Risk Factors for Suicide, Attitudes Toward Mental Illness, and Practice-related Stressors Among Veterinarians

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July 13, 2015
Suicide

- 41,149 deaths in the United States in 2013
- 10th leading cause of death
- 3–4 times more common among males
- Likely under-recognized and under-reported
- Risk factors include depression, serious mental illness, suicidal ideation, and psychosocial difficulties at work
- 68% of persons who died by suicide were not seen by a mental health professional in 12 months before death
Veterinary Medicine

- 102,583 U.S. veterinarians (57% female)
- Profession attracts certain personality types
- Competitive and rigorous educational process
- Stressful working conditions with long hours
- Lower compensation compared with physicians
- Euthanasia frequently performed
- Access to lethal drugs and knowledge of euthanasia procedures

Veterinarians and Suicide

- Estimated 4x higher suicide rate than general population and 2x higher rate than other healthcare providers
- Higher proportion of veterinarian suicides caused by self-poisonings compared with general population
- Suicide rate for female veterinarians ≈ male veterinarians
Hi [NAME REDACTED];

Can I fill this out as a XXXXXX. I ask only cause my husband Dr [NAME REDACTED] committed suicide on XXXXX. While this is very painful if I can in anyway prevent another senseless death I will come and speak or write to whomever. My husband excelled at XXXX medicine. We ran our own XXXXX practice in XXXXXXX for the last XX years.

I knew my husband was depressed and I had him in councelling for that and alcohol abuse. I never ever thought he would take his own life. I"m in a lot of emotional pain over this but like I said if I can help educated on depression and alcohol abuse to prevent another loss I will. I can't believe someone so gifted felt he had no way out. He left me with our clinic and X children.

My heart if broken. I"m willing to help.
High Profile Veterinarian Suicides

Anna Jane Grossman

Animal trainer and author

The Legacy and Tragedy of the Life of Dr. Sophia Yin

Posted: 10/06/2014 7:49 pm EDT | Updated: 12/06/2014 5:59 am EST

In remembering Dr. Clarissa Engstrom, friends and family will mobilize efforts against suicide

Risk Factors for Suicide — International Veterinarians

- **United Kingdom**
  - 20% of surveyed veterinarians characterized as suffering from either possible or probable case of depression

- **Australia**
  - Surveyed veterinarians had higher rates of moderate, severe, and extremely severe depression compared with general population
  - 5% of surveyed veterinarians had very high psychological distress and 17% had high psychological distress

- **New Zealand**
  - 16% of surveyed veterinarians had previous suicidal ideation and 2% had attempted suicide

- **France**
  - 18% of surveyed veterinarians had moderate or severe depression
Risk Factors for Suicide — U.S. Veterinarians

- Scarce data regarding suicidal behaviors among U.S. veterinarians
- Mean score on a burnout self-diagnosis instrument among 572 U.S. female veterinarians in early 1990’s was equal to beginnings of burnout syndrome
- 66% of 701 licensed veterinarians in Alabama had suffered depression, 24% had considered suicide
- 95% of executive directors of state veterinary medical associations believed increased stress in the last 10 years and serious problem with burnout exists
Need for Further Research

- Two veterinarian wellness summits held during 2013

- Participants concluded more research needed on veterinarians and their mental health

Finding calm amid the chaos
When it’s not the patient who needs a wellness check, but the veterinarian
By Malinda Larkin
Posted Oct. 30, 2013

https://www.avma.org/News/JAVMANews/Pages/131115a.aspx
Objectives

- Assess prevalence among U.S. veterinarians of:
  - Risk factors for suicide
  - Attitudes toward mental illness
  - Practice-related stressors

- Characterize proportion of U.S. veterinarians who might be at higher risk for suicide

- Describe the perceived accessibility to mental health treatment among U.S. veterinarians
METHODS
Methods

- **Electronic questionnaire**
  - Anonymous
  - Voluntary
  - Available July 1–October 20, 2014

- **Web-link to questionnaire provided in one of 4 ways**
  - Veterinary Information Network (VIN)
  - VIN News article
  - *JAVMA News* article
  - Monthly e-mails or other communications (e.g. newsletter) from 49 states and Puerto Rico
    - State veterinary medical associations
    - State agriculture or livestock departments
    - State health departments
Methods

- Questions assessed demographics, practice setting, experiences with depression and suicidal behaviors, mental health treatment, stressors related to veterinary practice, and satisfaction related to practicing veterinary medicine.

- **Kessler-6 psychological distress scale**
  - 6 questions assess how respondent felt over past 30 days
  - Nervous? Hopeless? Restless or fidgety? So depressed that nothing could cheer you up? That everything was an effort? Worthless?
  - 5-point Likert scale (0–4 points per question, maximum 24 points)
  - Scores ≥13 = serious psychological distress
Methods

- Qualtrics Research Suite (Qualtrics, Provo, UT)
- SAS Enterprise Guide 5.1 (SAS Institute, Inc., Cary, NC)
- Protocol approved by Auburn University Institutional Review Board
RESULTS
n = 12,707
n = 12,707

Never employed as veterinarian = 216
n = 12,707

Non-U.S. occupational location = 653

Never employed as veterinarian = 216
n = 12,707

U.S. occupational location = 10,949

Non-U.S. occupational location = 653

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- U.S. occupational location = 10,949
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U.S. occupational location = 10,949

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Responded via VIN, VIN News, JAVMA News = 211

U.S. occupational location = 10,949
n = 12,707

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Unknown occupational location and responded from state invitation = 678
n = 12,707

- Non-U.S. occupational location = 653
- U.S. occupational location = 10,949
  - Never employed as veterinarian = 216
  - Responded via VIN, VIN News, JAVMA News = 211
  - Unknown occupational location and responded from state invitation = 678
- Unknown occupational location = 889
- U.S. veterinarians = 11,627
Survey Completion

- 91% completed all questions
- Means of accessing survey

- 77% State-based communication
- 11% VIN
- 7% JAVMA News
- 5% VIN News
Demographics

- Female sex = 7,642 (68%)

- Age categories (years)
  - 20–29 = 1,079 (9%)
  - 30–39 = 3,133 (27%)
  - 40–49 = 2,505 (22%)
  - 50–59 = 2,627 (23%)
  - 60–69 = 1,504 (13%)
  - ≥70 = 422 (4%)

- Married or in committed relationship = 8,469 (73%)

Practice Characteristics

- Currently employed as veterinarian = 10,319 (89%)

- Practice specialty
  - Small animal = 7,460 (64%)  U.S. = 75.1%
  - Mixed animal = 1,238 (11%)  U.S. = 6.4%
  - Academia = 505 (4%)  U.S. = 6.3%
Practice Characteristics

- **Primary practice role**
  - Associate = 4,811 (41%)
  - Owner = 4,224 (36%)
  - Relief = 489 (4%)

- **Work with other veterinarians = 8,375 (72%)**

- **Member of veterinary medical association = 10,551 (91%)**
Mental Health

- Serious psychological distress
- Previous depressive episodes
- Previous diagnosis of depression
- Previous suicidal ideation
- Previous suicide attempt

Percentage

Male respondents
Female respondents
U.S. adult males
U.S. adult females

*95% confidence intervals
Mental Health

13% of male respondents currently being treated for mental health condition or emotional problem

Percentage

Serious psychological distress
Previous depressive episodes
Previous diagnosis of depression
Previous suicidal ideation
Previous suicide attempt

Male respondents
Female respondents
U.S. adult males
U.S. adult females

*95% confidence intervals
Mental Health

23% of female respondents currently being treated for mental health condition or emotional problem

*95% confidence intervals
Serious Psychological Distress (n=1,077)

- Shelter animal medicine specialty
- Not member of veterinary medical association
- Never married
- Separated/divorced
- Practiced 1-4 years
- No children
- Age 30-39 years
- Practiced 5-9 years
- Practiced 10-19 years
- Age 20-29 years
- Age 40-49 years
- Practice associate
- Female sex
- Total
- U.S. adults

*95% confidence intervals
Suicidal Ideation (n=1,952)

- Exotics specialty
- Shelter specialty
- Separated/divorced
- Widowed
- Relief work role
- Years practiced 10-19
- Not member of veterinary medical association
- Do not work with other veterinarians
- No children
- Never married
- Age 40-49 years
- Age 50-59 years
- Small animal specialty
- Female sex

*95% confidence intervals
Attitudes Toward Mental Illness

- Somewhat or strongly agree that mental health treatment helps people lead normal lives
- Somewhat or strongly agree people are caring toward persons with mental illness
- Somewhat or strongly agree mental health treatment accessible

*Veterinarians with serious psychological distress
*Veterinarians without serious psychological distress
*U.S. adults with serious psychological distress
*U.S. adults without serious psychological distress

*95% confidence intervals
Practice-related Stressors

- Demands of practice (e.g., long hours, work overload)
- Practice management responsibilities
- Making professional mistakes
- Client complaints
- Dealing with personal, staff, or client grief
- Client expectations of being expert in all areas
- Educational debt
- Other
- Animal deaths (from illness or euthanasia)
- Ethical challenges
- Fear of malpractice litigation

Percentage

- Associate
- Owner
- Relief
Demands of Practice

- “Work life balance is a huge factor. The stress of being supermom and supervet and superwife is overwhelming at times.”

- “I'd love to see more articles/lectures on common sense advice and life balance, less on how to squeeze out another dime. I am worn out.”
Making Professional Mistakes

“One of the hardest things about practice is to learn to forgive yourself for mistakes, I think many of us can forgive others easier than forgive ourselves. I know I still expect myself to be perfect (or really good) and make the correct diagnosis and treatment choices. It's really hard to have an animal die when you could have saved it if you had only done something differently. There is not much support or ways to learn how to deal with those feelings of guilt/disappointment.”
Financial Stresses

- “Financial pressure mostly driven by educational debt is the primary driver of my stress as it impacts every aspect of my life.”

- “Veterinary medicine has always been a huge challenge between our veterinary goals for animals and clients goals for animals. In addition, financial burdens on students, declining veterinary visits, declining incomes over time and severe oversupply make this a profession that is hard to continue to recommend.”
Perceived Stigma Toward those with Mental Illness

- “Veterinary community needs to be less judgmental/more supportive of colleagues with substance abuse problems”

- “Support within the veterinary community is generally lacking. It is challenging to trust other veterinarians, to show weaknesses or ask for advice about personal or professional problems we face. The "opportunities" for "help" within the VMA or State boards are honestly just for show. I was able to overcome my depression with the assistance of private medical care. Well outside of the veterinary community…..”
## Practice-related Stressors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Agreed or strongly agreed</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coping with work-related grief easy for them</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Same satisfaction of helping animals as before vet school</td>
<td>69%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Made the right career choice to enter veterinary medicine</td>
<td>73%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy being a veterinarian</td>
<td>80%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning to leave veterinary medicine</td>
<td>13%</td>
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DISCUSSION
Suicide Risk Factors

- **High prevalence of serious psychological distress**
  - 10% of respondents had serious psychological distress
  - 31% had previous depressive episodes
  - 17% considered suicide
  - 1% attempted suicide
  - 20% currently undergoing mental health treatment

- **Results consistent with data from international studies**

- **Conservative prevalence estimates**
  - All respondents included in denominator
  - Assessed only experiences occurring since graduation
Female Veterinarians

- Proportion of female veterinarian respondents ~11% higher than U.S. veterinary workforce

- Female respondents more often reported risk factors for suicide than male respondents
  - Similar to Australian, NZ, and UK female veterinarians

- Suicidal behaviors greater than for male veterinarians but suicide rate roughly equals male veterinarians

- Results have implications for future of veterinary medicine
**Stigma**

- High degree of perceived stigma toward those with mental illness
  - Higher rate of perceived stigma compared with U.S. adults
  - Similar to physician community
  - Increased among those with psychological distress

- Barrier to seeking mental health treatment

- Risk factor for suicide
Demands of Work

- Findings consistent with similar surveys of veterinarians in Australia, Finland, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, and United Kingdom

- 80% of surveyed UK veterinarians viewed practice as stressful

- UK veterinarians had less favorable psychological working conditions than general population
Occupational Factors and Poor Psychological Health

- Demands of work (long hours, work overload, pressure)
- Ethical challenges (e.g., euthanasia of healthy animals)
- Poor social support
  - Younger age
  - Not married or in committed relationship
  - No children
  - Do not work with other veterinarians
  - Not a member of a veterinary medical association
- Client-dependent occupation
Limitations

- Nonresponse bias
- Recall bias
- High percentage of female respondents
- Respondents not assessed for confounding factors
  - Alcohol or drug misuse
  - Personality type
  - Family history of mental illness
Conclusions

- High prevalence of risk factors for suicide among veterinarians
- High prevalence of perceived stigma toward those with mental illness among veterinarians
- Lower prevalence of perceived accessibility to mental health treatment among veterinarians with psychological distress
- Practice demands one of the most stressful factors associated with veterinary practice
Recommendations

- **Improve awareness**
  - Mental illness
  - Mental health treatment
  - Suicide prevention resources

- **Decrease stigma associated with mental illness**
  - Veterinary schools
  - Veterinary medical associations
  - Veterinary licensing boards

- **Enhance educational efforts in veterinary schools aimed at improving coping skills**
Future Areas of Work

- Assessing prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse among U.S. veterinarians
- Evaluating robustness and impact of existing U.S. veterinary wellness programs
- Describing prevalence of potentially stigmatizing practices in U.S. veterinary medical education
- Identifying evidence-based measures for lessening practice-related stressors
WHAT IF YOU OR A COLLEAGUE IS SUFFERING FROM DEPRESSION?
Recognize Warning Signs for Suicide

**IS**
- Ideation
- Substance abuse

**PATH**
- Purposelessness
- Agitation
- Trapped
- Hopelessness

**WARM**
- Withdrawal
- Anger
- Restlessness
- Mood changes
If Someone You Know is Threatening Suicide (What to Do)

- Be direct; talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide
- Be willing to listen; allow expressions of feelings
- Be non-judgmental
- Offer hope that alternatives available, but do not offer glib reassurance
- Take action; remove means, such as firearms or stockpiled pills
- Get help from persons or agencies specializing in crisis intervention and suicide prevention
In a Mental Health Emergency, Contact . . . .

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK)
- Psychiatric hospital walk-in clinic
- Hospital emergency room
- Urgent care center
- Call 9-1-1
## Acknowledgements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Co-investigators</th>
<th>Other collaborators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-TALK (8255)

For more information please contact Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

1600 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30333
Telephone: 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)/TTY: 1-888-232-6348
E-mail: cdcinfo@cdc.gov Web: http://www.cdc.gov

The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.
Attitudes Toward Mental Illness

- Somewhat or strongly agree that mental health treatment helps people lead normal lives
- Somewhat or strongly agree people are caring toward persons with mental illness
- Somewhat or strongly agree mental health treatment accessible

*95% confidence intervals
Practice-related Stressors

Demands of practice (e.g., long hours, work overload)
Practice management responsibilities
Making professional mistakes
Client complaints
Dealing with personal, staff, or client grief
Client expectations of being expert in all areas
Educational debt
Other
Animal deaths (from illness or euthanasia)
Ethical challenges
Fear of malpractice litigation

Percentage

Associate
Owner
Relief
Practice-related Stressors

- Demands of practice (e.g., long hours, work overload)
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<th></th>
<th>Associate</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Relief</th>
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<tr>
<td>Demands of practice</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>70%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Practice management responsibilities</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Making professional mistakes</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Client complaints</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dealing with personal, staff, or client grief</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>Educational debt</td>
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Practice-related Stressors

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Percentage

- Associate
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- Practice-related Stressors
Practice-related Stressors

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Other

Animal deaths (from illness or euthanasia)
Ethical challenges
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Percentage

Associate
Owner
Relief
Understand Risk Factors for Suicide

- Psychiatric disorders
- Previous suicide attempts
- Social isolation
- Physical illness
- Difficulties at work
- Unemployment
- Family conflict
How Can You Get Help For Psychological Distress?

- Reach out to your loved ones — no need to suffer alone

- Discuss concerns with family physician, who can:
  - Provide referrals to mental health provider
  - Prescribe psychotropic medication

- Request list of mental health providers from insurance company

- Call National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK)
If Someone You Know is Threatening Suicide
(What Not to Do)

- Don’t be afraid to ask if someone is suicidal — you will not “make things worse”

- Don’t dare the person to do it

- Don’t act shocked — this will put distance between you

- Don’t be sworn to secrecy — seek support

- If possible, don’t leave the person alone
References