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Gemma graduated from Harper Adams University in 2014 with a BSc (Hons) degree in Veterinary Nursing and Practice Management. She has worked in a number of practices around the West Midlands, either as a locum or permanent staff member. After taking a year to work as a Teaching Assistant at Harper Adams University in 2016, she has returned to practice full time, while maintaining to research work-related stress within the veterinary nursing industry. Outside of work, Gemma is the proud owner of an accident prone saluki-cross dog and mischievous ginger kitten.

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The influence veterinary practice management teams have on the welfare of veterinary nurses within the work environment

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ABSTRACT: There are many factors within a veterinary environment which can lead to poor welfare for veterinary nurses; this can lead to a number of negative consequences.

This investigation proposed a study to establish whether a relationship existed between how approachable, in terms of discussing mental and physical well-being, practice management teams are, and whether veterinary nurses would consider leaving the veterinary practice due to perceived poor welfare within the veterinary practice.

An online survey was distributed to veterinary nurses employed by Independent VetCare Ltd (n = 83) and results were analysed using chi-squared analysis on Microsoft Excel 2013®.

It was established that no significant relationship could be demonstrated between managerial approachability and perceived poor welfare being a considerable factor for leaving the veterinary profession.

Keywords: management; occupational stress; well-being

Introduction

Compassion fatigue

Working as a veterinary nurse is often a rewarding occupation, but it is not without its difficulties.

Exposure to traumatic events on a regular basis can take a toll on the psyche of those working within the veterinary industry (Foster & Maples, 2014). This exposure can lead to a number of physical and psychological symptoms which can include gastric upset, reduced appetite, headaches, insomnia, anxiety and depression. Collectively these symptoms, in relation to care-giving, are referred to as Compassion Fatigue (CF) or secondary trauma stress (Brannick et al., 2015; Huggard & Huggard, 2008).

Veterinary nurses are regularly exposed to traumatic situations, for example partaking in the euthanasia of a well-known patient. Such duties of care can put veterinary nurses at risk of suffering with CF (Black, Winefield, & Chur-Hansen, 2011).

Occupational stress

Veterinary professionals are also at risk of suffering psychological strain and stress due to factors associated with the working environment. This strain is referred to as Occupational Stress (OS) and is as equally dangerous as CF, as over time it can erode the sense of occupational engagement and decrease job satisfaction (Deacon & Brough, 2017). Poor staff health and high staff turnover will have negative economic implications for the practice and potentially alter the team dynamics (Foster & Maples, 2014).

The British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) (2014) conducted a study which investigated sources of work-related stress for veterinary nurses. The greatest sources of stress included managing finances and making professional mistakes. Number of hours worked and work-place relationships could also cause dissatisfaction within the veterinary practice.

The effect this has on the veterinary nursing profession

Continuing to work while experiencing stress and trauma within the working environment could increase the risk of entering a state of burn-out, where feelings of being ineffective in one's job role and cynicism are experienced (Black et al., 2011). Suicidal thoughts can become more common, as does the reliance on negative coping mechanisms, for example alcohol dependence (Brannick et al., 2015; Stoewen, 2015).

Williams and Robinson (2014) discovered that, on average, veterinary nurses who left the profession were approximately 30 years old. This could be linked to another finding of the study: quality of life scores on the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale for veterinary nurses were less than the national average.

There are many factors influencing occupational well-being. High job demands and a lack of control are commonly noted as factors influencing quality of working life (Black et al., 2011). Additionally, Deacon and Brough (2017) found social support to be a major factor influencing OS in the work place.

Studies in Emergency Department human nurses discovered that the majority of those who considered themselves to be suffering from CF perceived themselves to be lacking in support offered by managers (Hunsaker, Chen, Maughan, & Heaston, 2015). Good managers are problem-solvers, and they need to support the employees of a veterinary practice in order for them to be effective in their job role (Jerving-Bäck & Bäck, 2007).

Research question

With current changes in the veterinary industry, veterinary practice managers are often in a position of leadership, and as well as driving the business forwards they are in a position to influence well-being for veterinary professionals. Veterinary practice managers have a vital role to

play in promoting an engaging and supportive work place, as well as motivating employees (Jerving-Bäck & Bäck, 2007). However, as shown by Hunsaker et al. (2015), support offered by managers can vary and this directly influences well-being of employees. Therefore, the study proposed looked to establish whether a relationship existed between the following factors: how approachable in terms of discussing mental and physical well-being management teams are, and how likely veterinary nurses would be to consider leaving the veterinary industry, due to perceived poor welfare within the practice.

Materials and methods

An online questionnaire was distributed to all veterinary nurses who worked in practices which were part of the Independent VetCare Group (IVC). The questionnaire consisted of 12 multiple-choice questions which in part asked participants: how approachable they considered their practice management team to be and how likely they would be to leave the veterinary practice due to perceived poor welfare. Participants were selected purely on their status as a veterinary nurse and their affiliation to IVC ($n = 100$). The results generated by this questionnaire were analysed using Microsoft Excel 2013[®], using chi-squared analysis.

Null hypothesis: The approachability of a practice management team in regards to discussing mental and physical well-being does not influence the likelihood of a veterinary nurse considering leaving their job in a veterinary practice, due to perceived poor welfare.

The author received no funding from any organisation during the process this investigation.

Ethics

The analysis of data previously collected, for the means of publication, was granted approval through Harper Adams University Ethics Committee.

Participants were advised that the study was being conducted as a private study and all answers were confidential, but results generated may be published for educational reasons. Participants were also assured that the survey did not aim to critique or appraise individual practices,

but look at overall trends throughout the profession. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis, which was stated clearly in the opening paragraph of the questionnaire.

Results

Data was collected over two months early in 2017.

Participants were asked to score on a scale how approachable they considered their veterinary practice management team to be in regards to discussing mental and physical well-being. The scale used ran from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated an unapproachable management team and 5 represented a very approachable management. The results show a negatively skewed data set (-0.25).

On average, nurses awarded a score of 3.4 (± 1.2) to management teams, with the modal (most common) and median (middle) score being 4, with a range of scores between 1 and 5. These results indicate that most nurses perceive their management teams to be approachable, but that there is room for improvement.

Figure 1 shows the difference between managerial approachability scores for nurses who would consider leaving practice due to perceived poor welfare at work and those that would not. Those that would leave practice had a mean score for managerial approachability of 3.2, whereas those who wouldn't consider leaving showed a slightly greater mean managerial approachability score of 3.5.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between how approachable veterinary nurses consider their management team to be in comparison with how likely they would be to consider perceived poor welfare at work as a factor which may influence a decision to cease working within a veterinary practice. Fifty percent of nurses, who consider their manager to be approachable or very approachable when discussing well-being, would still consider poor perceived welfare to be a factor which could influence their decision to cease working within a veterinary practice.

There is no significant relationship ($p > 0.05$) between the approachability of practice management and nurses' consideration of leaving the profession due to perceived poor welfare.

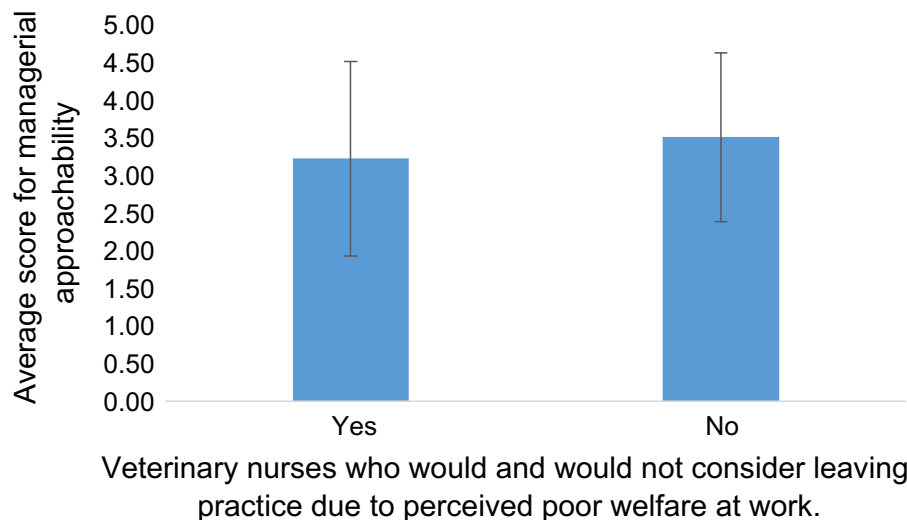


Figure 1. The average score awarded for managerial approachability in regards to discussing mental and physical well-being for nurses who would consider ceasing to work in a veterinary practice due to perceived poor welfare and those that would not (error bars show standard deviation)

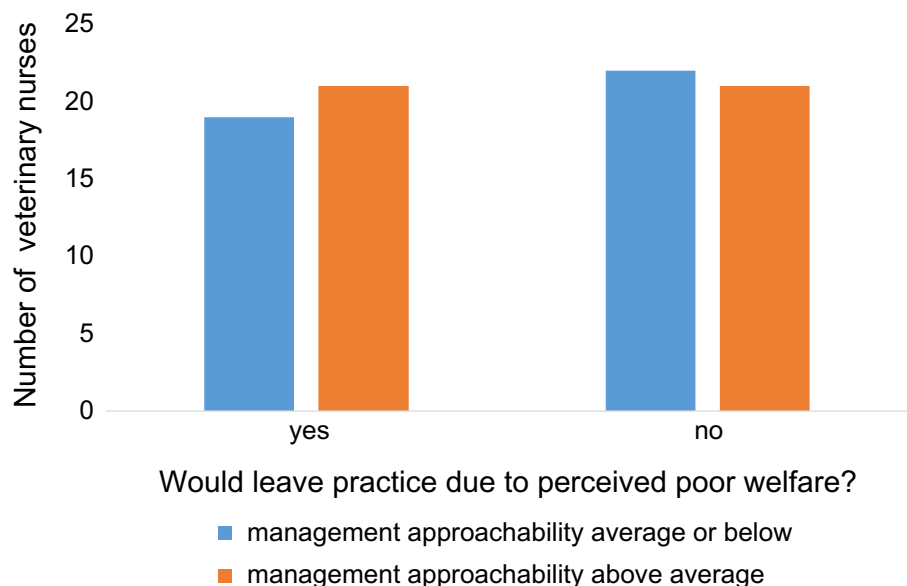


Figure 2. The relationship between how likely veterinary nurses would be to consider ceasing to work within a veterinary practice due to perceived poor welfare whilst working and how approachable they consider their practice management team to be in regards to discussing mental and physical well-being

Discussion

There was an 83% response rate to the questionnaire by RVNs working at IVC.

The results of this investigation show that no significant relationship exists between how approachable nurses find their management team to be regarding discussions of mental and physical well-being, and how likely they would be to cease working within a veterinary practice due to perceived poor welfare. Fifty percent of veterinary nurses who consider their practice management team to be approachable or very approachable may still consider leaving practice due to poor welfare.

There are a number of factors which could influence whether or not a veterinary nurse would perceive themselves to have poor welfare within the veterinary practice. These may include taking part in the euthanasia of animals, isolation of working in a small practice and long working days, all of which can affect the mental and physical well-being of veterinary nurses. Many of these factors cannot easily be overcome. Furthermore, it has been observed that some may be unwilling to disclose any health concerns they have due to the fear that highlighting any problems may impact upon their fitness to practise status (Hubbard, 2017; Stoewen,

2015). Tully (2004) determined that occupational stresses which can significantly affect welfare include job roles with little autonomy, and occupations which are physically demanding; these stressors are regularly encountered on a daily basis in practice.

The average managerial approachability score is 3.4, with a modal (most common) score of 4 out of a possible 5. This indicates that, overall, managers tend to be fairly approachable in regards to discussing mental and physical well-being. This could be due to the educational support IVC offers its managers regarding human resources (Independent VetCare, 2017). It could also be due to the fact that practice management teams are becoming more aware of the risks to the veterinary practice posed by poor well-being. The Mind Matters Initiative (MMI), launched by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons in 2014, particularly emphasised the subject of welfare within the industry. As a result, learning and understanding of best practices has been employed, and positive discussion regarding well-being is now increasingly encouraged RCVS (2014a).

Another thing to consider is that the responses could have varied according to the emotional status of the participant nurse during the completion of the survey, with negative or positive responses potentially exaggerated. Results may also have been influenced by any interactions participants had with their practice management team at the time of survey completion. Participants may also have had varied opinions of what they consider an approachable management team to be (Hunt, Chan, & Mehta, 2011).

The sample size of veterinary nurses who participated within this study was extremely small. By 2014, there were 11,661 registered veterinary nurses within the UK RCVS (2014b) and 83 nurses completed this survey. It would be preferable to repeat this investigation with a greater number of participants to identify whether the null hypothesis can be proven or rejected.

There is the potential that the results generated are not a truly reliable portrayal of the industry, as all participants of this study were all employed by the same company, Independent VetCare Ltd. IVC acquires veterinary practices, offering them financial support and access to a bank of clinical knowledge, and encourages independent governing which allows for variation in management styles.

Therefore, IVC was an ideal candidate for participation with this investigation. IVC is also a proactive company that promotes good employee welfare and so was keen to be involved.

In conclusion, it is not yet certain whether the approachability of veterinary practice management team affects the likelihood of nurses to consider leaving the veterinary industry due to perceived poor welfare at work. A further investigation into the welfare of veterinary nurses in the work place is required.

Ensuring that all staff members feel that they can speak out about any concerns is the first step in creating a supportive work space that allows individuals to develop and thrive.

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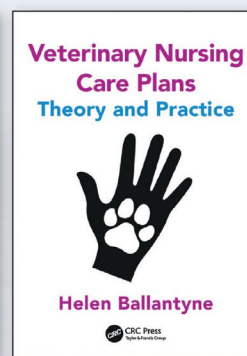
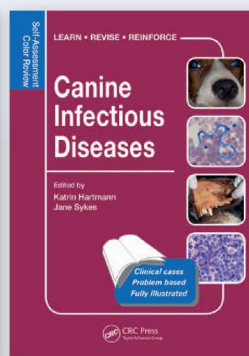
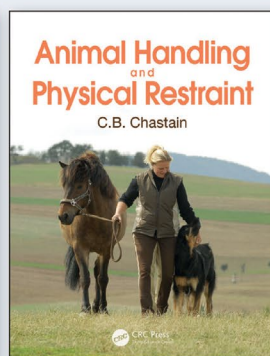
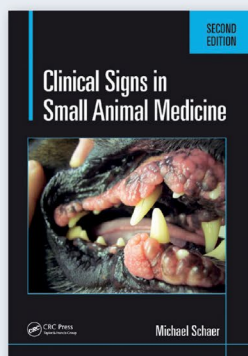
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