



**Subject: Veterinarians' Risk for Addictive Illness and Suicide**

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**Introduction:** Veterinarians have long been thought to be at increased risk for the same potentially impairing illness as physicians and other doctoral level healthcare providers. Anecdotally, this has been the observation of PHPs around the country, many of which, like WPHP, have worked with physicians for over two decades.

**Report:** Unfortunately, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) has been slow to see the need for programs supporting the health and wellness of its members. Historically, Veterinary Wellness Committees were formed at the state levels via the AVMA. These committees did not thrive and were allowed to sunset in 2005. As noted in the September 2011 report from WPHP to its Board of Directors, 33% of states PHPs follow the veterinarians in their state. Resources available to the veterinarians in other states are either not known or do not exist. Also problematic is the paucity of published data on veterinary health. There has been no domestic large-scale study of veterinarians and substance misuse/addictive illness, mental illness, or suicide.

Following is an abbreviated summation of available data:

- a) There is strong anecdotal evidence from PHPs that veterinarians have the same, or perhaps higher, risks for potentially impairing addictive and psychiatric illnesses as physicians. Their risk of suicide is believed to be higher than that of other healthcare professionals.
- b) Veterinarians in England, Wales and Scotland “with similar estimates in the USA, Australia, and Norway,” indicate that the veterinary profession has around four times the proportion of all deaths certified as suicide than would be expected from the proportion for the general population, and around twice that for other healthcare professionals. Male veterinarians between the ages of 45-64 had a relative risk (RR) of suicide that was 5.62 times higher than the general population and higher than pharmacists (RR, 4.15), dentists (RR, 5.19), or medical practitioners (RR, 2.22). Female veterinarians had the highest relative risk (7.62). Their female physician counterparts had a relative risk (RR 4.54).<sup>(1)</sup>

Speculation regarding possible underlying causes of increased risk in veterinarians includes “characteristics of individuals entering the profession, negative stressors, ready access to and knowledge of lethal means, stigma associated with mental illness, professional and social isolation, alcohol or drug misuse, and veterinary surgeons’ attitudes to death and euthanasia”<sup>(1)</sup>. The National Survey of Psychiatric Morbidity of adults in Great Britain reported

suicidal thoughts among Veterinarians as 5.5 times that of the general population <sup>(2)</sup>. It was noted that Alcohol has a well-established role in suicidal behavior.

- c) In the UK study,<sup>(1)</sup> 25.3% of veterinarians screened positive for Anxiety Disorder [2.1 times higher than the general population], 13.6% of veterinarians screened positive for Depression [1.6 times higher than the general population] and 12.3% screened positive for both. It was noted that co-morbid anxiety and depression appear to increase risk of suicide. It is speculated that veterinarians may be more accepting of suicide as an option secondary to their use of euthanasia in practice.<sup>(3)</sup>
  
- d) The UK study also screened for “at risk drinking.” It was noted that 65.1% of male veterinarians and 70.7% of female veterinarians drink at least twice per week and 38.1% of male veterinarians and 24.3% of female veterinarians drink four or more times per week. Of these, one in four males and one in eight females who drink consume five or more drinks per drinking day. The study determined that 62.5% of veterinarians screen positive for “at-risk drinking.”<sup>(1)</sup> Additionally, anecdotal evidence from PHPs demonstrates frequent use of narcotics among referred veterinarians, and the literature reports abuse of potent veterinary drugs such as Ketamine and animal tranquilizers such as telazol.<sup>(4,5)</sup> It is also very easy for veterinarians to hide diversion of controlled substances. Some animals require over 10 times the dose of opiates as do humans. In a survey conducted by a veterinary practice management company (Wutchiett Tumblin and Associates, Columbia, Ohio) fourteen percent of 100 veterinary practice managers who left their jobs reported their reason for leaving was “substance abuse issues.”<sup>(6)</sup>
  
- e) At its 2003 AVMA meeting, the AVMA Committee on Wellness conducted a survey of attendees. One hundred and ninety five conference attendees (of whom 160 were veterinarians) completed a brief survey. Seventy-six percent believed there are not adequate resources available to the veterinary community for dealing with wellness issues. Problem areas identified by respondents included: stress and burnout (85%), depression (70%), anxiety disorders (57%), alcohol abuse (57%), and drug dependency (52%). Of respondents, 9 out of 10 reported they had been personally impacted by one or more of these factors themselves or via a family member or a colleague.<sup>(7)</sup> The results of this survey indicate a need for further study. In spite of these concerns, the AVMA allowed its Committee on Wellness to sunset in 2005.
  
- f) Skipper et al have conducted a recent survey of licensed veterinarians in Alabama, members of the Student Chapter of the Veterinary Medical Association, and executive directors of state veterinary associations. A paper summarizing the survey findings is pending publication.

Interesting findings from the paper warrant mention. Of responding Alabama licensed veterinarians, 66% indicated they had been “clinically depressed.” Of these, 32% had sought no treatment. It is also concerning that 27% of depressed female veterinarians and 20% of depressed male veterinarians said they had “seriously considered suicide.”

Among the veterinary students surveyed, 88% believed veterinary medicine to be very stressful, 19% indicated they'd been diagnosed with a mental illness (depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, etc) and 13% had "seriously considered or attempted suicide." In addictive illness, we know clearly that genetic loading plays a significant role in disease development. Of responding veterinary students it is remarkable and concerning that 40.7% reported a family history of addiction to drugs and/or alcohol. (NOTE: Veterinary students responded from a post on the SCAVMA Website and response rate is not known).

Another interesting finding of the Skipper study was that only 11% of respondents believed suicide rates among veterinarians to be higher than that of other healthcare groups indicating a serious lack of awareness at all levels of the veterinary community.

Veterinarians report fear that mental illness and/or addictive illness will be addressed punitively by their regulatory boards as opposed to supportively or therapeutically. No studies report on the outcomes of veterinarians disciplined for these illnesses. We know from the 1970 Oregon data that 20% of physicians disciplined committed suicide within 10 years. We also know from the Blue Print Papers<sup>(8,9)</sup> that physicians with addictive illness approached via PHP-styled intervention, treatment and monitoring have a suicide rate of less than 1%.<sup>(10)</sup>

In conclusion, there is a lack of good data regarding substance misuse/addictive illness, mental illness, or suicide within the veterinary community. The papers and surveys available coupled with the anecdotal experience of state PHPs who follow this demographic are concerning and tend toward the conclusion that this is a very high risk population for whom resources aimed at education, prevention, treatment, and monitoring should be made available.

## References

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