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Burnout and compassion fatigue within veterinary nursing: a literature review

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ABSTRACT: Compassion fatigue within veterinary nursing is a daily occurrence. Veterinary medicine attracts compassionate, caring individuals, but caring for others who are in emotional and physical pain is at a cost to the veterinary professional involved. Compassion fatigue can damage a person mentally and be problematic to the physical work that they do, contributing to an unhappy work environment and clinical errors being made. It is important that mental health within the Registered Veterinary Nurse (RVN) profession is explored further and the preventative measures discussed to help minimise the risk to the whole veterinary profession.

KEYWORDS: burnout; compassion fatigue; depression; stress; trait perfectionism

Compassion fatigue is described as secondary traumatic stress and vicarious traumatisation, which translates to cumulative stress (DeNayer, 2014).

A 2014 study by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) discovered that 90% of veterinary surgeons reported work to be stressful (O'Connor, 2016). As many Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVNs) are in the same environment, this could also be the case for them. As O'Connor (2016) advised, frequent or prolonged exposure to stressful situations at work can affect physical and psychological health, which reduces job satisfaction and commitment. RVNs are continually exposed to high levels of stressful situations, which Michie (2002) defined as those that are unpredictable or uncontrollable, uncertain, ambiguous or unfamiliar, and involving conflict, loss or performance expectations. These scenarios can be experienced by the RVN every day; for example, the demands of animal care, euthanasia and patient cardiopulmonary resuscitation, the balance of work and home and keeping clients happy as well as management.

Many RVNs may also have trait perfectionism, which can be described as the tendency to have very high and rigid standards for the self and others and is often implicated in the experience of psychological distress (Crane, Phillips, & Karin, 2015). Due to many nurses wanting to give the best standard of care to each and every patient, this can cause significant stressors when they are unable to give this care, which could be due to many possibilities but most likely busy workload and understaffing within the veterinary hospital.

Stress can be defined as the body's physical, mental or emotional response to a change (Sinclair, Raffin-Bouchal, Venturato, Mijovic-Kondejewski, & Smith-MacDonald, 2017). Stress within veterinary hospitals is something that every colleague will experience at one time or another. As Hatch, Winefield, Christie, and Lievaart (2011) discussed, in the work environment stressors include long hours, client expectations, inadequate support and emotional exhaustion, all contributing to career disenchantment. Purcell, Kutash, and

Cobb (2011) concluded that there was a correlation between patient work load and nursing staffing factors contributing to nursing stress levels. Within the veterinary profession there are known shortages of veterinary nurses throughout the UK, which leads to hospitals continually having to try to employ staff. As Waters (2018) announced, staffing issues are one of the biggest headaches for vets needing to recruit suitable staff, as 44% of UK practices are looking to recruit within the next year. This in turn causes extra pressure on the RVNs still at the practice to step up and do extra shifts or overtime to ensure patient care is covered.

Each hospital is different. As Purcell et al. (2011) noted, hospitals with the highest workload had nurses who had higher burnout than those nurses with a lesser workload. This concluded that emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction were risk-adjusted to patient mortality and nurses with higher workloads had higher burnout than those nurses with lesser workloads (Purcell et al., 2011).

Many stressors in the veterinary environment cannot be ignored, as many are part of the RVN's daily jobs. There are some that can be avoided with the help of management within a practice; for example, working extra shifts, staff shortages and support. This lies with the individual being able to ask for help from management above, but the management also has a duty of care to ensure that their employee's mental health and well-being is not being put at stake.

Burnout is a multidimensional construct that includes elements of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced person accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Huggard and Huggard (2008) labelled compassion fatigue as an occupational stress that anyone in caring and helping professions can experience.

Burnout is already known to be widespread among human nurses and is thought to have numerous negative correlates (Dev, Fernando, Lim, & Considine, 2018). Prior studies of burnout show consistent links to negative mental and physical health outcomes. Greater burnout has been linked to poorer immune functioning, lower social support and greater substance use (Nakamura, Nagase, Yoshida, & Ogino, 1999). Figley and Roop (2006) conducted a survey across 200 veterinary practices in the USA, which demonstrated that over 50% of veterinary technicians (which are the equivalent to

the RVN) were classified as being at moderate or extremely high risk of experiencing compassion fatigue.

Occupational stress is associated with a number of negative outcomes for the workplace and the individual. In the animal care profession, workplace stress has been linked to intentions to leave, staff turnover, accidents at work and car accidents (Kimber & Gardner, 2016). Further to this, occupational stress can exacerbate the development of mental health disorders and contribute to an increased risk of suicide (Bartram & Baldwin, 2010). There are the stressors of the veterinary profession that once more contribute to the signs of depression or anxiety ending in suicide. Mosedale (2009) noted that possible explanations for the high risk of veterinary suicide lie with ready access to drugs, social and professional isolation, subconscious expectations and financial pressures.

As Halliwell and Hoskin (2005) discussed, the veterinary profession must develop a greater awareness within the profession of the issue of suicide, of the predisposing signs and the warning signs. There is ample evidence that bringing these issues out into the open rather than bottling them up is of great assistance in preventing suicides (Halliwell & Hoskin, 2005).

The implications for the veterinary profession is that compassion fatigue and burnout will ultimately impact on an individual's work, leading to poor attendance, job dissatisfaction and risks to patient safety (Boyle, 2011). This can then affect the remaining team members, causing added stressors, resulting in a snowball effect of other team members suffering from similar symptoms. It is also an integral part of the retention of qualified nursing staff, as many people also leave their jobs due to the effects of compassion fatigue (Rudman & Gustavsson, 2012).

Platt and Hawton (2000) have recommended that health promotion initiatives designed to reduce occupational stressors and enhance personal and interpersonal skills for managing stress are important in occupations with a high risk of suicide. Due to the stresses of the contemporary workplace, the challenges of maintaining satisfactory work-life balance, and the costs to business that mental health has on employees, many organisations have contracted to make counselling services available to their staff (McLeod, 2010). However, Sinclair et al. (2017) discussed that self-care interventions are the

primary modality for compassion fatigue prevention and management, emphasising the need for healthcare providers to achieve a work-life balance. Boyle (2011) identified the common self-care interventions as being exercise, good nutrition, maintaining healthy social networks and mind-body techniques such as yoga. In recent articles, some large companies have been installing gym equipment into the work place to help with these interventions.

The RCVS Codes of Conduct (2019) oblige the veterinary profession to be aware of their own and their colleagues' mental well-being, and employers have a duty of care to protect their employees' mental health. Boyle (2011) recommended that a good work-life balance should be encouraged by employers with the provision for adequate rest time, and Smith (2016) advised that if staff members are struggling with stress, employers should offer to send them on specific training courses to help them manage their work load and stress levels more effectively. As the veterinary profession struggles with mental health and compassion fatigue, structures should be put in place to provide support for all colleagues, as Cherry, Sheridan, and Tottey (2017) voiced that developing a culture where employees are encouraged to express emotions and talk about their experiences with traumatic and sad cases will help to reduce compassion fatigue.

Mental health awareness and counselling is recommended by studies to help reduce burnout and compassion fatigue, as well as stress-related sickness from work. It is important the RVNs continue to have a good work-life balance in what can be a very stressful environment, again to lessen the chance of compassion fatigue. Within the modern veterinary hospital, it should be imperative that management should be leading colleagues to better mental health with mental health first aiders, counselling and occupation health appointments if necessary.

Disclosure statement

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