

## **Policy Paper on Veterinary Medical Student Wellness**

Students in medical programs across the globe face great difficulties incorporating wellness into their daily routine. Veterinary medical students are especially faced with continuous challenges that deny them the ability to lead mentally and physically healthy lives due to the rigorousness of the veterinary program. These wellness issues negatively affect students personally, academically, interpersonally and in a multitude of other ways by increasing stress, anxiety and depression. Numerous studies show that suicide rates within veterinary medical students are higher than other individuals of similar age and degree programs.<sup>3</sup> The serious nature of this topic has led to the development of a policy paper by the International Veterinary Students' Association (IVSA) meant to highlight the stressors that negatively impact veterinary medical students and the different ways that universities can address these issues within their specific programs.

Stress is defined as the relationship between an environment and a person who perceives his or her surroundings as having the potential to tax or endanger his or her well-being.<sup>2</sup> The Merriam-Webster dictionary explores this interpretation deeper to define stress in relation to physical wellbeing as, "a physical, chemical or emotional factor that causes bodily or mental tension and may be a factor in disease causation".<sup>4</sup> Stress does not only cause instability and discomfort for a student in the moment of anxiety, but it can cause additional long-term negative consequences on the individual's health, both mentally and physically. Stress can be associated with attention and concentration problems, illness, depression, anxiety, reduced academic success, increased absences due to sickness and increased unhealthy behaviors; including inappropriate diets, smoking, and poor sleep habits.<sup>2</sup> The goal of IVSA's Policy Paper on Student Wellness is to increase awareness of student mental health issues within the veterinary medical field and offer suggestions to improve student health and well-being.

IVSA recognizes that there is an insufficient amount of research and investigation devoted to veterinary medical student wellness. The few studies that have been published on the topic were used to assist in the writing of this policy paper. Veterinary medical students have been shown to have dramatically higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress than individuals in similar educational programs, not just as compared to the general population. One report in the United States shows that 32% of first-year veterinary medical students exhibited clinical signs of depression and high anxiety.<sup>1</sup> The study additionally compares this rate to human medical students and demonstrates a significantly lower rate of clinical depression, found to be 14.3%.<sup>1</sup> This contrast between veterinary and human medical students is important because it represents the generalized volume of mental health issues that veterinary medical students suffer from, as compared to students in similar programs. This information supports the need for more exploration of wellness issues in the veterinary medical field, both locally and internationally.

One study notes that, "Preliminary findings indicate that veterinarians have higher rates of death by suicide compared to the general population in several countries, including the US, the UK, Scotland, Wales and Australia".<sup>1</sup> The inclusion of other countries, albeit similar nations,

highlights the problem as being a unified global issue within the veterinary profession. Due to the high levels of mental health issues in veterinary medicine, IVSA has dedicated itself to the implementation of support systems for veterinary medical students worldwide.

There are various strategies that allow students to fare better against stress, anxiety and other challenges. Optimism, self-esteem and social support are factors that can build well-being and help individuals deal with stressful demands.<sup>2</sup> These attributes might not eliminate the stress in an individual's life, but they can aid in his or her ability to handle that stress in a more positive manner.<sup>2</sup> The ability to understand coping mechanisms that may reduce the negative side effects of stress is important to the mental wellness of veterinary medical students.

Relaying this research to students and increasing social support systems is vital for remedying the negative effects of stress. It is common for students to be reluctant to get help for themselves in situations of anxiety because they see it as a weakness of character.<sup>2</sup> Students that can share in a community of wellness-seekers are more likely to succeed long-term. IVSA values and considers the social aspects and repercussions of incorporating wellness into the lives of veterinary medical students.

IVSA recognizes the current wellness problems that all veterinary medical students face, and believes that veterinary faculties should become more involved in assisting with the health needs of their students. IVSA recommends that veterinary medical schools determine which issues their students individually experience to allow for a maximal benefit of wellness implementation. For instance, the financial burden of attending university is an issue that significantly affects North American veterinary medical students, much more than those in other countries. Survey documents are added in the addendum of this policy that can assist schools in determining the most important issues affecting students in their program. Once a veterinary medical school pinpoints the major stressors for their students, the faculty can work to create solutions on these issues. IVSA encourages veterinary medical programs to have social work staff and psychologists present and available for their students. Additionally, IVSA recognizes the need for universities to adequately advertise these resources, allowing students sufficient information about the mental health services that are present. The schools should encourage students to utilize these resources and view these resources as a strength, and not a weakness.

IVSA also believes that taking time for self-care is a crucial aspect in student wellness. This self-care involves taking time for oneself and taking part in activities that are not veterinary-related. This might include drawing, writing, reading, cooking, exercising, etc... Universities should encourage students to take part in these types of activities in order to improve student wellness. Events may even be done at universities to give students the opportunities to take part in non-veterinary experiences while remaining on faculty grounds with their community of peers. Lastly, fostering a positive environment in the veterinary medical school is vital for student morale. Increasing student self-esteem and optimism could aid in strengthening students' ability to handle stress and anxiety. Tackling the incredibly high suicide rate of veterinarians at a student level will help young veterinarians establish a routine of wellness care that they can carry through the rest of their career. IVSA is committed to student wellness and

strongly urges veterinary medical universities to take action in making positive changes aimed at addressing their students' unique wellness needs.



#### Cited articles:

1. Drake, Adryanna A. Siqueira, Mcarthur Hafen, Bonnie R. Rush, and Allison M.j. Reisbig. "Predictors of Anxiety and Depression in Veterinary Medicine Students: A Four-Year Cohort Examination." *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* 39.4 (2012): 322-30.
2. Gardner, Dianne H., and Tim J. Parkinson. "Optimism, Self-Esteem, and Social Support as Mediators of the RElationships among Workload, Stress, and Well-Being in Veterinary Students." *Journal of Veterinary Medical Education* 43.2 (2016).
3. "Health and Wellness for Our Students – The Problems of Depression and Suicide." AAVMC (2012).  
[www.aavmc.org/data/files/members%20only/deans2013/kinghealthwellnesssummary.pdf](http://www.aavmc.org/data/files/members%20only/deans2013/kinghealthwellnesssummary.pdf)
4. Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary. Def: Stress. [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stress](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/stress)

**Addendum and Survey:**

**Veterinary Medical Student Wellness Survey**

*IVSA Wellness Advocacy Group*

**Identifier Questions:**

**1) I attend/attended Veterinary School in:**

Country: \_\_\_\_\_

**2) My graduation year is/was:**

Year: \_\_\_\_\_

**3) During my clinicals, the average amount of hours I work(ed) each week is:**

- a) Less than 40 hours
- b) 41-50 hours
- c) 51-60 hours
- d) 61-70 hours
- e) 71-80 hours
- f) Greater than 81 hours
- g) I haven't yet begun clinics

**4) How many hours, on average, do you/did you spend studying outside of class?**

- a) Less than 10 hours
- b) 11-15 hours
- c) 16-20 hours
- d) 21-25 hours
- e) 26-30 hours
- f) More than 31 hours

**5) On average, how many hours per week do I spend in extracurricular activities? (clubs, leadership roles, company representative positions, etc...)**

- a) Less than 5 hours
- b) 5-10 hours
- c) 11-15 hours
- d) 16-20 hours
- e) 21-25 hours
- f) More than 26 hours

**6) I identify my gender as:**

- a) Male
- b) Female
- c) Transgender
- d) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**7) I identify my sexual orientation as:**

- a) Straight
- b) Bisexual
- c) Gay/Lesbian
- d) Pansexual
- e) Asexual
- f) Undefined

**8) I identify as a minority in my university in terms of race:**

- a) Yes
- b) No

**9) I identify as a minority in my university in terms of religion:**

- a) Yes
- b) No

**10) My age is:**

- a) Under 20 years
- b) 21-25 years
- c) 26-30 years
- d) Over 30 years

**11) My estimated student debt at the time of graduation from veterinary school will be:**

Amount: \_\_\_\_\_

Currency: \_\_\_\_\_

**12) I estimate my academic performance in school to be:**

- a) Above Average
- b) Average
- c) Below Average

**Personal Wellness and Stressor Questions:**

(If you are an alumni: answer from your previous experiences while in veterinary school)

**1) My biggest stressors within veterinary school are: (can circle more than one)**

- a) The pressure to perform well on exams
- b) Feelings of not being good enough and/or not fitting in
- c) Debt and personal finance
- d) Work load and responsibilities
- e) Difficulty fitting in with classmates or judgement/gossip from classmates
- f) Placement after veterinary school (getting a job, internship)
- g) Lack of support from peers, professors, university as a whole, and/or family
- h) Inability to express oneself, having to act 'tough' or like everything is okay
- i) Dealing with euthanasia of patients, or working with very ill animals
- j) Unhealthy and extreme working conditions in clinics (working 24 hours straight, being on-call for long periods of time and working weekends and nights)
- k) Choosing a field: being pressured to decide the type of vet to become without all the info you might need, or being pressured into a specific field
- l) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**2) My biggest stressors outside of veterinary school are: (can circle more than one)**

- a) Relationships (friendships, partner, children, parents, no free time to spend with others)
- b) Pets (lack of support for caring for pets, like walking dogs, or feeding them at the appropriate time, or caring for sick pets)
- c) Budget/money worries
- d) Lifestyle (addiction, eating disorders, exercise habits, sports, sleep, etc)
- e) Life events (losing a family member, weddings, moving)
- f) Lack of appreciation from society (misconceptions of the veterinary profession, negative connotations of veterinarians as compared to human physicians, etc...)
- g) Holding jobs or other positions outside of school
- h) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**3) I use the following methods to manage my own stress: (can circle more than one)**

- a) Exercise
- b) Food
- c) Relationships (friends and/or romantic)
- d) Substances (nicotine, alcohol, marijuana, energy drinks, caffeine pills etc...)
- e) Religion or spirituality
- f) Extracurricular activities
- g) Writing in a diary (personal reflections, etc...)
- h) University or sponsored events
- i) Volunteering
- j) Spending time with animals (at shelters, etc...)

**4) During the weekday, while in veterinary school, I sleep an average of:**

- a) Less than 3 hours
- b) 3-4 hours
- c) 5-6 hours
- d) 7-8 hours
- e) More than 8 hours

**5) During the weekday, while in veterinary school, my sleeping habits:**

- a) Make me very stressed because I sleep too little
- b) Make me mildly stressed because I sometimes sleep too little
- c) Do not stress me out because I sleep just the right amount
- d) Do not stress me out because I sleep too much
- e) Make me stressed because I sleep too much

**6) As a student, what programs has your school offered that have been helpful in maintaining your overall wellness? (can pick more than one)**

- a) Presentations on handling stress
- b) Mentor programs
- c) Social events focused on wellness
- d) Counseling service/psychological
- e) My school does not provide programs or support
- f) Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**7) I have a sense of control over my own life while in veterinary school.** (circle one) (If not, include space for why)

1      2    3    4    5    6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

*If you do NOT feel that you have control over your life in veterinary school, please take a moment to briefly explain why:*

\_\_\_\_\_

—

**8) I have experienced periods of disinterest or depression in veterinary school with regards to interests, relationships, or other experiences.** (circle one)

1      2    3    4    5    6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**9) I worry that I will be a bad veterinarian. Maybe have answers that would be more like “this varies, or everyday or sometimes”**



a) Frequently

b) Sometimes

c) Rarely

d) Never

**10) I feel adequately informed about the wellness resources available through my university.**

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

*If you feel adequately informed and you answered 4, 5, or 6 in the above question #10, please answer #11. If you answered 1, 2, or 3 in #30, please answer “not applicable” #11.*

**11) I feel comfortable using the wellness resources available through my university.**

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

not applicable

### **Veterinary Student Wellness Survey: Extra Questions**

*IVSA Wellness Advocacy Group*

#### **Extra Personal Wellness and Stressor Questions:**

(If you are an alumni, answer from your previous experiences while in veterinary school)

**12) My average stress level during veterinary school is:**

1   2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**13) When veterinary school is not in session, my average stress level is:**

1   2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**14) During veterinary school, I exercise for at least 20 minutes or more:**

a) Never to rarely

b) 1-2 days per week

c) 3-4 days per week

- d) 5-6 days per week
- e) Daily or more
- f) I don't exercise by choice

**15) During veterinary school, I estimate the number of healthy snacks and meals I eat a day would be:** (Healthy snacks might include fruit, vegetables, nuts, etc...; Healthy meals are generally well-balanced, and may include proteins, carbohydrates, vegetables, and may be home cooked/prepared)

- a) I rarely eat healthy
- b) One snack or meal per day is healthy
- c) At least half of my snacks and meals are healthy
- d) Nearly all of my snacks and meals are healthy
- e) I am not worried about eating healthy

**16) During veterinary school, I hang-out with friends outside of school or attend social events:**

- a) Never to rarely
- b) A few times a month
- c) Once a week
- d) A few times a week
- e) Daily or more
- f) I don't think spending time with friends is a priority

**17) I feel satisfied with my social life.** (circle one)

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**18) I feel I spend an adequate amount of time on hobbies and interests outside of veterinary medicine.** (circle one)

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**19) I feel regularly tired while in veterinary school.** (circle one)

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**20) The night before a test, I sleep an average of:**

- a) Less than 3 hours
- b) 3-4 hours
- c) 5-6 hours
- d) 7-8 hours
- e) More than 8 hours

**21) During veterinary school, I practice religion, attend religious/spiritual meetings or events:**

- a) Yes, I practice
- b) I wish I could attend religious/spiritual meetings or practice religion, but I am not able to during veterinary school
- c) No, I do not wish to practice.

If you answered A or B for #21, please answer #22. If you answered C for #21, then skip to #23

**22) During veterinary school, I practice religion, attend religious/spiritual meetings or events:**

- a) Never to rarely
- b) A few times a month
- c) Once a week
- d) A few times a week
- e) Daily or more

**23) I feel I respond to stressful or unfortunate circumstances with appropriate emotion.**

(circle one) I can adapt well to stressful situations,

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**24) I have experienced periods of disinterest or depression that lasted longer than 2 weeks. (circle one)**

- a) Yes   b) No

If you answered Yes to #24, please answer #25. If you answered No to #24, skip to #26.

**25) How frequently do you experience periods of disinterest or depression that last longer than two weeks. (circle one)**

a) Frequently                      b) Sometimes                      c) Rarely

**26) I have considered harming myself or have harmed myself by cutting, scratching, pulling my hair out, etc... (circle one)**

a) Frequently                      b) Sometimes                      c) Rarely                      d) Never

**27) I feel that professors and clinicians care about my personal well-being and treat me with respect. (circle one)**

1            2    3    4    5    6            (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**28) I feel my peers care about my personal well-being and treat me with respect. (circle one)**

1            2    3    4    5    6            (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**29) I worry about finding employment after veterinary school.**

1            2    3    4    5    6            (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**30) My university provides me adequate resources about starting my career as a veterinarian.** (This can include information on career path, managing life as a new vet, advice on buying a practice, or advice on working in academia, or advice on working in private practice)

1            2    3    4    5    6            (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**31) My university provides me adequate resources about life after university.** (Paying off debt, buying a home, starting a family, paying taxes, managing finances, health insurance, etc...)

1      2   3   4   5   6      (1: completely disagree; 6: strongly agree)

**32) I feel content with my personal wellness.**

1      2   3   4   5      (1: completely disagree; 5: strongly agree)