

## Extinguishing the Fire Before Burnout Takes Over

by Elyse Politica



To simply state it – burnout is breaking us.

The World Health Organization defines burnout as a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”.<sup>1</sup> Tense working environments, too few support staff, and high patient caseloads are all factors that contribute to the emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion associated with burnout. This exhaustion is driving current veterinary workers to leave the profession.<sup>2</sup>

For years, veterinarians and veterinary nurses have been trying to find ways to battle compassion fatigue, handle exhausting days, and manage a work-life balance. Before solutions were made, the pandemic began. Patient caseloads grew. Veterinary staff did not.

The solution to burnout lies in the hands of hospital owners and managers. They have the ability to limit the number of hours employees work each week and can help foster a healthy work environment where staff feel appreciated and empowered. A positive work culture will increase employee retention while also attracting new staff.

One way employers can support the success and longevity of their employees is by eliminating production-based compensation and limiting employee overtime. Production-based pay is advertised as a way to reward veterinarians for their hard work by paying them a percentage of the revenue they generate; however, it can negatively affect their wellbeing. It encourages veterinarians to work longer hours, squeeze in more patients each day, and not use their well-deserved vacation time because they will not earn production on days that they are not in the hospital. Young doctors may not initially see the problem with working extra hours each week to reduce their high debt loads, but this unsustainable and exhausting work ethic can easily lead to burnout. Rather, paying doctors a flat salary will encourage them to have a better work-life balance.

Employers can further reduce burnout by actively maintaining a healthy team environment. Research has shown that team effectiveness in a veterinary hospital greatly influences veterinary technician satisfaction and burnout.<sup>3</sup> Periodically reassessing efficiency and allowing technicians to delegate tasks among themselves so that they can perform the activities they each prefer can help strengthen employee satisfaction. Creating an anonymous ideas jar and implementing employee suggestions can help boost team morale while demonstrating the value of staff ideas.

An important aspect of team effectiveness is maintaining a positive attitude among the team members. Hospital managers should build relationships with their employees and understand when the personality of a typically positive employee starts to negatively change. Employees exhibiting signs of cynicism, reduced performance, and lack of patience are showing the classic characteristics of burnout.<sup>4</sup> If the signs of burnout among one staff member progress without being addressed, a vicious cycle of burnout through an entire clinic can be created as team effectiveness dissipates.

Managers need to understand the subtle signs of burnout among staff members while also working to educate other employees as to how to identify it in their coworkers. Veterinary staff can be very adept at reading the body language of animals. They recognize the subtle flick of a cat’s tail or the side glance from a dog as immediate warning signs that the animal is angry. However, the staff may fail to recognize when a coworker with whom they have been interacting all day is emotionally suffering. Veterinary staff need to be able to keep themselves healthy in order to keep their patients healthy. Having a trained professional speak to staff members regarding noticing the signs of burnout can help identify individual issues before they manifest into hospital-wide problems.

Lastly, employers can further promote a healthy work environment by demonstrating employee appreciativeness more frequently. Simply thanking staff members after each shift, congratulating staff after performing well during difficult cases, and sponsoring occasional bagel breakfasts or pizza dinners can help demonstrate appreciation.

I spent two years working as a veterinary technician in an emergency hospital. During particularly difficult days, the hospital owners would surprise everyone by having dinner delivered. Saturday mornings I would often walk into work to find bagels and pastries for all the staff. These small gestures had a profound impact on our team. We knew we were appreciated, and the time we spent eating and talking during our breaks was a team-building and stress-relieving time.

My experience at this closely-knit, privately-owned emergency hospital sparked in me the desire to start my own clinic. I want to foster this sense of unity and support for my future coworkers and staff. These approaches to promoting employee retention, decreasing burnout, and creating a healthy work environment are concepts that I have extensively thought about and have seen exemplified at other hospitals in which I worked.

Beginning in May, I will serve as the national liaison for the University of Florida's chapter for the Veterinary Business Management Association. This club primarily focuses on educating veterinary students about the financial aspects of owning a veterinary practice. As a member of the executive board, I want to expand the topics of discussion to include meetings focusing on work-life balance, combating burnout, negotiating contracts, and improving leadership skills. My goal is to help broaden the knowledge students will gain about the management of veterinary hospitals. Future doctors need to learn to utilize their positions of leadership in a hospital to help influence changes that can lead to healthier work environments. Future doctors also need to understand the ways in which they can protect themselves from burnout while also helping to improve the career longevity of their coworkers.

Burnout and poor working environments have been problems in the veterinary industry for too long. Employers need to initiate changes in order to increase employee retention, and future veterinarians need to utilize their leadership positions to influence positive changes. Positive team atmospheres and employer support for healthy work-life balances will promote staff retention and attract future employees. We can improve the working conditions throughout the veterinary industry and improve the mental, physical, and emotional health of the workers within it as long as employers and all veterinary staff work together toward this common goal.

#### References

<sup>1</sup> Who.int. 2019. *Burn-out an "occupational phenomenon": International Classification of Diseases*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>> [Accessed 9 March 2022].

<sup>2</sup> Hayes GM, LaLonde-Paul DF, Perret JL, Steele A, McConkey M, Lane WG, Kopp RJ, Stone HK, Miller M, Jones-Bitton A. Investigation of burnout syndrome and job-related risk factors in veterinary technicians in specialty teaching hospitals: a multicenter cross-sectional study. *J Vet Emerg Crit Care (San Antonio)*. 2020 Jan;30(1):18-27. doi: 10.1111/vec.12916. Epub 2019 Dec 16. PMID: 31840933; PMCID: PMC7003767.

<sup>3</sup> Moore IC, Coe JB, Adams CL, Conlon PD, Sargeant JM. The role of veterinary team effectiveness in job satisfaction and burnout in companion animal veterinary clinics. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2014 Sep 1;245(5):513-24. doi: 10.2460/javma.245.5.513. PMID: 25148093.

<sup>4</sup> InformedHealth.org [Internet]. Cologne, Germany: Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care (IQWiG); 2006-. Depression: What is burnout? [Updated 2020 Jun 18]. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK279286/>