

Wellness Risk Factor Study Finds Positive Correlation to VMA Membership

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In a recent article published in JAVMA, Nett et al. (2015) found that membership in a veterinary medical association is positively correlated with less mental illness and suicidal ideation.

The authors also found that 9.3% veterinarians were experiencing severe psychological distress at the time of the survey and that 16.8% had contemplated suicide since graduation. These distressing numbers are higher than that of the general US adult population.

The number of veterinarians currently in psychological distress nearly doubles when controlling for membership in organized veterinary medicine (9.3% for members of a VMA vs. 17.5% for those that are not). A similar but less pronounced pattern is seen when examining the relationship between currently married, separated/divorced and never married veterinarians (8.1%, 13.8% and 14.3% respectively).

The authors hypothesized that these patterns may be related to the interpersonal relationships in a veterinarian's life. They go on to cite research that names social support as a positive influence on mental health.

Alternate factors associated with psychological distress were working in shelter medicine and being in practice for less than 20 years. It was unclear from the data if it was age, a change in class selection criteria, or another factor that led to increased risk in younger vets.

Other research questions revealed a disconnect between veterinarians and the general population when it comes to perception of those with mental illnesses and the help available. Psychologically stressed veterinarians were significantly less likely than those similarly afflicted in the general population to state that "People are caring towards those persons with mental illness," and less likely than non-distressed veterinarians to agree that "Mental health treatment is accessible." This perception of a lack of support may be one factor contributing to higher distress levels.

The findings of this study open a pathway to better caring for veterinarians in psychological distress. Veterinary medical associations play an important part in this battle as they provide social support and a vehicle for dissemination of information. Because so many veterinarians in distress perceive that no aid is available, VMAs have the opportunity to step in as helpers. Support systems such as the AVMA's Early Career Online Community and VIN's From the Trenches message board provide practitioners with a group with whom they have similar trials, worries, and sometimes even victories.

If you are experiencing psychological distress, please seek help. If you have suicidal thoughts, please call the National Suicide Hotline at 1-800-273-TALK.

Citation:

Nett, R. J., Witte, T. K., Holzbauer, S. M., Elchos, B. L., Campagnolo, E. R., Musgrave, K. J., ... Funk, R. H. (2015). Risk factors for suicide, attitudes toward mental illness, and practice-related stressors among US veterinarians. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 247(8), 945–955.
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