

From Studying the Rain to Studying the Umbrella: Mental Health and Well-Being of Veterinary Medical Students and Graduates

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Guest Editors

Journal of Veterinary Medical Education

The mental health and well-being of students and graduate veterinarians is a critical area of concern. Veterinary medical educators are positioned at the heart of this problem, taking students into intensive programs and sending them out as graduates into a profession featured regularly in the literature as having a problem with mental health and well-being and, at the extreme, with higher rates of suicidal ideation than other professions.^{1–3}

In 2005, *JVME* published a themed issue on stress in veterinary students. In his editorial to that issue, Turnwald observed that the articles therein “helped fill a void in the veterinary literature.”^{4(p.169)} Since then, there has been a small but steady stream of articles focusing on the problem not just in veterinary students but in the profession as a whole. In the present issue, we join forces with our colleagues in medical education to share and learn from each other and crucially begin to move our focus from description and identification of the problem to action and intervention. The importance of this shift was highlighted by Baker in 2012, as part of another group of articles on student anxiety and depression in *JVME*, when he noted that “the need for intervention and assistance is apparent and urgent.”^{5(p.311)}

So where are we now? Both the veterinary and medical professions are facing the problem head-on, with several recent large-scale initiatives focusing on interventions. In the UK, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons launched the Mind Matters initiative in 2014 to help address mental health and well-being issues within the veterinary profession.⁶ This initiative includes outreach to veterinary schools and training/support for students who are in leadership positions in their school community, together with a broad program of activities to help reduce stigma and raise awareness.

In North America, at the time of writing, the fourth Veterinary Wellness summit is getting underway, bringing together veterinary students, administrators, practitioners, social workers, counselors, and industry partners to develop a common understanding about health and well-being issues within the veterinary profession. In September

2016, the International Conference on Physician Health, co-sponsored by the American, Canadian, and British Medical Associations, was held in Boston with the theme “Increasing Joy in Medicine.”

In 2012, the General Medical Council in the UK recognized the need to bring all UK medical schools up to the highest level of support for medical students with mental ill health. They commissioned research specifically into provision of support.⁷ A systematic review identified 140 articles on the prevalence of mental ill-health among medical students, making further study of prevalence unnecessary. The study concentrated instead on provision of support and possible barriers to its uptake. All medical schools and universities had well-established support systems in place for students with mental health concerns; however, student reluctance to disclose a mental illness to their medical school on the grounds that it would be taken up as a fitness-to-practice issue was widespread.^{8,9} None of the students interviewed could give an example of a student who had been treated in this way, which highlights the importance of reducing stigma and creating communities that support open and transparent discussion of mental illness.

Several of the articles in this issue are moving from the focus on identification of the problem and the associated factors to the positive psychology approach, which seeks to “focus on adaptation and thriving, rather than disorder and deficit.”^{10(p.x)} It is this approach that explains the title of our editorial: “From Studying the Rain to Studying the Umbrella.”^a While for obvious reasons much of the published research in the area of mental health and well-being focuses on reporting the problem and reducing stressors (the rain), an alternative approach is to focus on how we can build resilience and nurture well-being (the umbrella)—that is, how can we develop better umbrellas and help students protect themselves from the rain?

A related question is whether our demand for extremely high academic performance from medical and veterinary medical students attracts a particular group of driven, perfectionist individuals who are prone to anxiety and

depression. After being among the brightest in high school, and bringing with them determination and “a long-held ambition, which often developed during childhood,”^{11(p.x)} these students can find themselves surrounded by equally bright students and struggling with the volume of work. It is therefore incumbent on us to consider the support that might be necessary and to be open about signposting other career options where appropriate.^{9,11}

For all these reasons, the concepts of psychological capital, resilience, mindfulness, and personal resources are important areas receiving increasing attention in veterinary schools. A number of articles in this special issue focus on these more positive psychological approaches, which begin to take us into new and exciting territory where we can explore, in an evidence-based fashion, the impact of curricular (and extracurricular) interventions to help us with our acknowledged problem.

Let us move forward with renewed vigor in this crucial area. Yes, we must continue to study the rain to ensure we monitor the problem—but by looking to design some innovative umbrellas (and robustly research their properties and performance), we can hopefully make a real difference to our students and to our professions for the future. Collaboration across continents and disciplines will help us in our mission.

NOTE

- a This analogy is attributed to Dr. Lindsey Sinclair (University of Bristol), who used it in the context of focusing on protective factors for Alzheimer’s disease. Dr. Julie Williams (University of Bristol) and Dr. Martin Cake (University of Murdoch) have since transferred it to their own research on self-reflection, insight, and well-being.

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