

# The Veterinary industry

## Mental health & wellness snapshot



Mental health and wellness across the veterinary industry is complex and varied, with growing evidence that the industry is in the midst of a mental health crisis. Academic research and evidence suggests that those working in the industry are at high risk of burnout, compassion fatigue, depression, anxiety and suicide. While there are interventions in place across the industry to address veterinary wellness there are many opportunities to ensure those working in the industry are thriving and well.

## SuperFriend & The AVA

SuperFriend was recently engaged by the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) to complete a review of the current research and literature related to mental health and wellness in the veterinary industry as well as to provide guidance and best practice recommendations for future interventions.

SuperFriend aimed to provide a summary of the current state of the industry, identify psychosocial risk and protective factors, determine gaps in existing local and international interventions and provide recommendations on best practice approaches to addressing mental health and wellness across the industry.

This report provides a summary of these findings and form phase one of a broader piece of work between SuperFriend and the AVA.

## The veterinary industry

There is growing evidence from academic research, industry bodies and professionals across the industry that the veterinary industry in Australia and internationally is in a mental health crisis, with some studies suggesting those in the industry are at higher risk of suicide than not only those working in the healthcare sector but also the population as a whole (13).

Recent reports suggest that those working in the industry across all roles are acutely aware of the mental health impacts on their work and many are considering leaving the industry due to stress, anxiety and poor working conditions.

## Mental health across the career life cycle

Risks to mental health and wellness exist across the entire career life cycle of those in the veterinary industry these may include;

### Students

- High entry score & demanding course
- High student loan
- Clinical content focus

### Recent graduates

- Lack of post graduate support
- Unrealistic job expectations
- Low starting wage

### Life in clinical practice

- Lack of career progression & development
- Stress of practice ownership
- Long term exposure to stressors
- Identity crisis when leaving profession

### The state of mental health in the veterinary industry

When assessing workplace psychosocial risk, factors that detract from the workplace experience or increase the likelihood of one experiencing mental health related issues are referred to as risk factors. Those factors that enable good mental health and positively contribute to the workplace experience are referred to as protective factors. In order to create a thriving and mentally healthy workplace or workforce both of these factors must be considered.

As well as a high stress working environment and poor work-life balance due to long hours, demanding work, unsociable hours and on-call work there are multiple factors that contribute to risk within the industry. The emotionally taxing nature of the work brings a host of risks including exposure to high instances of death, decisions around euthanasia and difficult decisions around patient care.

**'Those working in the industry must perform a dual role in working with animals and people, often lacking the skills to manage the people side of the job'**

Challenging interactions with the public further contribute to the workplace stressors that negatively impact those in the industry. Staff are routinely exposed to workplace conflict including client abuse, complaints, emotional manipulation, negotiating patient care and cost of treatment as well as expectations to work for free or for the greater good. Conflict around treatment cost often flows on to create a range of financial stressors for practices and staff with many absorbing costs or compromising on best practice patient care.

Stigma related to mental ill-health is also prevalent in the macro-level professional environment, with professional competence being the main priority in a highly regulated environment. This further contributes to barriers associated with help seeking, disclosure and attitudes towards 'just pushing through'.

Despite the range of risk factors and stressors there are many positives to working in the industry, however these are less frequently reported on in the literature. These include;

- The sense of meaning and purpose associated with serving in animal welfare & contributing to the greater good.
- Community perception of being an essential and needed service.
- The team and community feel of many work environments.
- Achievement and satisfaction that comes with clinical success and good news stories

This is an area of opportunity for ongoing research. Leveraging existing protective factors will form an important part in future solutions and initiatives to improve veterinary wellness.

### Psychosocial risk factors

Some of the most common psychosocial risk factors that exist in the veterinary industry include.

- Lack of work-life balance
- Financial stressors
- Challenging client interactions
- High pressure work environment
- Emotional & moral distress
- Personal/professional identity dilemma.

### Psychosocial protective factors

Some of the most common psychosocial protective factors that exist in the veterinary industry include.

- High sense of meaning & purpose
- Internal motivation & engagement with work
- Sense of community & connection
- High levels of autonomy in work
- Achievement & satisfaction
- Good team environment

## Interventions to address veterinary wellness

SuperFriend conducted a desktop analysis of organisations in Australia and internationally who are currently intervening and offering services, resources or initiatives to tackle mental health and wellness in the veterinary industry.

These included the veterinary associations across the world, charities and not-for-profits, education providers and other organisations with an interest in veterinary mental health and wellness.

Through this analysis it was determined that a range of interventions are being offered across the industry, predominantly focused towards managing illness when it occurs. There remains further opportunity in the prevention of illness and interventions that promote the positives of working in the industry and maintaining wellness.

### Common interventions

When addressing mental health across a workforce or workplace it's important an integrated approach is taken to include interventions aimed at preventing harm, promoting positive mental health and managing illness. The most common interventions offered in Australia and internationally currently includes but is not limited to;

- Free counselling services
- 24/7 mental health helpline
- Benevolent funds and grants
- Mental health training
- Suicide intervention training
- Peer support programs
- Graduate mentoring
- Leadership training
- Mental health and well-being resources
- Continuing professional development

"The industry faces high rates of suicide & mental health issues. This needs to be better communicated to the public"

"It would be good if there was more mental health support, like better training and knowing where everyone is at"

SuperFriend ITW report 2020

### Our recommendations

United as one, the industry can achieve great things, which is why SuperFriend recommends creating an industry wide approach to veterinary wellness inclusive of investing in further research and creating stronger links with state health and safety regulators.

We recommend an approach to veterinary wellness that not only focuses on known risk factors but aims to enhance those protective factors that exist to leverage the positive aspects of working in the industry.

Through the partnership between SuperFriend and AVA strategic recommendations will be formed to address the issue of veterinary wellness and importantly stakeholder consultation will form the backbone of bringing the voice of the industry to the forefront in these solutions. This stakeholder consultation will form phase 2 of the project and will commence shortly.

For more information email [info@superfriend.com.au](mailto:info@superfriend.com.au)

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