2018 ANNUAL CONFERENCES
AVA Annual Conference

Over 1,200 people attended the 2018 Annual AVA Conference at the Brisbane Exhibition and Convention Centre in May.

Delegates were treated to an outstanding series of plenary speakers. Engineer Dr Jordan Nguyen argued that intelligent technology can improve the lives of everyone, including people living with disability. Rather than fear change, he embraces it and harnesses the power of artificial intelligence and big data to develop innovations such as the mind-controlled smart wheelchair.

Dr Jennifer Whelan talked about the value of diversity and inclusion, and the way that our unconscious bias about difference can manifest in the workplace. This session was of particular interest in the light of the AVA’s Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy, ratified by the Board in September 2017. Dr Whelan shared strategies used by companies to thwart unconscious gender, culture and other bias, including blinding of job applications and rotating roles in meetings.

Brain fitness expert Dr Jennifer Brockis delivered the good news that our brains can work better for us – if we make the effort to provide the right conditions for them to flourish. She discussed current research highlighting the benefits of appropriate brain fuel (good nutrition, hydration, decent sleep and physical exercise), as well as the importance of non-tasking, deliberate brain-stretching and mindfulness.

Professor Jakob Zinsstag delivered the Ben Cunneen Memorial Plenary on One Health and its potential for integrated disease. Professor Zinsstag described his own brush with a zoonotic disease, Ebola, and the importance of communicating and understanding traditional healing practices when designing a One Health program.

We also heard from passionate colleagues within our profession during the inaugural VetEd Talk session. Hosted by self-proclaimed public health geek Guy Weerasinghe, VetEd provided a platform for practitioners to talk about their passions. The audience was treated to talks covering an amazing breadth of topics – from a female leadership program in Antarctica to an urban veterinary employer experiencing an epiphany about his lack of emotional intelligence, to a call to arms to end parvovirus forever. Ultimately, it was Dr Karen Teasdale, a practice owner from Yamba, who collected both the judge’s prize and the People’s Choice Award for her passionate and compassionate talk about death and end of life decision making.

In addition to the scientific program, a major thread running through the conference was wellness.

This year the program included two 2-hour mini wellness workshops, which were well attended. Clinical psychologist Naomi Bickley talked practitioners through the steps of fostering wellbeing and mental health in the veterinary profession. For the past nine years, Bickley has worked with Murdoch University’s Veterinary school, co-designing and co-facilitating the annual ‘Veterinary Professional Life’ camp. Delegates simulated opening a practice meeting asking their colleagues about one simple, good thing that had happened this morning (bearing in mind the workshop began at 8:15am). The shift in the energy of the room was palpable as veterinarians transformed from Monday-morning zombies to animated, engaged colleagues. If every delegate in the room took this message home, veterinary practice meetings will become a weekly highlight and a stepping stone to positive practice.

It was a stimulating, engaging and educational week, which felt like it was over far too soon. Now it’s time to start planning for the next AVA Conference. See you in Perth 5th-10th May 2019.

The Australian Veterinary Orchestra is seeking more members. If you have a musical bone and want to dust off an instrument, contact avo@sugarlandvets.com

AVA Mental Health First Aid instructor and counsellor Rosie Overfield ran a workshop on resilience on the Wednesday afternoon. She walked delegates through the PERMA-V model, where P stands for Positive emotions and self-compassion, E for Engagement, R for Relationships, C for Cultivate meaning, A is for Accomplishment and V is for Vitality. She also talked about the importance of whole body care for veterinarians (eating well, getting exercise) and sleep hygiene. There was a sense of camaraderie in the room as delegates shared stories about when they know they’re burnt out (for one practice owner and red wine connoisseur, he notices the wine doesn’t taste so good) and how they refuel.

Rosie also delivered the Mental Health First Aid Australia blended learning program, with the face-to-face component held on Friday May 19. This practical program enables Veterinarians, Nurses and Practice Managers to recognise a colleague in distress and provide immediate, constructive assistance.

AVA Recent Graduate and Student Program Manager Monika Cole led the AVA’s Wellness Stand, helping dozens of delegates attend to their own health and well-being with health checks (with some hand-holding of the needle-phobes), remedial massages and counselling sessions, all free of charge.

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Article supplied by Dr Anne Fawcett, University of Sydney