

The Career That Kills

By Kaylie Stein

When asked about the emotional toll of her career path, veterinarian Dr. Nicole McArthur claims, “It's not all puppies and kittens and wonderful experiences. There's a lot of pain involved,” (Dembosky, 2022). Unfortunately, within the field of veterinary medicine, this is a common misconception. It is often assumed that the veterinary profession revolves around curing sick puppies and administering vaccines, and while this still plays a role in the workload of a veterinarian, there is also an immense amount of stress, hard decisions, and burnout that follow suit. However, these hardships are not often something that aspiring veterinary professionals, like myself, are made thoroughly aware of before entering their field of practice. Consequently, the mental health crisis within the veterinary medicine field has only festered and grown out of proportion due to low income, unrealistic expectations, and little awareness of the steps of prevention needed including precautions that should be taken by both employees and clients.

Although not new, a rising trend of suicides across the veterinary profession has been occurring. The results from a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that female veterinarians, which occupy over 60% of the veterinary population, are 3.5 times more likely to commit suicide in comparison to the general population while male veterinarians were 2.1 times more likely. However, while veterinarians are more likely to commit suicide, they are just as likely to struggle with mental illness as the general population (Tomasi, 2019). So what are the factors causing this strange correlation?

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2023

While the occupation of being a vet itself can be extremely difficult, for some, experiencing vet school may be just as difficult. Halliwell and Hoskin (2015) theorize that the academic rigor and intelligence required to be accepted into veterinary school may be in relation to suicide within the profession. It is also stated that the extreme curriculum and urgency to not only pass vet school but to succeed in vet school, makes developing social and emotional intelligence essentially impossible for students, further limiting their development within other areas of expertise expected within their future profession (Stoewen, 2015). In the majority of cases, students studying to become veterinarians do not take academics lightly. This makes for an extremely competitive environment in addition to the already competitive nature of getting accepted into one of the very few veterinary schools in the world. This constant striving to highly achieve puts an excessive strain on students that goes on to further strain their careers.

More often than not, after four tedious, expensive years of veterinary school on top of four years of undergraduate expenses, newly graduated students are left drowning in student debt. According to Not One More Vet, an organization dedicated to spreading veterinary professional mental health awareness, “The cost of veterinary medical school in the US is well in excess of \$200,000 and veterinarian salaries fall on average about 2.5x lower than physician salaries despite a similar level of educational debt...” (Not One More Vet, 2021). The wage of veterinarians, although lower than physicians’ wages, is often considered to be a large amount to the general population and therefore not seen as a “real problem”. While the median salary of a veterinarian is \$92,000 per year (Kreisler, 2020), this large sum becomes seemingly lower when a minimum of eight years of school becomes decades of student loans in addition to other payment priorities such as housing, utilities, insurance, etc. Owners expect optimal treatment for

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2023

their pets when bringing them into a clinical setting, however, it is difficult to provide that under constant financial stress.

Despite their modest salary, veterinarians continue to work toward steadily improving animal welfare in terms of end-of-life decision-making as well as humane euthanasia techniques. 4 However, the focus is primarily on the mental health of the patient and owner rather than the psychological toll placed on veterinarians who execute these taxing procedures. Veterinary euthanasia is a technique used to end the life of a suffering pet that has little chance of recovering from its illness or injury. Nevertheless, euthanasia is also used in cases where it is not a necessity, which can put a high strain of emotion on veterinarians. These cases can include situations from behavioral issues that could have been fixed with proper training to a situation where a pet's owner lacks the financial stability to support treatment. Knowing that a pet could be easily saved within a few hours on an operating table and not being able to save them as a result of the surgery's heavy price tag is something that veterinarians often struggle with. In a survey that was conducted of 932 small animal veterinarians, 67% of vets disapproved of euthanasia of pets with serious, yet treatable, health conditions, and over 76% disapproved of euthanasia of a healthy pet on the owner's terms (Brosnahan, 2016). This disapproval frequently changes into strong feelings of guilt which can, oftentimes, result in depressive episodes among veterinarians.

While no vet is happy to euthanize a pet, it is even more difficult, in some cases, to face the aftermath of the loss with the pet's owner, especially in a clinical setting. Some upset owners will often take their grief and transform it into anger towards the veterinarian who carried out their pet's euthanasia whether it be due to illness or an expensive life-saving surgery expense. Clients do not often understand the lack of control veterinarians have over the expenses of

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2023

surgeries which is often the takeoff point for negative client interactions. The lack of expense control roots from the fact that waiving expenses often comes directly out of a vet's paycheck or pocket. According to an article focused on these negative interactions, online bullying has risen in popularity. Upset clients will often take their poor experience as an opportunity to leave negative reviews for a clinic, single out veterinarians, and create false narratives in order to sabotage a clinic or employee out of grief. However, due to client/patient confidentiality, there is no chance of reputation redemption (Sun, 2017). This becomes difficult, as a veterinarian's job is to treat a pet to the best of their abilities within means. However, an owner is going to fight for their pet's survival regardless of price or prognosis, sometimes without realizing the toll it takes on the veterinarian who, more than likely, wants the same.

Given euthanasia's prevalence and how often vets administer it, they will often rationalize death as an emotional coping mechanism. While to an extent, this is acceptable, there becomes an extremely fine line between rationality and absurdity. In a study conducted by the University of Alabama, 130 veterinary students with a diverse level of experience with euthanasia were screened to determine whether or not its impact played a role in veterinary professional suicide rates. The university concluded that students who had more frequent encounters with euthanasia, primarily small animal or companion animal euthanasia, were less fearful when considering their own death. In light of this data, the University of Alabama went on to declare that despite the percentages of veterinarians who struggle with mental illness and suicidal ideation being no higher than the general population, the rationalization of death is the constituent that causes vets to proceed to the next step of committing suicide (Gyles, 2014). This process of rationalization becomes dangerous within the veterinary medicine field when the idea of regularly comforting terminally ill patients turns into a comparison to the vet's seemingly

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2023

terminal feelings of hopelessness and mental illness. However, unlike a fraction of their patients who undergo euthanasia, their illness is treatable.

Working within a vet clinic while struggling with mental illness may become a feat as well when given easy access to means of suicide. Because veterinary professionals regularly administer drugs like euthanasia and anesthesia amongst a plethora of drugs, this grants access to not only the intense knowledge of how to administer them but also a knowledge of how much is required for a “coping” or even lethal dose. In a study conducted by Witte et al. (2020), a discovery that 47% of the 73 suicides at the time were classified as poisoning. 25% of those deaths were correlated to pentobarbital, which is a primary ingredient in euthanasia (Nett, 2020). These suicides were more than likely rooted in just how accessible these drugs are in clinics. In a survey conducted by Roark (2021), 71% of respondents were able to easily access controlled substances from their clinics. Roark’s proposed solution to this issue is developing a “4-eyes” system. This system requires two people to be present in both the retrieval and administration of these drugs and is standard in human hospitals today (Roark, 2021). While Roark’s “4-eyes” system may not prevent suicide within veterinary medicine in its entirety, preventative systems like these may be proposed in the future making this idea an admiral start to eventually reduce this epidemic as a whole through further awareness and surveillance.

Veterinary medicine’s mission is one that is deeply rooted in help for the helpless. However, through the duration of their service, veterinarians often begin to feel helpless themselves. Within their field, vets are underpaid, overworked, and miscalculated. The suicide epidemic is widespread throughout the occupation and will only increase if awareness and preventative action are further neglected. In the words of Dr. Kathy Gervais, “I love my job. It is a vocation. It is a passion. And it's hard to walk away from that. But if it's going to kill me on the

BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2023

flip side, I would hope I could just say, 'OK, that's it. I'm done,'" (qtd. in Dembosky, 2022). Dr. Gervais's hope is one that all current, previous, and deceased veterinarians have had at one point or another. However, not all have been lucky enough to walk away.

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BRADFORD WRITES!
Spring 2023

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