

## VIN Solutions to the Profession Essay Contest Second Place Winner

### Mental Health by Shannon Finn

In recent years, there has been increased recognition about the magnitude of mental health problems affecting veterinarians and veterinary students. In studies from the US and the UK, it was discovered that veterinarians had 1.5 times higher rates of depression, 2-2.5 times higher rates of anxiety, and a staggering 3-5.5 times higher rates of suicidal ideation than the general population.<sup>1,2</sup> Mental health issues are not restricted to veterinarians post-graduation, but rather, studies on mental health in veterinary students indicate that it is likely something that takes root in veterinary school. Numerous studies have reported that about one-third of veterinary students suffer from significantly increased levels of depression,<sup>3,4,5</sup> which is higher than the rates of depression in both medical students and the general population.<sup>6</sup> Studies have also demonstrated elevated anxiety levels in veterinary students,<sup>4,5</sup> increased burnout,<sup>6</sup> as well as elevated stress.<sup>3</sup>

There are many theories as to why we are currently facing this problem, although there is a lack of solid evidence to firmly back these speculations. Current theories include: stunting of emotional maturity in students put through such a rigorous program relatively early in life, selection of veterinary students based heavily on grades, perceived stigma about suffering from mental health challenges as a veterinary professional, a theorized correlation between a higher prevalence of adverse childhood events and the likelihood of choosing a veterinary career, tendencies of perfectionism and unhealthy relationships with failure, and obviously, the intense stresses and heavy workload of the veterinary curriculum.<sup>7</sup> It is also important to consider the trend of veterinary medicine becoming more female dominated,<sup>3,5</sup> as female students are identified as more likely to have increased levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>3,5</sup>

There is obviously a strong moral obligation to improve mental health in veterinary students and bring forth a new generation of resilient veterinarians who are better equipped to handle the challenges of the profession. In order to accomplish this, several key points should be emphasized: addressing stigma, implementing best-practices, and providing tangible resources. It is also vital that all levels of the profession, from students to national organizations, be involved in implementing the change.

Academic research is continuing to delve into the issue of veterinary mental health, and researchers in this field should strive to provide good quality evidence to support appropriate decision making for the profession. Many recently conducted studies are multi-institutional, which is a step towards better quality studies with larger sample sizes. It is also important to consider the research in parallel fields like human medicine and nursing. Systematic reviews regarding mental health and programs to improve well-being should be inclusive of these closely related fields in order to get a broader view of the issue.

Governing veterinary bodies at the national and state/provincial level should constantly consult high quality evidence to inform decision making about how best to support their veterinary members. Monetary resources should be funnelled towards consistent messaging (about stigma, and how to get help), improved emergency mental health care (such as hotlines or counselling), and providing evidenced-based

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preventative methods (such as mindfulness training<sup>8</sup>). Many associations have responded to the call for mental health help by providing a large quantity of online resources for veterinarians. This material would benefit from being presented in an organized or problem-based manner for ease of use and to prevent the user from being overwhelmed. Using a flow chart with a series of questions such as “Are you feeling \_\_\_\_\_?” may be effective, because many people do not recognize signs of depression, anxiety, or burnout in themselves, and therefore may not seek out the appropriate resources. Internal screening should be conducted to see how well these online resources are being used, and make changes accordingly. Governing bodies should also consider incentivizing “wellness oriented practices” in order to have veterinarians and practice owners prioritize employee well-being in the clinical setting. This might include certification to be “wellness oriented” similar to “cat friendly” or “fear-free” practices.

Veterinary schools should be seeking to include evidence-based methods for improving resilience into the core veterinary curriculum. This can include things like changing to pass/fail grading<sup>9</sup> and teaching mindfulness and self-compassion<sup>10</sup>. It is also a necessity to address the crippling stigma surrounding mental health. This can be done by educating faculty about mental health conditions, being lenient about mental health exemptions for exams, and being comfortable talking to students about well-being. Since veterinary students frequently assist classmates with mental health struggles, suicide prevention training should be available for all students, so they feel more comfortable when helping a struggling peer. Provision of adequate counselling services and emergency response is a must, and future budgets should take this into consideration.

Veterinary students can and should form student organizations to address mental health. These organizations should create events that incorporate sharing experiences to reduce stigma, practicing mindfulness, providing information on how to practice self-care (such as worksheets and self-evaluations), as well as advocating for provision (or creation!) of tangible resources (like mental health first-aid kits). Student leaders also need to have a seat at the table when mental health is being discussed at the school, provincial, national and international level, in order to be informed and inspired to create change and improve well-being in their colleagues.

Mental health in the veterinary profession is a multi-faceted issue, and solutions must be implemented at the national, state/provincial, academic and individual level in order to make the necessary improvements to veterinary mental health. This is one of the most important issues facing the future of the profession, and suicide related social media hashtags such as #VetStudentsUnited and groups like “Not One More Veterinarian” serve as a stark reminders of the tragic outcomes that can occur if effective action is not taken.

### About Shannon Finn



Shannon Finn is entering her fourth and final year at the Ontario Veterinary College in Guelph, Canada. She is hoping to go into rural food animal practice upon graduation, but also has interests in public health and regulatory medicine. After spending last summer researching resilience in vet students, Finn realized a passion for mental health advocacy and started her school's first wellness club called OVC THRIVE.

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