



Stress as a vocation. Veterinarians' perception of work-related stress

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Abstract

The article illustrates the stress that veterinarians face in their profession and advances a few possibilities for stress management. Some representative studies on stress and veterinarians are described in the first part of the paper, which is followed by a discussion of semi-structured interviews conducted with veterinarians in Bucharest. The main objective of the research was to understand and analyze the social world of veterinarians by illustrating the main problems faced by members of this occupational category. Lack of a support network, intricate communication with pet's owners, limited access to the possibility of a specialization and emotional challenges associated to euthanasia are the main themes that emerged from the interviews. The conclusions show that veterinarians would benefit from trainings in order to address these specific issues, including those related to communication with pet's owners and the development of efficient coping mechanisms.

Keywords

Stress; stress management; veterinarians; coping mechanisms; vocation;

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Introduction. Stress as a vocation

Whether we talk about “anxiety, frustration, unease, and discontent” (Seaward, 2017, p.2) or just generic stress, we talk about a common occurrence in many professions – from burnout to attempting suicide, stress is a monster that comes in many forms. In some Eastern cultures, stress is the lack of inner peace or the inability to cope with change. Western cultures define stress as the lack of emotional control. Stress is also defined as a situation when “people feel is placed on their minds and souls by the demands of their jobs, relationships, and responsibilities in their personal lives” (Seaward, 2017, pp.4-5). Medicine in general is a highly stressful area – by dealing with death, loss, guilt and helplessness, medicine requests a special type of dedication, for all professionals involved. Veterinarians, as medical professionals, are not excluded, as their patients, unlike the human ones, have a very different way of communicating, which means they cannot point to where they hurt or what physical ailments they are confronted with. This means that veterinarians have to rely on a non-verbal investigation with their patients and they have to build trustworthy relationships with pet owners.

We see an increasing number of doctors becoming writers (without quitting their profession), part because of the need to be understood, to tell a tale, part because medicine needs to be demystified for the public (see Atul Gawande with *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*, 2002 or *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End*, 2014, also Paul Kalanithi – *When Breath Becomes Air*, 2016, or Henry Marsh’s *Do No Harm: Stories of Life, Death, and Brain Surgery*, 2014, just to name a few). Writing also has therapeutic purposes and helps doctors cope with the stress of being a doctor. Another way of coping with stress is talking about it and, as we shall see, more and more doctors want to be heard. We know about stress to be one of the main causes of death. Stress can be the culprit for heart disease, smoking that leads to lung ailments, accidents, cirrhosis, and, very important, suicide (see Woo & Postolache, 2008 or Bartram, Yadegarfar & Baldwin, 2009).

Studies show that stress within the veterinary profession is high (Newby 2000, Gardner & Hini, 2006). The main factors that trigger work-related stress for veterinarians are long working hours, less or lack of time to spend with family, relationships with the industry, communication with the pet owners’ and performance of euthanasia. Dealing with death and the lack of a support network are also factors that contribute to the increasing number of professionals that are confronting exhaustion and burnout.

By studying the levels of occupational stress in veterinarian nurses in South Africa, Black, Winefield and Chur-Hansen (2011) observed that high job demands and responsibilities that also come with low control and low support from co-workers and supervisors are directly linked to work-related burnout and low job satisfaction (p. 193).

Gardner and Hini (2006) present a working party that consisted of representatives from the Doctors’ Health Advisory Service, the Institute of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences, the VCNZ and the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) that was in charge with developing a functional support network for veterinarians in New Zealand. The working party used a survey to identify the forms of social support useful

for managing work-related stress and reported levels of stress and depression. The exhaustive survey took into account the gender, age, number of colleagues and type of patients (small, large, mixed or non-clinical). Respondents answered about the general stress in their life, the normal workday, the most stressful events or activities at work and they were also asked how often they felt depressed. The answers were rated on a scale from one to five. The survey had several questions with yes/no answers, like “have you ever been clinically diagnosed as suffering from depression? Are you currently suffering from depression? Have you ever seriously thought about committing suicide? and Have you ever attempted to commit suicide?” (Gardner & Hini, 2006, p.119).

The survey took into account the following factors that could trigger stress: “hours worked, employer/colleague expectations, client expectations, communications with clients, workplace relationships, resources available, amount of support from senior staff/employers, amount of professional support, unexpected outcomes, and legal issues (including the threat of litigation, privacy and confidentiality, compliance with regulations and registration requirements)” (Gardner & Hini, 2006, p.119). There were different sets of questions regarding the physical effort of being a veterinarian, about keeping in contact with clients after hours, about responsibilities and about euthanasia. Having technical and management skills, being able to properly communicate with the client, abilities to keep up with technology and new techniques, having some basic legal knowledge, personal/family relationships were other factors taken into consideration. The respondents' network of support was also investigated (Gardner & Hini, 2006, p.119).

The conclusions were most interesting. The younger veterinarians felt more stressed with the every-day work than older ones. Moreover, women were, in general, more resilient to everyday stress, but more sensitive to highly stressful situations. They were also, in general, more depressed than men and were diagnosed with depression in larger numbers than men. The researchers concluded that different stress management strategies may be required for males and females. Actually, targeted strategies might be needed for most if not all veterinarians, as the study also revealed that all types of professionals (working with small animals, large animals, mixed or non-clinical) reported some type of stress associated with the job. Out of these types, the ones working with small animals seemed to be more affected by the relationship with the pets' owners. The most important stressors for the respondents were hours worked, client expectations, and unexpected outcomes (Gardner & Hini, 2006). Out of the stressors associated with the level of skills and expertise, the first three identified were the ability to keep up with new knowledge, the level of technical skills and ability to keep pace with technology. A very interesting finding of the study is that the female respondents felt more stress due to lack of technical skills, which shows a different self-perception related to gender. The most important personal factor was living up to one's own expectations. Fulfilling the family needs was also very important.

In addition, 83% respondents had a consistent network of friends and family that helped if needed to and also “other sources of support, such as workmates, other veterinarians and, to a lesser extent, employers, were also used” (Gardner & Hini, 2006, p.121). The respondents that dealt with depression, suicidal thoughts and attempted

suicides tended to use “formal resources rather than relying on their own networks, workmates and employers” (Gardner & Hini, 2006, p.121). For the authors, this emphasizes the need for a formal strategy to support veterinarians to manage work-related stress.

Another study, conducted by Mastebroek et. al (2014) focuses “on the role that personal resources play in the process that affects work-related well-being and performance” (p.190). This is relevant because the veterinary practices in Romania are very different from each other and it is quite difficult to find some common factors for analysis. The fore-mentioned study takes into consideration exhaustion and work engagement and “how work and personal characteristics are related to self- and other-ratings of inrole and extrarole performance” (Mastebroek et. al, 2014, p.190). One last contribution of this study points out, at the behavioral level, the need for proactive behavior and reflective behavior, along with self-efficacy, organizational-based self-esteem and optimism (p.191). The authors emphasized that the lack of resources can have an exhausting effect on veterinarians, that can ultimately lead to fatigue and a loss in the quality of life. In order to study that, they conducted interviews about the positive and negative aspects of the work and developed a list of job demands and job resources for veterinarians. “From this list we made a selection of job demands and job resources that have been identified as major stressors, respectively motivators for the majority of occupations and for veterinarians in this age group specifically: workload, physical demands, and work-self conflict” (Mastebroek et. al, 2014, p.194). One of the observations was that “individuals who are more reflective, more proactive and feel self-efficacious seem to be less exhausted” (Mastebroek et. al, 2014, p.198). It is a cost-benefit situation, where greater efforts come with bigger costs and, of course, access to resources is the most important feature.

Black, Winefield and Chur-Hansen (2011) show that a veterinarian has to address both the needs of the animal and the needs of the owner, and sometimes these two sets of needs are not in harmony, which can be another source of stress.

Methodology. Motivations, rationalization, empathy

The present analysis is based on ten interviews with Romanian veterinarians that practice in small animal clinics. The interviews selected for the present article are part of a mixed qualitative – quantitative research conducted in forty-one veterinary practices. The interviews conducted for the qualitative part were semi-structured and had a total of seventeen questions. The objective of the research was to comprehend the insights of the veterinarians’ social worlds (Unruh, 1980; Strauss, 1982). All the interviews were recorded with the permission of the respondent. We will furtherly select excerpts that describe the reasons for choosing a stressful profession, knowing, at least at some level, the difficulties that the veterinarians will have to overcome.

When asked why they decided to pursue this career, in the veterinarians’ discourse the words *passion* and *vocation* were often used. For some respondents, becoming a veterinarian is not a decision, it is a passion. You have to like pets, first of all. Figuring out

that medicine is a vocation comes with sacrifices – almost no free time, weekends and nights off are a rare occurrence and the high levels of stress they have to deal with. However, many did not second guess themselves. There are, of course, some exceptions: *If I were to go back in time, I would choose human medicine. Veterinary medicine is not so well paid. It's a beautiful job, you have to do what you like, considering that the remuneration is not so high. We always have new challenges, honestly, considering that the veterinarian is a general practitioner, he does anything, unlike the human doctor who can have a single specialization.* The particular issue of the bad remuneration seems to be specific for Romania, as no other studies that analyze the veterinarian profession cited here emphasizes this.

The diversity of the activities and the complex implications are highly valued: a very broad profession, from food safety to animal health. Probably the most well-known saying that sums everything is that the human doctor saves men, and the veterinarian saves humanity. Empathy, love and the desire to save the animals are among the most common reasons for becoming an animal doctor: *But why should I practice human medicine when I rescued my first dog at the age of 12, my own dog. And I became a veterinarian, especially out of love for puppies. All animals are dear to me and I love them and I would not harm any animal, but especially the puppies are in my soul.* The comparison with human medicine is used as a justification (I could have, but I didn't) or as a comparison based on subjective values (one is more appealing than the other).

Empathy is a quality that veterinarians have and rely on in order to treat patients that cannot communicate their ailments: *I have always had a dog and I have always felt comfortable with animals and dogs and I have felt that I understand them, and that I understand how they work. They aroused more empathy in me than people and if I had to choose between human medicine and veterinary medicine, I preferred veterinary medicine because I think if you want to do medicine well, it has to be based on empathy. Empathy stimulated me somehow.*

Although the comparison between human medicine and veterinary medicine is often a source of conflict (one argument used by the vets is that in human medicine they study and practice on only one species – the human, whereas veterinarians are expected to have profound knowledge about cats, dogs, cows, sheep, horses, pigs, mice, birds, exotic animals), there is a particular feeling of vets being the underdog, even financially, although veterinary is a private practice.

Stress as a refuge: Dealing with unhappiness and frustration

One respondent stated that being a vet is a job like many jobs, but also a job full of unhappiness, with many sad cases, especially in our country, given that we are not educated. The vast majority have animals because it is fashionable or because they have seen others or because their children want pets but they fail to understand that the animal is more than an object. *When you see suffering, you suffer too. I am exhausted,* said one of our respondents. This also leads to frustration, as Romanian veterinarians sometimes deal with lack of resources and the lack of a support network. In Romania

veterinarians cannot follow a residency, so specializations are only available to the ones that have the resources to study abroad: *And we have this frustration, that veterinary medicine is not as well structured as human medicine, we cannot specialize and that puts us in the situation to deal with all medical fields, but that means we do not have too much depth in these areas and we always have the feeling and frustration that we don't know enough and that we can't have perfect control. This is a professional frustration.*

Stress can also be a motivator, or, as one respondent puts it, *a refuge*. Having a profession that requires constant learning, high energy and comes with high demands. For some, the benefits are reflected in more than one area of their lives: *You become calmer, more patient. This job is a refuge and a medicine for me. And it also made me understand children more, being a profession that is linked to a certain point to pediatrics.*

Communication is also a learning process and, as it was pointed out, it is not taught enough in school but it is critical when interacting with the owners. Learning to communicate the good news, but, more importantly, the bad news, is something valuable that can be worked on. For some, communication and working with people as mediators (between the veterinarian and the patient) is the hardest part, but also the most rewarding one: *I think the hardest part is working with people in general. You see people in their most unhappy and stressful moments and they are either nervous or upset about the losses and this interaction with them in these unhappy moments is felt very strongly. In contrast, we have the cases of rescued and happy animals, but we still have quite a lot of losses and difficulties.*

Stress as relationship management: Dealing with improper communication

Stress is a big part of a veterinarian's life. In Romania, vets deal with insufficient communication trainings, difficult clients and lack of support network mentioned earlier. We found out these things conducting interviews with veterinarians that practice in small animal clinics. The interviews revealed that some experiences are stressful, some are traumatizing, some could be solved with a better communication.

For some respondents, the relationship with the client (the pet's owner) is challenging. The most difficult part in treating patients is the owners, not the patients themselves, because, in general, *we know how we stand and what we have to do about them, and the most difficult part is maintaining communication. Understand what and why we do, what are the costs because many have the feeling that it should be free. We often encounter a duality that probably happens inside the owner. They love their animals like their children, but when it comes to paying or taking responsibility, they don't do it like for some children, meaning their emotional attachment is very strong, it's like their furry children and that's what they often say: "my fur child", "family member", these are commonly used terms, but when it comes to paying or spending money for them or being serious and rigorous in what they have to do, things are not done.*

The communication with the owner or client and building a relationship based on trust are important factors that generate a stressful working environment. *People are not always honest. You ask them something, they answer you something else or they don't give*

you a specific answer. They tend to trick you, to not to tell you since when the animal is sick or what he feeds the animal. Building a trustful, long-lasting relation is not something taught in veterinary school, but is mentioned more than once by most of the respondents because there is always more than one beneficiary: *the most difficult part is socializing with the owner, after which the pet feels that you want to help him.*

Another responder emphasized the importance of a good collaboration with the owner. *If the owner doesn't agree, that's about what we can do. Otherwise, we have no difficulties.* Sometimes the doctors have to deal with difficult patients, a situation that produces fear in all the actors involved: *There are other cases where the animals are kept secluded and then it is very difficult to interact with the animal, because the animal is scared, it is frightening, and in the end you have to protect yourself as a doctor and treat the animal at the same time.*

Stress as a mentor: Dealing with death

Like in most medical professions, for veterinarians, death is part of the everyday life. However, the exposure to death does not make it easier. It is peculiarly frustrating when death could have been prevented. Time and money are the two main factors that can sometimes save a life: *There are cases where patients have died. They [the people] come with very sick animals because they think it is too expensive and the animals die because they do not respect the treatment.*

Sometimes the success gives hope and strength to carry on: *I worked in a public shelter and had announced that in one week they wanted to euthanize 100 dogs, and that week I saved 98 dogs, I found them homes.* These types of experiences remain with the individual for the rest of his career and they define the way the human interacts with the animals. We observed that there is no structured network or procedure for asking and receiving help, the veterinarians having only individual coping mechanisms. *Sometimes yes, we face death quite often, because we have to do euthanasia and we have to decide this, it is draining our lives and it's quite stressful.*

And sometimes, death is necessary. Although the respondents said that the first euthanasia is always traumatizing, it is an extremely difficult situation *when the owners refuse the euthanasia of an animal that suffers and can no longer be saved. By delaying it, the suffering of the animal is prolonged.*

In conclusion, the veterinary profession appears to be a highly stressful one. Dealing with both human owners and animal patients, the veterinarians need to engage a specific set of skills and abilities in order to navigate the everyday job. Some skills that can help veterinarians manage stress are: having a social network, the ability to make decisions, communication skills including empathy, negotiation and mediation, conflict prevention and resolution and dealing with grief (Gardner & Hini, 2006). In order to develop better coping mechanism, veterinarians could benefit from some training and mentoring courses, communication trainings, better access to resources, to psychologists, relaxation time and less working hours.

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