded to the survey, the majority of whom responded in English and Russian. There was a high response rate to the survey, which indicated that wellness is seen as a very important issue by veterinary professionals.

The Kessler score results indicated that VNs, females and younger veterinary professionals were more at risk of lower mental wellbeing.

The satisfaction with career scale scores indicated that older respondents were significantly more satisfied with their careers and that the mental health of younger members of the profession is at risk.

Interestingly, survey respondents were also asked how many colleagues in their country they believe have issues with mental health. Responses indicated that this was much lower in Asia and in Africa, although Dr Endenburg pointed out that this doesn’t mean that these continents have actual lower rates of mental health issues. What this could indicate, she explained, is that respondents from Asia and Africa might have less awareness of mental health issues in their professions.

Exploring the survey conclusion, Dr Endenburg noted that there is no significant difference in mental wellbeing between regions of the world – but that in some instances, if you look closer, the issues may be different in different regions.

Dr Endenburg then concluded her speech by looking at the ‘Vets in Mind’ app – which is in development and addressed the ‘what are we doing about the results’ aspect of the research.

Dr Endenburg explained that an app was chosen because a number of initiatives are helping veterinarians cope with mental health issues but none so far are available via an app.

The ‘Vets in Mind’ app, derived from a similar version



(‘BackupBuddy’) successfully used in the UK police and military, will complement the other excellent support structures available. The aim is that the app will enable the profession to have access to high quality information to support themselves and colleagues, to reduce stigma surrounding mental health, and to signpost users to credible support services in their regions around the world all via their smartphones.

## Government veterinarians’ wellbeing – a veterinary profession wellbeing case study

### Dr Rebeca Garcia Pinillos

Having qualified as a vet from the University of Zaragoza in Spain, and with a PhD from the University of Reading, Dr Rebeca Garcia Pinillos currently works as a Government Veterinary Adviser on animal welfare. She is President for the Association of Government Vets, and an active member of the European College on Animal Welfare and Behavioural Medicine specialising in Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law. Dr Garcia Pinillos presidential focus is on Government vets’ wellbeing. She is also a passionate advocate of One Welfare and founder of an initiative to help define and disseminate this concept globally.

### SUMMARY

Dr Garcia Pinillos’ talk concerned a survey that was conducted with government vets in 2018 that asked for their opinions on levels of

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wellbeing - looking at mental health as well as physical health and safety. The survey was conducted with vets directly employed by the Government, vets working under contract for the public sector and vets who worked for companies contracted by the Government.

Introducing the research, Dr Garcia Pinillos highlighted the fact that the Association of Government Vets had worked with the Department for the Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to draw up the survey. There was a recognition that vets employed or contracted by Government often did not get enough attention in terms of wellbeing issues, and that there were some specific issues that may affect this cohort and the objective was to assess and identify tools to promote wellbeing and identify best practice, gaps in provision and areas for improvement.

Rebeca said that, to their surprise, over 500 responses were received, of which around half were vets undertaking Government tasks under contract. The survey found that most of the respondents had clear objectives and sufficient support and training and that, although they often worked outside their contracted hours, only 16% described their workload as unacceptable.

Less positively, most said that the physical and emotional environment they worked in was challenging but only two-thirds were aware of any workplace policy to help them with these challenges. A fifth of respondents also felt that their organisations would not be able to help with mental health issues and the challenges of loneliness and isolation, often exacerbated by poor IT support.

One very stark finding of the survey was the emotional toll of mass culling events on vets employed or contracted by the Government. Around a third of respondents had been involved in mass culling events and two-thirds of these had found it emotionally challenging but very few reported awareness or use of mental health support in response to these events - something that Dr Garcia Pinillos felt was a cause of concern.

The survey also found that the trauma of these events can be long-lasting, as many of the responses of those involved in mass culling events mention the Foot and Mouth Disease outbreak in 2001 and, not only the mass culling, but the traumatic impact these events had on individual farmers and rural communities.

Other concerning findings were often in the free-text comments, including concerns over the ethics around culling animals and taking enforcement action against farmers. Incidents of assault, bullying, harassment and discrimination against vets who were non-UK nationals were also raised, with some distressing cases that the Association of Government Veterinarians was not aware of.

Dr Garcia Pinillos reported that, as a result of the survey, several solutions had been identified to improve the wellbeing and safety of

Government vets. For vets who often worked alongside each other, it was suggested that trackers and alert pagers, regular update calls to members of staff, and a phone or text in-and-out policy at the start and end of the working day would help with this. She said that, personally, she would like to see a buddy system so that all visits require at least two people to attend and lone-working would be banned in all but the strictest circumstances.

Another recommendation was that, as the survey found only 25% of respondents had training in holding difficult conversations (for example, with a farmer who you have to take enforcement action against), such training needed to be made more widespread.

She also reported that, in future, contracts with the Animal and Plant Health Agency will have a clause to provide mental health support for vets that have to be involved in mass culling events.

## The relationship between psychosocial work environment and mental health in veterinary practitioners: a scoping review

### Dr Linda Hoinville

Dr Hoinville worked for two years in large animal practice before starting her career in research. She worked for 25 years as a veterinary epidemiologist, providing the evidence to inform the control of transmissible spongiform encephalopathies and the development of surveillance strategies. Having recently obtained a master's qualification in psychology she is now planning research to investigate improving the mental health and wellbeing of veterinary professionals.

### SUMMARY

Dr Hoinville started her talk by highlighting the aim of her research – which was to investigate the relationship between the psychosocial work environment and mental health in veterinary practitioners. She also mentioned that her research aimed to explore whether the relationships identified are consistent with existing occupational stress theories.

With this in mind, Dr Hoinville had two research questions. The first was whether she could identify the aspects of the work environment that are associated with mental health or wellbeing in veterinary practitioners. The second research question was whether she could determine which of the existing occupational stress theories would be required to explain the relationships identified.

To explore this, Dr Hoinville carried out a scoping review – identifying empirical articles using a systematic search of MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Web of Science, and Scopus with



Dr Joanna Dyer



Carolyne Crowe



Dr Linda Hoinville



Dr Rebeca Garcia Pinilos

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search terms related to mental health and work environment in veterinarians.

She then developed a coding structure and carried out a thematic analysis—dividing data into categories based on mental health outcomes and whether they were descriptive or analytical.

Explaining the results, Dr Hoinville said that the sixty-four articles identified suggest that general aspects of the work environment (workload, support, interpersonal relationships) and more profession-specific factors (performing euthanasia, ethical dilemmas) were associated with various mental health and wellbeing outcomes. These outcomes included anxiety, depression, burnout, and job satisfaction.

The development of a comprehensive model to describe the relationship between the work environment and mental health of veterinary practitioners would require the integration of several existing theories, including the demand-control-support, effort/reward imbalance, and job-demand-resources models.

Rounding off her speech, Dr Hoinville said that this work, together with a review of interventions to improve mental health in healthcare staff, is an important first step in improving wellbeing in veterinary practitioners. The aim is that it will provide a framework to inform the development and evaluation of individual and organisational level interventions.

Going forward, investigations should consider a range of workplace factors in both descriptive and analytical studies. Factors that protect against mental ill-health and stressors, their impact on mental wellbeing and mental ill-health, and organisational and individual factors that modify their impact should also be considered.

## How unease and stress can become confidence and harmony through nontechnical competencies continuing professional development

### Tierney Kinnison and Stephen A May

Dr Kinnison originally studied animal behaviour before undertaking several research positions at the Royal Veterinary College, within the Lifelong Independent Veterinary Education Centre, and the Veterinary Epidemiology, Economics and Public Health Group. Dr Kinnison is especially interested in interprofessional education (IPE)—bringing veterinary and veterinary nursing students together to improve their collaboration. Her current teaching is primarily within the Postgraduate Certificate, Diploma and Masters in Veterinary Education, as well as developing IPE at the RVC.

Professor May received his veterinary degree from Cambridge



and has spent brief periods in general practice, and worked as a specialist equine clinician. He completed his PhD on “Mediators of Equine Joint Disease” and was awarded Fellowship of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons for meritorious contributions to learning. Professor May has been at the Royal Veterinary College since 1993, where he was Professor of Equine Medicine and Surgery for more than 20 years, before becoming the College’s Professor of Education and Senior Vice-Principal. He is a recent past President of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons and chairs its Graduate Outcomes, CPD and Legislation Working Groups.

### SUMMARY

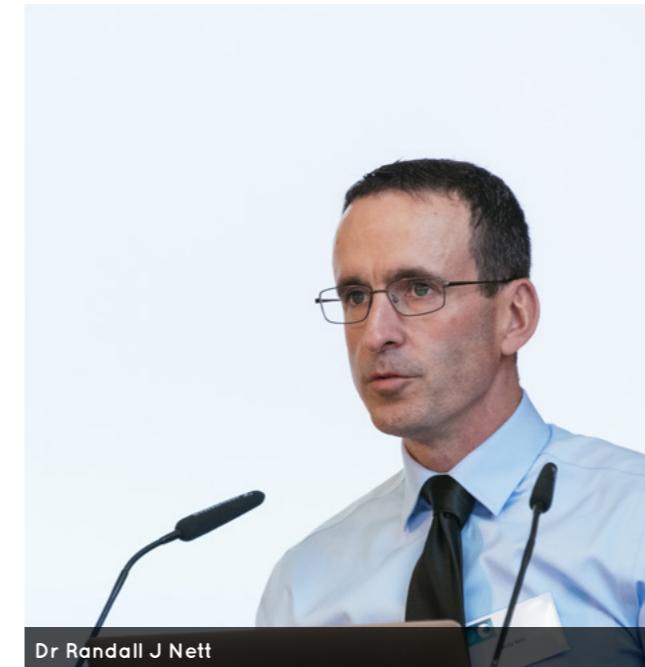
Dr Kinnison began her presentation by giving delegates some background information on the RCVS Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice (CertAVP), explaining that CertAVP is a form of continuing professional development (CPD) that includes a professional key skills (PKS) module, which focuses on non-technical competencies.

She then narrowed the scope of her talk and went on to explain that research utilising essays summarising learning from the PKS module identified that this opportunity had client/patient benefits, practice benefits and personal benefits.

This then led to Dr Kinnison and Professor May’s study which chose to focus on personal benefits, which included reduced stress at work, thus relating to the Mind Matters Initiative.

The specific aim of the study was to identify all of the changes from ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ emotions associated with the PKS module, and to explore the context of this change. The research question driving the research was: how does completing the PKS module improve the emotional wellbeing of veterinary surgeons?

Dr Kinnison then went on to explain the methods used in the



Dr Randall J Nett

study, which consisted of 46 participants giving consent for Dr Kinnison and Professor May to analyse their PKS summaries.

The focus of analysis was identification of a ‘negative’ to ‘positive’ emotional change regarding a specified topic. Following this, thematic analysis was performed on sections of the summaries relating to these emotional changes.

Dr Kinnison told delegates that three themes emerged and were developed. The first related specifically to the PKS module. At the beginning, people perceived the topics in the module to be irrelevant. However, through doing the essays, they found there was relevance between the module content and the work they were doing, and discovered new areas of interest—thus increasing their investment and interest in the module. This was shown when negative emotions such as ‘reluctance’ became positive, for example, ‘stimulation’, when participants realised the importance of non-technical competencies for their work.

The second theme to emerge focused on developing non-technical competencies. At the beginning of the module participants felt unease and frustration with the skills. However, after developing practice-relevant non-technical skills they felt that there was more benefit and this led to greater work enjoyment. Participants wrote about learning new skills and changing emotions from ‘unease’ to ‘confidence’, for example.

The third and final theme to emerge centred on stress and coping through a reflective focus. Participants’ reflections outlined coping



mechanisms including cognitive reframing of self-do (reasonable expectations), self-feel (not alone) and the organisation (recognising stressors). Emotions described in the essays changed from ‘stress’, ‘guilt’ and ‘fatigue’ to ‘coping’, ‘enjoyment’ and ‘harmony’. Benefits for self, practice, colleagues/friends and client/patients were also noted.

Summarising the findings, Dr Kinnison said that study participants had an increasing realisation of relevance of non-technical competencies CPD, and this was found to be supported significantly through the use of reflection. Dr Kinnison closed her presentation by noting that this research supports more attention to professional skills CPD in supporting the wellbeing of health professions.

## Suicides and deaths of undetermined intent among veterinary professionals, national violent death reporting system, 2003-2014

### Dr Randall J Nett

Dr Randall Nett is Chief, Field Studies Branch, at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States. Dr Nett is a physician (Family Medicine and Preventive Medicine) and epidemiologist who conducts field epidemiologic studies and research concerning occupational lung diseases.

### SUMMARY

In his introduction Dr Nett, who is married to a vet, said that every veterinarian he knows of has had a colleague or classmate who has died from suicide—his wife alone knew four of them.

His research was looking at what facts can be gleaned about veterinarian suicide from the US National Violent Death Reporting System, a database of deaths by violence, including suicide.

The baseline for Dr Nett's research was a study conducted in the 1980s which found that the suicide rate amongst veterinarians was 1.7 times higher than the general population, and he used his research on the system to look at what had changed.

A key difference was that, in the 1980s study, those who took their own lives were predominantly men working with livestock, whilst now it was mostly women working in companion animal practice.

The research he undertook analysed veterinary deaths from 2003 to 2014 from 18 states with the aim of analysing suicides and suicide methods, and identifying the problems that led up to veterinarians taking their own lives. The study ended up using 202 records, representing 73 vets, 77 vet techs, 39 assistants, eight unspecified veterinary professionals and five vet students who had taken their own lives.

Key findings from the research were that the vets were often male; that the vets and the vet techs were more often white; that vets took their own lives in older age than other professional groups; and that the majority were employed at time of death. Both male and female vets and vet techs were more likely to die from suicide than the general population.

The records demonstrated that most veterinary suicides were at home and that almost one half of vets and vet techs died from poisoning, with the use of barbiturate pentobarbital standing out as a common method of suicide.

He added that if those who died from pentobarbital poisoning were removed from the data, then the suicide rate was not significantly higher than general population and that those who want to take their own lives may not seek another method. He surmised that, if veterinarians can be stopped from taking home pentobarbital, then a significant number of suicides could be prevented.

In terms of the limitation of the data he said that it largely concerned a white, non-Hispanic population group and that there were varying degrees of data completeness amongst the different US states. It was also difficult to ascertain employment status and the proportion of males and females based on survey estimates.

His recommendations resulting from the research were to ensure suicide prevention awareness and activities were available to all vet professionals; that there should be improved administrative controls for pentobarbital in veterinary practices and that the NIOSH data could be further used as baseline for later analysis of same data set.



Dr Kate Stephen

### Positive and negative mental health impacts of experiences associated with livestock veterinary practice

#### Dr Kate Stephen

Dr Kate Stephen is a Behavioural Scientist at the SRUC Epidemiology Research Unit, Inverness, in the Scottish Highlands. She has experience of mixed methods research in rural communities; the use of qualitative methods to collect sensitive data; development and evaluation of complex services and novel interventions, including eHealth; multi-disciplinary working; motivation and adherence to health behaviours.

#### SUMMARY

At the start of her speech Dr Stephen highlighted the fact that she and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) were the first recipients of the Mind Matters Initiative's Sarah Brown Mental Health Research Grant, set up in memory of an RCVS Council member who tragically passed away in 2017, which will help build on the research she was presenting at the Symposium.

Dr Stephen's research was focused on the experiences of livestock veterinary practices in the rural environment of the Scottish Highlands, and she had spent much of the previous summer travelling to agricultural shows to talk to farmers and livestock vets and gather their experiences of what factors might have an impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

The background to the research highlighted some of the factors affecting wellbeing common to most vets: long working hours; high client expectations; unexpected/ negative outcomes; challenges to keep up with CPD and clinical/ technological developments;



and a profession comprising mostly academically-gifted individuals with tendencies towards perfectionism, conscientiousness and neuroticism.

However, some of the issues were more specific to livestock vets, many of which revolve around the dynamic with the farmers themselves. For example, there were challenges persuading clients of the competence of young vets who may not be from farming backgrounds and the fact that the vet is often, in essence, part of the farm management team who has to earn the trust of the farmer. Vets also reported a tension between farm efficiency and productivity on the one hand and ethical, animal welfare and environmental considerations on the other.

In the interviews that were conducted with vets they reported a strong focus on job satisfaction and helping people and that, when they could see a farmer having success with their stock thanks to their advice, they were satisfied – although it was reported that farmers rarely actually thanked the vet.

Negative aspects of the role highlighted by those vets interviewed included the impact that their decisions can have on the animals, on the livelihood of farmers and the stress of the workload, which includes not only practical tasks but also the proactive communication of advice on, for example, disease control. Vets reported that they found it frustrating, depressing and demotivating when farmers didn't listen to or take on advice, but also noted that they had also formed strong, positive relationships and friendships with farmers.

Vets also reported a sense of dread about what they might see when visiting farms where they suspected poor animal health and welfare and would often blame themselves for these poor outcomes.



John Volk

Dr Stephen also talked to livestock farmers about veterinary mental health and found that farmers were sometimes surprised at what she told them. Farmers thought of vets as confident professionals and not people necessarily prone to self-doubt.

Following this qualitative research, Dr Stephen said that her next step was to focus on the development of coping resources to help prevent burnout amongst rural vets, using psychological strategies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, which helps people learn how to live with and learn from failures and mistakes. She hopes that this will help to break the cycle of negative thoughts by demonstrating to vets that they are making a difference and contribution, so that they are able to draw positive thoughts even from negative situations.

Dr Stephen is also now conducting further research with livestock vets, looking at how they currently cope with work-related stress and wellbeing issues and what actually works successfully for them. She hopes to draw from this an idea about what tools can be developed to support and enhance coping strategies.

### Key findings of the MSD Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study

#### John Volk

John Volk is senior consultant with Brakke Consulting, the largest consulting firm serving the global animal health, veterinary and pet care markets. John is principal author of five landmark studies of the veterinary profession: Brakke Study

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of Financial and Economic Behaviours of Veterinarians (1998), AVMA-Pfizer Business Practices Study (2005), Bayer Veterinary Care Usage Studies (2011-2013), Veterinary Pet Insurance-Veterinary Economics Financial Health Study (2014), and the Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing study (2018). He has been widely published in veterinary journals and is a frequent speaker at veterinary conferences.

## SUMMARY

In introducing his research, John said that the main objectives of his study, which was conducted in late 2017 and announced in early 2018, were to determine levels of mental health and wellbeing using standardised tools with a representative sample; to identify at-risk segments of the US veterinary profession and contributing factors; and suggest organisational and personal remedies and interventions, if needed.

The research was conducted in conjunction with the American Veterinary Medical Association (which represents 90% of licensed vets in the United States) and Brakke Consulting, with

surveys sent to 20,000 veterinarians with a response rate of 18%. The survey used two key measures to gauge levels of mental health and wellbeing. Serious psychological distress was measured by Kessler-6 distress scale questions, while wellbeing was assessed by a series of standardised questions about how people felt about their lives at any one particular time compared to the best/ worst possible lives they can imagine.

In terms of the results, the survey found that the mental health of the participating vets was statistically the same as for the general population in terms of psychological distress and serious mental health conditions.

Half of those who scored high in the Kessler-6 scale were receiving treatment, while some of those who got low Kessler scores were also receiving treatment. Major self-reported conditions included depression, compassion fatigue and anxiety, and younger vets were found to be at higher risk than older vets.

Those who said they were not doing well financially scored higher for psychological distress and there was a positive correlation between the amount of student debt and distress.



Professor Susan Dawson

The study found that contributors to reduced levels of distress were spending time with family, socialising, travelling for pleasure, reading for pleasure and limiting time on social media. There was an apparent adverse relationship between social media use and mental health.

In terms of gender, the survey found no significant differences between men and women under 45 and over 65 – however, female vets aged 46 to 64 had poorer wellbeing than their male counterparts.

Work-related factors that were associated with greater wellbeing included higher incomes, fewer hours worked, lower student debt, owning a veterinary business rather than being an employee and not having to work nights.

Overall, the most disturbing finding was that only 41% of respondents would recommend veterinary medicine as a career to others – this was particularly acute amongst young vets.

In conclusion, John said that there were opportunities for change at organisational, practice-based and individual levels to improve mental health and wellbeing and that the study is being

repeated in September 2019, not only to benchmark the previous findings but also explore other issues such as burnout, job satisfaction, substance misuse, stress management, cyber bullying, household income and debt.

## Closing session – Professor Susan Dawson Dean of the Institute of Veterinary Science at the University of Liverpool; incoming Mind Matters Initiative Chair

### Professor Susan Dawson

Professor Susan Dawson is Dean of the Institute of Veterinary Science at the University of Liverpool. She qualified as a veterinary surgeon from Glasgow in 1983 and spent several years in veterinary practice before joining the University of Liverpool in 1988. Her research is in the area of infectious diseases with a focus on zoonotic infections and antimicrobial resistance in particular.

Professor Dawson is currently a Council member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). She has chaired the RCVS Education Committee and has been a panel member and chair of accreditation visits of veterinary schools on behalf of the Royal College. Susan currently chairs the Primary Qualifications Subcommittee at RCVS and was voted in as chair of Veterinary Schools Council in July 2019.

She has been a member of the Mind Matters Initiative Taskforce since its instigation and is proud to take over as chair from Professor Stuart Reid in September 2019.

### SUMMARY

Professor Dawson closed the Symposium by addressing delegates as the new Mind Matters Initiative Chair. She spoke about how we are starting to see some evidence behind the activities that MMI is undertaking and supporting and that we should be proud of our achievements in this space.

She spoke about the importance of collaborative work, and that it is so good to see such a range of organisations and individuals working together in a non-hierarchical or competitive way to improve mental health and wellbeing in the veterinary professions. In particular, she noted that she has been struck by the benefits we can get by bringing in people and insights from other professions and from abroad.

She finished by reflecting on the interesting and informative symposium and said that she is looking forward to chairing MMI and taking on the challenge of making a difference for the veterinary professions.

# POSTER ABSTRACTS

## Small animal practice veterinary surgeons' quit intentions: a qualitative investigation

### Jo Kelly

Jo is a small animal veterinary surgeon at a large multi-branch practice in the North East of England. She has seen first-hand the issues that face veterinary professionals in the workplace and is passionate about tackling work-related stress and poor mental wellbeing. In response to this, she set up a group within her practice to champion wellbeing projects. Jo has undertaken and recently completed the Workplace Health and Wellbeing Master's with the University of Nottingham, during which she was awarded a scholarship.

### Background

Poor mental wellbeing in veterinary surgeons is a recognised problem. Concomitant to this are challenges concerning the retention of veterinary surgeons in clinical practice. Survey research has demonstrated that more than 50% of recently graduated veterinary surgeons are looking for a change in work, with 10% planning to leave the profession altogether. The specific factors that drive intention to leave within this population are so far largely unexplored.

Job satisfaction and perceived work-life balance are predictors of intention to quit in other sectors and these, in addition to other wellbeing factors, will be explored.

### Aims

The study aimed to explore the reasons given by small animal practice veterinary surgeons for intention to leave practice in favour of alternative careers. A further aim was to determine what interventions might encourage those considering exiting small animal practice to remain. A third aim is to use the information

gathered to enhance recruitment of small animal veterinary surgeons into clinical practice.

### Methods

Fifteen face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with practising small animal veterinary surgeons in the spring of 2019. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis of the transcripts is currently underway in order to identify themes in the data pertinent to the aims of the study. Data analysis will be completed by August 2019 with the report on the study submitted in part fulfilment of the requirements of a Master's Degree in Workplace Health and Wellbeing in September 2019.

### Results

Themes characterising the reasons vets intend to quit small animal practice will be identified. In addition, themes that illustrate factors associated with a desire to remain in practice will be established.

## Should clinicians always do what they can? - utilising the Animal Welfare Assessment Grid as a decision-making tool to improve mental health

### Rachel Malkani and Professor Sarah Wolfensohn

Rachel is a PhD student at the University of Surrey School of Veterinary Medicine and is developing the Animal Welfare Assessment Grid for dogs alongside Professor Sarah Wolfensohn. Rachel has an MSc in Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law from the University of Glasgow. She has a background in canine behaviour and is the Veterinary Engagement Officer for the British Veterinary Behaviour

Association. She previously worked at NewMetrica, assisting with quality of life research in cats and dogs and has strong research interests in companion animal welfare assessment and mental health in the veterinary profession.

Sarah's first degree was in Physiology from University College London, she then read Veterinary Medicine at Churchill College, Cambridge. She spent a number of years in general practice, both small animal and mixed, first as an assistant, then a partner, during which time the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 arrived. While still in general practice, she became Named Veterinary Surgeon for a number of small pharmaceutical and biotech companies in her local area and was then Head of Veterinary Services at the University of Oxford for nearly 20 years, leaving there in 2010.

She is now Professor of Animal Welfare at the veterinary school at the University of Surrey and also runs an independent consultancy on animal health and welfare. She holds the Diploma of the European College of Laboratory Animal Medicine, and the Diploma of the European College of Animal Welfare and Behavioural Medicine, and is a Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Recognised Specialist in Laboratory Animal Science.

She has published textbooks and a numerous papers in the area of laboratory animal science and welfare, won the 2002 GSK Laboratory Animal Welfare prize for work on housing and husbandry of large primates used in research, won the 2010 EPAA communication prize and was awarded an OBE for services to animal welfare in 2012. She has served on a number of UK and International animal welfare and ethics committees to develop improvements to animal welfare.

### Background

Veterinary surgeons are at high risk of mental health disorders and suicide. A risk factor contributing to suicidal behaviour and poor

mental health is cited to be coping with high client expectations (Bartram & Baldwin 2008). Stress ratings are highest when there is conflict between the welfare of the patient and the interests of the client (Batchelor & McKeegan 2012). Therefore, a tool that enables clinicians to make well-reasoned, ethically justified decisions, that promotes positive clinical experience is of critical importance in veterinary practice.

The Animal Welfare Assessment Grid (AWAG) (Wolfensohn et al. 2015) is a validated tool that monitors the welfare of animals and is highly adaptable to any species by assessing the four parameters of physical health, psychological wellbeing, environmental quality, and veterinary and management procedural events. The AWAG app software is currently being developed for companion dogs.

### Aims

Assess the value of the AWAG as a treatment and end-of-life decision-making tool and examine if use of the tool improves mental health in veterinary surgeons.

### Methods

Following development of the AWAG for dogs, the app will be assessed quantitatively and qualitatively for its effectiveness as a treatment decision tool. To assess the mental health impact of difficult decision-making, a variety of dimensions will be examined (burnout, fatigue, low mental and physical quality of life, depression, anxiety, and stress), using the Well-Being Index (WBI) (Dyrbye et al. 2013).

### Hypotheses

We hypothesise that by enhancing the quality of decision-making, decisional conflict will be reduced; thereby, improving mental health in veterinary surgeons.



# ABOUT MIND MATTERS

## NOTES

**The Mind Matters Initiative (MMI) aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of those in the veterinary team, including students, veterinary nurses, veterinary surgeons and practice managers.**

MMI began life in 2014 and was formally launched in 2015. It is funded and run by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK.

The RCVS takes the mental health and welfare of members of the veterinary profession seriously, and was kicked off with a five-year, one-million-pound commitment from the RCVS. During 2018, RCVS Council agree to extend the programme beyond its initial five years, on a rolling three-year basis.

Mind Matters is a pan-professional initiative, supported by a taskforce comprising representatives from key veterinary and veterinary nursing organisations, including:

- Association of Veterinary Students
- British Small Animal Veterinary Association
- British Veterinary Association
- British Veterinary Nursing Association
- Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons
- Veterinary Defence Society
- Veterinary Management Group
- Veterinary Schools Council
- Vetlife

We offer mental health awareness training and try to break down the stigma associated with mental ill-health. We also develop and support resources and courses to help students, vets, nurses and practice managers to flourish, and, when needed, to get back on form.

Our programme is divided into three streams of activity:

**Prevent** – proactively looking at systemic issues within the veterinary profession to help minimise the chance of people becoming unwell in the first place. Our joint anti-stigma campaign, &me, which we run with the Doctors' Support Network, also falls under this stream of activity.

**Protect** – a programme of communications and training designed to equip individuals with the skills and knowledge they need to stay well, even when working under challenging conditions.

**Support** – financial and other support for existing independent services, such as Vet Support NI, Vetlife Helpline and Vetlife Health Support, together with an investigation into what more may be required to support those in need, and catalysing the development of those services.

Mental health issues affect the veterinary team across the world, it's not just a UK situation. In recognition of the importance of supporting the veterinary family wherever it may be, we are starting to work internationally, and were delighted to sign a memorandum of understanding with the American Veterinary Medical Association in 2018.

**Mind Matters is not your first port of call if you are in crisis or need direct and immediate help. If that is the case, please turn to the Vetlife Helpline, which we support, both financially and in kind. The Vetlife Helpline is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, on 0303 040 2551. There is also a confidential and anonymous email service, accessible via [vetlife.org.uk](http://vetlife.org.uk)**

# NOTES

# MMI RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

