



Perspectives

Recent insights into the prevalence of mental health disorders in the veterinary profession

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A literature review was conducted on exploring the link between veterinary professionals and mental health disorders with publications in National Library of Medicine. The review revealed that mental health concerns, such as burnout and chronic stress, are widespread among veterinary professionals worldwide, with notable instances observed in regions like Hong Kong and Austria. This study calls for more research, better mental health awareness, exercise, expertise in animal welfare and ethics, and addressing occupational hazards and ethical challenges.

In their comparative study of various occupations and associated mental disorders, Williamson et al. discovered that veterinarians frequently encounter events of moral significance in their practice (Williamson et al., 2018).

Crane et al. examined trait perfectionism on moral stress (Crane et al., 2015). Their results indicated that inherent perfectionism is a personal trait that increases susceptibility to heightened distress when faced with moral dilemmas in veterinary practice. The potential consequences of these results and suggestions for future research were explored (Crane et al., 2015).

Stoewen et al. stated that alarmingly high suicide rates plague the veterinary profession, with veterinarians estimated to be twice as likely to take their own lives compared to dentists, more than double the rate of medical professionals, and a staggering four times higher than the general population (Stoewen, 2015).

Burnout, a syndrome of physical and emotional exhaustion due to prolonged occupational stress, affected individuals differently based on demographics (Steffey et al., 2023a). It negatively impacted healthcare organizations through decreased productivity, low morale, and suboptimal teamwork, potentially affecting patient care quality. Their review discussed the demographics of veterinary burnout, its impacts, and

mitigation strategies for the veterinary workplace and profession (Steffey et al., 2023a).

Smith et al. surveyed over 1000 veterinary professionals to examine the impact of pet ownership and exercise on their mental health (Smith et al., 2023). Their findings revealed that pet owners were more depressed than non-owners, with dog and horse owners showing less anxiety and suicidal ideation. Regular running, walking, and less sitting were associated with lower anxiety and depression. The type of pet owned may influence the relationship between pet ownership and mental health. Future research should explore these relationships further (Smith et al., 2023).

Chronic stress and burnout were significant issues in veterinary medicine, affecting sleep and health (Steffey et al., 2023b). Misconceptions often label burnout as a personal failure, suggesting healthcare professionals were less susceptible and can self-heal. These outdated and harmful beliefs hinder appropriate solutions. It was crucial for veterinarians to understand the problem, its causes, and impacts before implementing solutions. Their review defined burnout, discussed its pathophysiology, and identified occupational stressors leading to burnout (Steffey et al., 2023b).

Chan et al. examined the impact of Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) on the mental health of Hong Kong veterinarians (Chan and Wong, 2023). Their results showed high rates of suicide risk, suicidal ideation, depression, and anxiety among the participants. Burnout was identified as a predictor of depressive symptoms, and secondary traumatic stress potentially predicted suicide risk. However, no conclusive evidence was found linking compassion satisfaction to reduced mental health symptoms. Their study highlighted the need for further research and improved mental health literacy in the profession (Chan and Wong,

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2023).

Veterinarians face occupational stressors like excessive workload and financial constraints, leading to mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, burnout, and even suicide (da Silva et al., 2023). Risk factors included continuous exposure to challenging scenarios, interpersonal conflicts, performing euthanasia, and easy access to lethal means of suicide. Their study emphasized the need for understanding predisposing factors, improving the professional environment, and establishing mental health care policies. It suggested promoting mental health and preventing suicide through social support, resilience, coping skills, a healthy work environment, and discouraging perfectionist behaviors (da Silva et al., 2023).

Humer et al. studied and revealed a high mental health burden among Austrian veterinary students, with a significant percentage showing symptoms of depression, anxiety, insomnia, stress, alcohol abuse, and disordered eating (Humer et al., 2023). Factors associated with these symptoms included female gender, older age, low physical activity, high smartphone usage, and interest in small animal or wildlife medicine. Their findings underscored the need for teaching coping skills and strategies to improve mental hygiene in veterinary education (Humer et al., 2023).

Luethy et al. studied and evaluated the mental health of veterinary students post-COVID-19 pandemic measures (Luethy et al., 2023). They found high levels of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among the respondents. Fourth-year students had the lowest weekly vigorous physical activity. Notably, students engaged in high levels of vigorous exercise had significantly lower odds of self-reported depression symptoms. Their findings highlighted the high mental health concerns in this group (Luethy et al., 2023).

Veterinarians faced numerous occupational risks, including overworking, isolation, and professional and financial pressures (Mendez, 2024). These can lead to psychological distress and even suicide. The profession was also grappling with evolving client expectations and ethical dilemmas. Recent research focused on workplace discrimination and maintaining good veterinarian-client relationships. The profession's "feminization" raised concerns about gender wage gaps and discrimination. Despite more female veterinarians, the profession remained male-centric. Addressing these issues was crucial for the profession's future (Mendez, 2024).

Despite the positive aspects of the veterinary profession, the challenging socio-economic and cultural climate has been identified as a source of mental wellbeing issues (Jansen et al., 2024). Surveys across Europe showed high stress levels and the need for medical leave due to reduced mental wellbeing. Early-career and female veterinarians were most at risk. Despite increased attention to veterinary wellbeing, our results underlined the need for more supportive workplaces that prioritize wellbeing and job satisfaction (Jansen et al., 2024).

Veterinarians often found themselves in conflicting roles, such as animal welfare advocates and business owners (Florian et al., 2023). They explored how these decision-making factors significantly affect their mental health. High societal pressure and challenging work conditions contributed to their distress. Mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and burnout, were prevalent. They emphasized the need for veterinary professionals to be proficient in animal welfare, ethics, and moral decision-making. It called for more discussions on critical thinking and ethical decision-making in the profession and veterinary education (Florian et al., 2023).

This collection of studies highlighted the global mental health

challenges in the veterinary profession. It explored the impacts of burnout, the influence of pet ownership and exercise on mental health, and the significant issues of chronic stress. The mental health of Hong Kong veterinarians and Austrian veterinary students was assessed, revealing high rates of mental health disorders. The studies underscored the need for further research, improved mental health literacy, and the importance of exercise in reducing depression symptoms. They also highlighted the occupational risks veterinarians face, the evolving expectations and ethical dilemmas in the profession, and the socio-economic climate's impact on mental wellbeing. The studies emphasized the need for proficiency in animal welfare, ethics, and moral decision-making.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Yoshiyasu Takefuji: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Validation, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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