

ETHICS EXHAUSTION: A PROFESSION IN PERIL?

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One of the most disturbing statistics on the current state of veterinary medicine comes from the 2018 Merck Animal Health Veterinary Wellbeing Study. This survey indicated that respondents felt overstressed, undervalued, and, shockingly, only 41% of veterinarians surveyed would recommend their profession to a friend or a family member. This number is even more egregious when the data is segmented by age—only 24% of veterinarians aged 34 and under would recommend their profession to others. Considering the typical age at graduation from veterinary school is 26, this younger demographic of veterinarians have become disillusioned with the profession in just under 8 years. And this survey was taken before COVID . . . and all of that additional stress placed upon the profession.

Many theories abound for these distressing statistics. One underlying cause could be certain specific “breed characteristics” or personality traits commonly shared by veterinarians. In 2005, Zenner et al compared veterinary students to elite high school students and professional athletes¹. This study suggested that there were several unique personality traits inherent and unique to veterinary students when compared to these other two high-performing populations. Veterinary students, in general, demonstrated higher levels of anxiety than the other two groups, were more competitive (more competitive than professional athletes!), had a higher fear of failure, and were more prone to depressive episodes. The authors also theorized that it is entirely possible that the selection process for admissions into veterinary school could be unintentionally selecting for these particular personality traits.

Additionally, the typical veterinary work place and work culture also appear to contribute greatly to this career dissatisfaction, stress, and frustration. Many veterinarians report a work culture which consists of work overload, a lack of decision latitude, complaints at work by both staff and clients, social/family conflicts, and poor mentorship. In the typical Demand-Control Support Model, the demands of the veterinary profession far outweigh the controlling elements, leading to job stress and dissatisfaction.

Often, the mental stress and dissatisfaction with the profession has been attributed to “compassion fatigue,” a condition characterized by emotional and physical exhaustion which leads to a diminished ability to feel empathy or compassion for others (or animals). Due to the caring and selfless nature of the profession, veterinarians, as a group, tend to be self-sacrificing, prioritizing the needs of others over their own needs, while also adhering to the “Hero Syndrome” which attempts to help others at all costs. And while these personality traits could very well lead to compassion fatigue, many new theories suggest that veterinarians rarely lose

¹ Zenner, D. et al. Veterinary students as elite performers: preliminary insights. *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* 2005; 32.2: 242-248.

their ability to feel empathy and compassion. Rather, a more descriptive diagnosis for the pathologic disease affecting our profession could be “ethics exhaustion.”

Ethics exhaustion is a term coined by Sonnya Dennis, DVM, ABVP a few years ago and defined as the fatigue, emotional distress, and a lack of will to continue to act in a way that is not consistent with what you believe is ethical. Typically, veterinarians know how to diagnose, treat, and manage the majority of cases they see on a day-to-day basis. Veterinarians even take an oath to protect animal health and welfare and to prevent animal suffering. That is why most of us became veterinarians! One common issue, however, consistently impedes veterinarians from practicing high quality veterinary medicine. One common issue frequently leads to clients declining your treatment plan. They ask if you can skip diagnostics . . . maybe alter the treatment plan . . . refuse the referral . . . seek cheaper medications.

A recent study by Kipperman et al (2017)² reported that 96% of the veterinarians surveyed indicated that owner economic limitations have negatively affected their ability to provide their recommended quality of care at least once weekly. A majority (51%) of veterinarians report that owner economic limitations affected the quality of care daily or multiple times daily. Half of the veterinarians in this survey indicated that owner economic limitations were one of the leading causes of professional burnout, or “ethics exhaustion.” Veterinarians state that the consequences of these economic limitations include a decrease in the number of office visits, unnecessary delays in office visits, a decline in quality care, and an increase in economic euthanasias. These “compromises” in quality care lead to increased moral stress to the veterinarian, limitations on DVM income, and reduced career satisfaction.

Can anything be done to mitigate this ethics exhaustion? The following lecture will suggest some solutions, while perhaps stirring up a little controversy!

Resources for additional information and/or support:

MightyVet

www.mightyvet.org

Not One More Vet

www.nomv.org

AVMA Wellbeing and Peer Assistance

www.avma.org/resources-tools/wellbeing

² Kipperman BS, Kass PH, and Rishniw M. Factors that influence small animal veterinarians’ opinions and actions regarding cost of care and effects of economic limitations on patient care and outcome and professional career satisfaction and burnout. *JAVMA* 2017; 250:7.