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Understanding and overcoming the effects of compassion fatigue within the veterinary profession

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ABSTRACT: Veterinary professionals have to constantly deliver a compassionate and sympathetic service to clients and the pets we treat. However, daily stress and lack of support in the working environment can cause the manifestation of a number of physical and psychological symptoms. Collectively, these symptoms are referred to as compassion fatigue. This can negatively impact the quality of care delivered by RVNs and could be responsible for nurses leaving the profession. A more self-nurturing and sympathetic approach must be adopted by veterinary nurses and managerial staff to reduce the impact of compassion fatigue in practice.

It is commonly acknowledged that veterinary nursing is a difficult and emotionally draining profession to enter into. So many of us enter into this vocation with hopes of nurturing and caring for patients and supporting clients when they need us most; however, many are not prepared for the emotional toll that providing high levels of care and compassion takes on their well-being.

From personal experience, when I first registered as a veterinary nurse, I would often feel drained at the end of the day and be unable to have an undisturbed night of sleep, unable to switch off from the events of the day. Needless to say, this impacted on my overall well-being and left me feeling isolated. As it turns out, this is not uncommon.

The veterinary profession requires its members to behave in a compassionate and epithetical manner towards clients and patients. The ability to detect suffering in others, and the desire to alleviate anguish and pain, is what propels many to

deliver outstanding care and upholds the excellent reputation of our profession.

However, over the years, an increasingly high level of pressure has been put on veterinary teams. The expectations of clients can, on occasion, seem very hard to meet, and no matter how much is offered, some situations will remain unresolved. In addition to this, many practices are beginning to offer a seven-day service to clients, increasing the number of hours worked by vets and nurses. The ability to refer patients to dedicated out-of-hours surgeries has significantly reduced the need for nurses and surgeons to be on-call. However, staff will stay far past the end of their shift to deal with an emergency which arises when they are still in practice, or even to write up their clinical notes at the end of a busy day.

This alone can be taxing enough for nurses to process, but the addition of environmental stressors, such as inadequate facilities, stressful cases and personal conflicts, can lead to a number of symptoms.

Symptoms

These symptoms can be physical, such as gastric upset, headaches and inappetence, or psychological. Sufferers can experience depression, anxiety, insomnia, detachment from everyday life and the inability to concentrate (Brannick et al., 2015). These symptoms are all linked to sustained acts of empathy and sympathy and are collectively referred to as compassion fatigue.

It has now been identified that those in care-giving professions, such as veterinary nursing or veterinary medicine, are at risk of the psychological impact from daily deliverance of care.

However, there has been little change in attitudes towards the veterinary team, either by the public or in some cases even managerial departments. Long working hours, overtime and an attitude of “having to make do” has long since been the norm.

A study of human emergency department nurses showed that low levels of managerial support lead to increased cases of compassion fatigue. Those with supportive, compassionate managers tended to score higher on the Professional Quality of Life Scale (Hunsaker, Chen, Maughan, & Heaston, 2015). Having been fortunate enough to have worked alongside supportive and encouraging management, it is obvious with hindsight how much this support can benefit your daily working life. Studies looking into the effects of compassion fatigue in student midwives found that those who were more critical of themselves were found to be less compassionate towards others (Beaumont, Durkin, Hollins, & Jerome, 2016). Although this study was carried out in the human medical field, the same findings could be applied to the veterinary industry.

Veterinary nurses must show high levels of compassion to deliver the best nursing care to their patients and excel in caring for their clients. If a nurse is unable to attain this high level of practice, then their reputation, as well as that of their practice and the veterinary nursing profession, may suffer as a result. It could also be argued that those performing less well at work could then increasingly feel that they are inefficient at their job and also lead to a break down in relationships with colleagues and others.

Burn-out

Continuing to work through compassion fatigue, without support and with nothing

changing within the practice environment, can lead to an emotional state known as “Burn-out”.

Brannick et al. (2015) accounted many emotional states that are associated with burn-out, including self-doubt, whether that be in working or social environments. Additionally, it leads to increased negative interactions within the veterinary practice. This feeling of being unable to cope can lead to some extremely serious psychological ailments, such as an inability to concentrate, which leads to an increased risk of being involved in a road traffic accident, depression, anxiety, the development of negative coping strategies (coming to rely on alcohol, overeating, etc.) and suicidal thoughts (Brannick et al., 2015).

Veterinary professionals are at greater risk of suicide than are members of the general public, and yet there is limited support available, compared to NHS workers and other care-giving professions (Brannick et al., 2015).

Williams and Robinson (2014) noted that the average age of veterinary nurses who leave the profession is 30 years. In comparison to other industries, that is very young, and one factor contributing to this figure was found to be the perceived lack of mental well-being in members of the profession. Veterinary nurses score an average of 47.5 on the Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale, and the population average is 51. This is evidence to support that veterinary nurses do not feel that their standard of life compares to their friends and family, who perhaps work in less-demanding environments. In addition, it seems that those under the age of 20, on average, have a slightly higher welfare score (48.9) than their older colleagues, and male veterinary nurses have marginally higher perceived well-being than their female co-workers (Williams & Robinson, 2014).

Overcoming symptoms

This has been recognised by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), who has commissioned a number of programmes to assist those suffering from the effects of compassion fatigue.

The Mind Matters Initiative (MMI), which is funded by the RCVS, was established to promote good well-being and raise awareness of mental health problems within the veterinary industry. Aside from educating

members of the profession about good mental well-being, they run workshops teaching resilience techniques to undergraduate veterinary surgery students. It is encouraging that as recognition of the problems posed by compassion fatigue increases, the veterinary surgeons of the future may be better equipped to deal with practice challenges (Mind Matters, 2017).

The Vetlife Helpline is a charity available to all who work in the veterinary profession. They offer a 24/7 telephone and e-mail support service. On contacting them, they can provide on-phone counselling and further referral to external counselling services. By providing information and resources to veterinary practices, they are easily accessible to those who need them (Veterinary Benevolent Fund, 2015).

Surgeries in America have identified the need to educate veterinary professionals about self-care and self-validation which teach stress-coping strategies and mind–body skills. This approach could be adopted within the UK in conjunction with the MMI and their education programmes. However, managerial support and cooperation is vital in implementing changes and ensuring they have a long-lasting effect (Brannick et al., 2015).

Developing positive relationships between those who work in a veterinary practice is also vital. From personal experience, team outings are an effective way of bonding the team; however, additional practices could include team sports and participating in competitions together. The MMI recommends completing intense physical activities, carried out in 10-minute bouts, to promote good mental well-being (Mind Matters, 2017). Team sports could effectively increase the formation of positive interpersonal relationships as well as increasing mental well-being within the team.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the attitudes within the veterinary industry to the demands and pressures faced by professionals must change. A more self-caring, considerate and understanding nature must be adopted by both managers and employees alike. Managers must be aware of the risks of compassion fatigue and fully support staff members, as well as identifying individuals at risk. Veterinary nurses and surgeons must be responsible for their own well-being, ensuring that they apply stress

management methods, and fostering good relationships between co-workers.

Fundamentally, we are responsible for our own health, and it must be noted that when we are less judgemental and more caring towards ourselves, we are able to excel in providing compassionate, considerate nursing care to our patients. A mantra to apply to daily work in the veterinary industry should be that we cannot provide care for our patients and clients until we have first taken care of ourselves.

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