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Occupational stress and its management among the Veterinary Professionals

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Abstract

Veterinary practice certainly has its share of stress, with veterinarians having to deal with difficult clients, complicated cases, sometimes financial worries, ethical dilemmas or workplace tensions. Veterinary profession, especially the para-clinical and clinical practice is a demanding, and at times, a very stressful occupation. Veterinarians operate under unique constraints unlike human medical counterparts and other professionals. Financial, diagnostic, communication and therapeutic considerations pose limitations to the accurate diagnosis and correct treatment of many clinical cases. Despite these obvious constraints, clients often expect the same results from veterinarians at a cost that the human medical profession can offer through a State funded health system, while in reality this is just not possible due to multi-factorial limitations.

Euthanasia represents the most emotionally stressful situation for the veterinarian. Although euthanasia is included as a part of the professional curriculum, the component of training in how to deal with a distressed client or indeed with distress is not incorporated. In addition, working with varying species of animals are also stress inducers. The stressors in these situations need to be considered and managed.

The veterinary profession is aiming to increase social support among veterinarians with mentoring and helpline assistance. Training in skills such as conflict resolution, managing client grief, assertiveness, communication, and management skills for practice managers may also help but other issues including workloads, hours worked and isolation will be more difficult to resolve. Above all it is important to find ways to address stressors in order to enhance the satisfaction that veterinary work can provide and generate the awareness about the profession in society, especially under Indian scenario.

Keywords: Occupational stress, management strategies, veterinary professionals

Introduction

Stress is defined as 'a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or demanding circumstances'. Bad stress is known as distress, while good, motivating stress is known as eustress. Stress is normal in the day-to-day life of a veterinarian.

Veterinarians are exposed to a wide variety of stressful conditions and occupational hazards during their working life. Stress may be of competing demands of work and family, to diagnosing and treating critically ill patients, to dealing with difficult co-workers or employees, to making ends meet financially, bites, scratches and other trauma from animals, needle stick and sharps injuries, musculoskeletal disorders, occupational dermatoses, car accidents, as well as exposures to zoonotic diseases, x-rays, anaesthetic gases and other chemicals^[26, 11, 21]

Past research among veterinary professionals has suggested that proactive measures with a view to creating awareness about job resources such as external support in planning, extra help in administration and in clinical work are important in improving work in the veterinary profession. Several countries such as UK, USA, Canada and Norway have begun concerted attempts to adopt stress management interventions specifically for veterinarians. Similar measures in India could also be instrumental in improving well being of professional involved in veterinary practice. This review specifically describes the occupational stress experienced by veterinarians, its correlation with health status and strategies to overcome these stressors for better job satisfaction among the professionals.

Stressors in the Veterinary Workplace

The salience of job stress as an area of research has been due in part to the magnitude of its

effects. In addition to being associated with a variety of physical diseases including hypertension, high levels of job stress can have a negative effect on emotional well being^[15, 16]. At the organizational level, high levels of job stress have been linked to low levels of productivity^[10]. In general, job stress has been viewed as an antecedent of job satisfaction and the two constructs have been treated as related yet distinct^[23]. An inverse relationship between job stress and job satisfaction among various populations has been reported constantly in literature^[9]. The veterinary profession has been identified by a number of studies as a stressful occupation^[11]. A better understanding of the stressors in veterinary practice may allow for identification of strategies to improve the working conditions of veterinarians with resulting benefits for the quality of veterinary health care.

Veterinarians have roles which incorporate many duties of multiple healthcare professionals from nursing to surgical interventions. The professionals are expected to have the education and experience to perform duties such as placement of intravenous and central lines, radiology technique, anesthesia monitoring, surgical interventions, medication dosing and administration, knowledge of multiple species, treatment protocols, human resources, health and safety regulations, client communications, grief counselling, and many more. These expectations from the public and the employer can cause stress and heavy workloads.

In addition, many management responsibilities are also to be performed by the veterinarians. Management responsibilities may include hiring and firing, scheduling of employees, scheduling of appointments and surgeries, ordering supplies and maintaining inventory, maintenance of facilities, and many others. These management duties often fall to the support staff adding to the workload.

Veterinary public health concerns all aspects of food production chain from controlling transmissible diseases that may impact human health to slaughter procedures and inspection of carcasses and products until their sale on the stores. Food safety and inspection veterinarians check on animal products in order to ensure safe food supplies to the consumers.

Research veterinarians, who work in laboratories, conduct research on human and animal health problems. These veterinarians may perform tests on experimental animals, for example to identify the effects of new drug therapies, or they may test new surgical techniques. They may also research how to prevent, control, or eliminate food- and animal-borne illnesses and diseases. Also there are veterinarians who deal with experimental animals, to ensure their health and welfare.

Veterinarians perform different tasks that can be counted among those at risk for health and safety, in particular, working with herds of animals, lair ages, slaughter houses, farms, stables and meat processing plants, and much different tasks that relate in various ways to the problem (and risks).

The main physical risks for veterinary profession are injuries/trauma/musculoskeletal disorders and ionizing radiations. Chemical risk can result mainly from the use of gaseous anesthetics, drugs (and in particular anti-neoplastic and anti-parasitic agents), detergents and disinfectants. Biological risk is present in all work activities where there is risk of exposure to biological agents (EG rabies virus), any organism that may cause infection, allergy or poisoning^[2, 12, 5].

Research has suggested that people whose work requires them to kill animals suffer from occupational stress^[4].

In a survey of 148 animal workers whose jobs involved euthanasia, including veterinarians, shelter workers, and

animal researchers, it was found that 39% of the participants reported mild symptoms of euthanasia-related traumatic stress, and 11% reported moderate symptoms^[18].

Zoonosis are also suspected to bring about an increased risk of cancer, as suggested by some epidemiological data showing that veterinarians, meat inspectors and slaughterhouse workers experience an increased risk of myelolymph proliferative disorders attributed to contact with animal on coviruses, in particular those associated with poultry and cattle farming^[8]. Exposure to oncogenic viruses, in particular papilloma viruses, could also be an etiologic agent of oesophageal cancer in cattle and humans and studies have reported an increased risk of oesophageal cancer in veterinarians^[24].

Sources of stress that create poor wellness in veterinarians include giving bad news to the owners, managing adverse events, long hours worked by day clients expectations, working in teams and balancing work and home life. But handling ethical dilemmas, in particular regarding euthanasia (especially among veterinarians involved in small animal and equine work^[17, 25]), seemed to be the worst stressor. Some stress is necessary for achieving one's best performance but poorly managed stress can result in burnout, substance abuse, depression, anxiety relationship distress, abuse of tobacco, alcohol and drugs a negative work-home life environment and even suicide in particular in women and younger vets^[17, 13].

A study conducted in Kerala, India to know the important aspects of job situation in terms of stress factors which influence job satisfaction. The two top ranking stress factors found were prescribing costly medicines to poor livestock owner and large animal practices especially attending dystocia. The study concluded that majority of the veterinarians perceived medium level of stress^[22].

Strategies to overcome stress in veterinary profession

Coping is the process of thoughts and behaviors that people use to manage the internal and external demands of situations they appraise as being stressful or exceeding their own resources. Coping efforts seek to manage, master, tolerate, reduce or minimize the demands of a stressful environment. Over 400 different ways of coping have been identified and numerous frameworks for categorizing them have been put forward^[20]. Strategies are often organized according to whether they aim to address the problem causing distress (problem focused coping) or reduce the negative emotions associated with the problem (emotion-focused coping).

The American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) listed out the following tips for stress-relief^[1, 3]

- Incorporate regular exercise
- Sufficient amount of sleep
- Not to be a workaholic. Try to maintain a balance between work and leisure/play
- Don't allow "stress to eat you". Follow a well-balanced nutritious healthy and timely diet
- Delegate tasks to the rest of the workforce
- Conflict management should be a part of life
- Spend time with those whose company you enjoy.
- There are benefits of human-animal bonding. Pets at home acts as mood elevators.

The Mayo Clinic^[14] suggests four strategies for coping with stress

a. Avoid

- Take control of your surroundings to modify the situation.

- Avoid people who bother you and can incite stress.
 - Learn to say no in difficult situations.
 - Prioritise your to-do list.
- b. Alter**
- Respectfully ask others to change their behaviour.
 - Communicate your feelings openly in the work place without disturbing the feelings of co-workers.
 - Manage your time efficiently.
 - State limits in advance.
- c. Accept**
- Talk with someone who understands the situation.
 - Forgiveness should be practice of life since it brings down negative energy.
 - Practice positive self-talk.
 - Learn from your mistakes.
- d. Adapt**
- Adjust your standards and expectations.
 - Practice thought-stopping by refusing to replay a stressful situation
 - Reframe the issue with a new viewpoint.
 - Adopt a mantra such as, "I can handle this," and mentally repeat it in tough situations.
 - Create an assets column such as vacation, children and pets.
 - Look at the big picture by giving a time frame

Methods for stress management also include meditation, yoga, expressive writing, mindfulness, or affirmations. Stress reduction also can come from physical exercise, playing games with your family, spending time with friends, or finding 15 minutes of quiet time to be alone. Since most of us got into the veterinary profession because we love animals, it can mean taking 15 minutes extra each day to spend quality time with your pets.

Recently, multi-theory model (MTM) of health behaviour change and its application toward helping veterinary professionals start and continue stress-management behaviours have been proposed [19].

This model explains the complex process of behaviour change into initiation and sustenance. For veterinarians and veterinary students starting a chosen stress management behaviour, the first and foremost requisite is that they must be convinced that advantages of such a behaviour change of regular relaxation practice outweigh its disadvantages.

Two-way participatory dialogue between a facilitator and veterinarians and veterinary students can be one of the effective ways to reduce stress. The facilitator can be a senior colleague, who has learned and mastered such techniques, a professional health education specialist, a professional counsellor, or anyone well versed with these techniques interested in propagating them.

Building confidence can be done via a step-by-step delineation of chosen relaxation techniques, such as progressive muscle tightening and relaxation; autogenic training (warmth and heaviness of different body parts are imagined), visual imagery focused on past, present, or future happy events; meditation concentrating on inner energy or sublimation of thoughts is done; or biofeedback using physiological instrumentation to guide relaxation.

Physical environment changes include accessibility and availability of necessary equipment and facilities. If a person does not have access to a quiet place where he or she can practice relaxation behaviour for 20 to 30 minutes every day, then efforts must be made to secure access to such a place. If

biofeedback is used, the physiological machines must be available, and so on.

One approach that can help throughout the day is to try to become mindful of moments when you start to feel stressed, and take immediate action to manage that stress. Breathe deeply, take a five-minute break from work, or take a quick walk for change of scenery. If a difficult conversation with a client or co-worker is expected, take 15 seconds before walking into the room, and just breathe deeply [1].

Coping with stress has two main functions: addressing the problems responsible for stress (problem-focused coping) and regulating the feelings that arise from stress, which include anxiety, anger and sadness (emotion focused coping). In general, the best fit occurs when people use the appropriate strategy for the changeable and unchangeable aspects of a situation. A broad coping technique, including both problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies, is regarded as being most effective for managing stress in a difficult situation. Always consider a greater range of strategies to deploy and to carefully select approaches based on the nature of a specific stressor, rather than rely on their natural inclinations towards a particular coping style. The stresses experienced by the veterinary professionals both in work and life in general may then become bearable and manageable in due course of time [4, 6, 7].

Conclusion

In this modern world managing stress is a daily challenge for all professionals involved in health care management. Identification of causes for the stressors is considered as primary approach in stress management. It is mandatory to use the ideas, various skills and techniques discussed above to give the professional life a reasonably balanced structure on a daily basis. Ideally, in every day there should be proper time designated for work, time out, meditation/relaxation, exercise and some connection with loved ones. It is strongly recommended for a weekly action plan and set a balance between personal and professional life. By developing a solid practice of self-care, every individual can reasonably become stress proof to certain extent.

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