



# Australian Veterinary Association Veterinary Wellness Strategy

Summary of research findings

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YEARS AND BEYOND ASSOCIATION



## Project introduction

This report on Veterinary Wellness is part of a joint initiative between the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA) & SuperFriend to address the mental health and wellbeing of the veterinary profession. It represents the 'voice of the profession' and is an abridged version of the detailed report which provides in-depth findings of the research. It is recommended that the detailed report is reviewed for completeness alongside this snapshot.

### Veterinary wellness

There is growing evidence from academic research, industry bodies and professionals that the veterinary profession is in a mental health crisis.

Over the last three decades the risk of suicide in veterinary professionals has been reported to have steadily increased: with some research reporting veterinarians are four times more likely to die by suicide than the general population, and two times more likely than any other healthcare professionals (6).

This research has been publicised widely and supported by anecdotal evidence, however further work is required to validate this and truly understand not just the impacts of suicide on the profession, but the holistic state of mental health and wellness.

The mental health landscape across the Australian veterinary profession is complex and varied, suggesting that a holistic yet integrated approach is needed to positively impact the mental health outcomes of veterinary professionals.

This research aims to dig deep into the issues impacting veterinary wellness and provide a national picture of the current state of mental health in the Australian veterinary profession – this, in turn will pave the way for the sustainable and effective change the profession has been calling for.

### Project phases

The Veterinary Wellness Project was a strategic piece of work to address the mental health of the veterinary profession and consisted of 5 key phases;

#### Desktop & literature review

- Review & gap analysis of existing research
- Summary report provided to AVA

#### Stakeholder research

- Focus group & 1:1 interviews conducted
- Voice of profession survey

#### Problem definition & solutions

- Identification of key problems & issues
- Proposal of solutions for consideration

#### Recommendations

- Stakeholder presentation
- Final recommendations & action plan

#### Implementation & evaluation

- Translation of research into action
- Implement & evaluate strategic action plan

## Methodology & aims

The stakeholder research component of the Veterinary Wellness project was comprised of 3 key components:

1. Stakeholder focus groups
2. One-on-one interviews
3. Voice of profession survey

This was the first comprehensive national stakeholder research undertaken in the area of veterinary mental health and wellness, giving a voice to the profession on this important topic.

Stakeholder research was conducted between May 2021 and August 2021 by SuperFriend on behalf of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA). The focus groups and one-on-one interviews included 82 participants while the survey was completed by 2,540 participants. Further information about the methodology for each component can be found in the detailed report.

### Stakeholder feedback aimed to...

- Understand the mental health and wellbeing of the veterinary workforce.
- Understand psychosocial risk factors in the veterinary profession.
- Understand psychosocial protective factors in the veterinary profession.
- Understand barriers and enablers that influence help seeking behaviours.
- Gather opinions and insights on potential future initiatives, interventions, and solutions to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the profession.

## PART 1: Demographic overview of the veterinary profession

Through focus groups, one-on-one interviews, and survey data the voice of over 2,500 individuals working in the profession was heard. This section highlights the demographic characteristics of those involved in the stakeholder research. Demographic data was not collected for focus groups or one-on-one interviews, therefore the below represents information related to survey respondents.

**2,540** people took part in the 'voice of the profession' survey.

**72.2%** of respondents identified as female.

**26.9%** of respondents identified as male.

**62.5%** of respondents reported to work in a full time capacity.

**25.2%** of respondents were aged between 50-64 years. 30-35 & 40-49 were the next highest represented (16.9%).

**27.8%** of respondents were from NSW, with 26.6% in Vic & 19.5% in QLD.

**33.7%** of respondents advised they were veterinary employees in private practice.

**74.5%** of respondents reported to work in small companion animals.



## PART 2: Mental health & wellbeing among the veterinary profession

One of the main aims of the stakeholder research was to understand the mental health and wellbeing status among the veterinary workforce and provide a comprehensive picture and potential benchmark for all roles across the profession. This section highlights the perceived mental health self-rating of participants, personal experiences of mental health conditions and factors contributing to mental health conditions.

### Mental health self rating

**Women, students, veterinary nurses & 25-29 year olds were the most likely to rate their mental health poorly.**

Respondents were asked to self-rate their current mental health status. Half of respondents rated their mental health positively (50%), 32% were neutral and 18% rated their mental health poor or very poor.



Overall Women (19.6%) were more likely than men (13.5%) to rate their mental health poorly. This is consistent with general population data at a national level.



Men were almost 20% less likely to have experienced a mental health condition than women, they were also less likely to have their condition formally diagnosed or to seek support.

"Overworking for many years because I didn't have another option caused an imbalance.. I was spending too much time as a vet not a person"

"I feel like I must treat cases I am not confident managing.. being overwhelmed by complex & severe cases & running on adrenaline all day"

Survey verbatim comments 2021

### Mental health rating by age

Mental health self-rating appeared to improve with age across the population which is in line with national data that suggests prevalence of poor mental health decreases with age.

**Those aged between 18 - 35 years old**  
Were the most likely to rate their mental health poorly.

#### 25-29 year olds

In particular rated their mental health the worst out of any age group across the population.

#### Older workers

In particular those in the 65 year plus age group were more likely to self-rate their mental health as 'very good' irrespective of if they had retired or were still working in the veterinary profession.



## Mental health conditions

Respondents were asked if they have personally experienced a mental health condition including but not limited to depression, anxiety, bipolar, schizophrenia or eating disorder. If they had experienced a mental health condition they were asked when this occurred and if they were diagnosed by a health professional, as well as the factors they felt contributed to the condition.

**Over half of people have experienced a mental health condition, with the last 12 months being particularly challenging.**

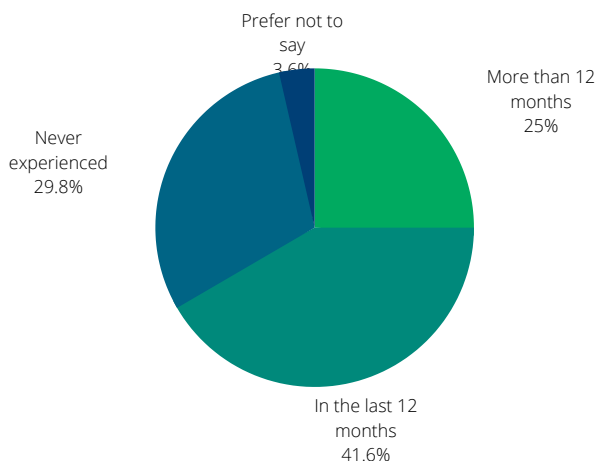


Figure 1 – personal experiences of a mental health condition

- Over half (66.7%) of people said they had experienced a mental health condition at some stage, of those 60% said their condition had been diagnosed by a medical professional.
- Women were far more likely (72.1% vs 53.0%) to have experienced a mental health condition, and more likely to have done so in the last 12 months (47.3% vs 27.0%)
- The likelihood of experiencing a mental health condition declines with age. Older workers were far less likely to have experienced a mental health condition in the past 12 months (on average 26% for those 40 years plus and 58% for those below 40 years old).

## Factors contributing to a mental health condition

Work and non-work related factors were cited by respondents who had experienced a mental health condition when asked about contributing factors. The top 10 work related factors included;

1. Challenging client interactions
2. Workplace bullying
3. Working long hours
4. Managing a high workload
5. Dealing with staff shortages
6. Poor leadership
7. Dealing with COVID-19
8. Poor remuneration
9. After hours & on-call work
10. Poor workplace culture

Over

1/4

**of people took time off work due to stress or a mental health condition**

Over

1/3

**of those people did not disclose the reason for their time off to their employer**

## PART 3: The impact of veterinary work on mental health

Work can either contribute to improving people's mental wellbeing or impact it negatively. This section explores the impacts of work upon mental health, psychosocial risk factors, psychosocial protective factors, and barriers to addressing mental health in the workplace.

### Impact of work aspects on mental health

Respondents were asked to assess the overall impact of their work on their mental health by answering the question 'overall how would you rate the impact your work has had on your mental health?'.

**Almost half of people feel their work has a negative or very negative impact on their overall mental health**

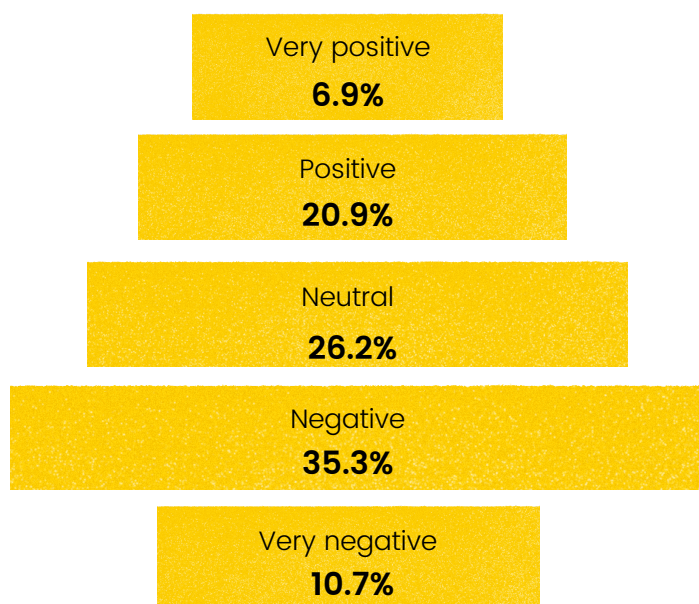


Figure 2 – impact of work on mental health

### Psychosocial risk factors

For the purpose of this research psychosocial risk factors were described as anything in the design or management of work that increases the risk of work-related stress.

Psychosocial risk factors are those factors that exist that may detract from the workplace experience, cause stress, and increase the likelihood of one's mental health being negatively impacted.

There were 5 common psychosocial risks identified consistently throughout the seven focus groups;

1. Challenging client interactions & expectations
2. Interpersonal conflict with colleagues
3. Working long hours
4. Experiencing financial strain
5. High workload & pressure

“Most of the mental health issues have been associated with being chronically overworked, understaffed and underfunded. It can be impossible to leave work or have breaks when the workload does not allow it. You can't go home and leave animals untreated, or when there is a lot of work to be done that cannot wait”

## Psychosocial risk factors in the veterinary profession

There are a range of psychosocial risk factors present in the veterinary profession that are common and therefore comparable to risks present in a range of workplaces, as well as risks specific to the veterinary profession.

### Common risk factors

There were five key risks that were consistently represented across survey responses, these risks are common workplace psychosocial risks that may be present in a range of workplace consistent with SafeWork Australia standards;

1. High workloads
2. Not being treated fairly
3. Poor change management policies
4. Lack of reward & recognition
5. Poor leader accessibility & support

**53.2% of people feel as though they do not have an appropriate workload**

### Veterinary specific risk factors

There were five key risks that were consistently represented across survey responses, these risks are veterinary specific psychosocial risks that may be present and related to this particular type of work;

1. Emotionally draining work
2. Staff shortages
3. Work intrusion on personal life
4. Neglecting physical health due to job
5. Inability to take sick or annual leave

**72.5% of people feel they regularly leave work feeling emotionally drained**

## Psychosocial protective factors

For the purpose of this research psychosocial protective factors were described as anything in the design or management of work that protects workers from experiencing work-related stress.

Psychosocial protective factors are those factors that exist that may enhance the workplace experience, increase engagement, and bolster mental health.

There were 5 common psychosocial risks identified consistently throughout the seven focus groups;

1. Good relationships with colleagues
2. Reward & recognition for effort
3. Mentally engaging work
4. Clinical success & good outcomes
5. Good relationships with clients

There were five key protective factors that were consistently represented across survey responses, these risks are veterinary specific psychosocial protective factors that may be present and related to this particular type of work;

**74.6%** of people rated **relationships with colleagues** as a protective factor

**70.1%** of people rated **positive interactions with pet owners** as a protective factor

**60.4%** of people rated **making a difference** as a protective factor

**60.1%** of people rated **achieving clinical successes** as a protective factor

**49.3%** of people rated **serving the community as an essential service** as a protective factor

## PART 4: Help & support seeking

A key aim of the stakeholder research was to understand the attitudes around and actions towards help and support seeking for those working in the veterinary profession, in particular those either self-reporting lowered mental health or those experiencing a mental health condition. This section examines help seeking behaviours including frequency of help seeking, willingness to seek help, types of help or support accessed as well as any barriers or enablers when it comes to seeking support.

### Help seeking behaviours

When asked whether they had sought help or support for their mental health, nearly 2 in 5 (38.5%) of all respondents had sought help for mental or emotional health issues in the last 12 months.

Women (44.1%) were twice as likely to seek help than men (22.0%) in the last 12 months, while those aged between 25–35 were more likely to seek help than any other age group.

Psychology & psychiatry services, a conversation with a colleague or manager, employee assistance programs (EAP), wellbeing check ups and changing job role were the most common forms of support.

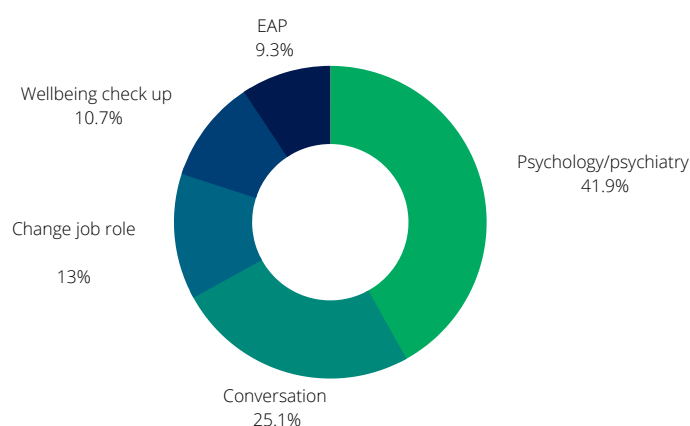


Figure 3 – top 5 supports accessed by respondents

“De-stigmatisation of mental illness and the normalisation of taking sick leave for mental health related issues as well as physical would make a big difference. I think if I had taken time off earlier, like I would for a cold, I would not be in such a bad place now. But I never wanted the hassle.”

### What would stop you from or encourage you to seek help?

Respondents were asked about what barriers stood in the way of seeking help or support for their mental health as well as what would enable them to do so.

#### BARRIERS TO HELP SEEKING

- Lack of time to access treatment
- The cost of treatment
- Stigma about mental illness
- Fear of the veterinary board
- Pressure to maintain competence
- Not knowing where to get help
- Confidentiality concerns
- Feeling like a burden or weak

#### ENABLERS TO HELP SEEKING

- Hearing relatable real life stories
- Having open & transparent leaders
- Access to good quality mentors
- Free or low cost treatment
- Flexible service options
- Reducing stigma
- Having time for treatment
- Good advertising of services
- Easily accessible services



## PART 5: Future initiatives

This research aimed to gather opinions and insights on potential future initiatives, interventions, and solutions to improve the mental health and wellbeing of the profession at an individual, organisational, profession and government level. This section explores solutions to address key risk and protective factors both at a support and service level as well as policy and workplace interventions.

**"What I need to support my mental health is better industry standards... less client abuse, reasonable work hours, better work/life balance and appropriate remuneration.**

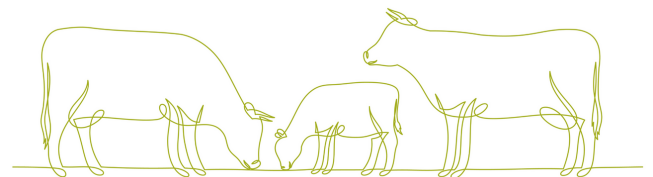
**Whilst support is important if/when people may struggle with their mental health, this is a band aid fix if the workforce issues aren't addressed.**

**We need to address the cause, not the result – fix the things that break us... don't try to fix us after we are broken"**

### Initiatives & policies

Respondents were asked about which workforce and environmental factors they believed would benefit from implementing certain initiatives and policies that directly or indirectly impacted mental health. Addressing these factors through policies and initiatives is seen as a preventative measure in improving mental health. These are often profession or organisation focused and may be linked to some of the 'workforce issues'.

- 1 Changes to the salary & award.
- 2 Community education campaigns.
- 3 Flexible work options & opportunities.
- 4 Mental health education for students.
- 5 Government subsidy/rebate on pet care
- 6 Vet specific mental health resources.
- 7 Upskill veterinary nurses clinically.
- 8 Communication & interactions training.
- 9 Health & wellbeing subsidies
- 10 Recruitment & staffing support.



## Supports & services

Respondents were asked about which formal or informal supports and services they believed would be beneficial for the future mental health of the profession. These refer to those which support those that may be experiencing or are at risk of low mental health or a mental health condition or illness. These are reactive supports and services which aim to assist in directly improving mental health. These are often individually focused.

- 1 Free confidential counselling.
- 2 Graduate mentoring & support.
- 3 Mental health training.
- 4 Mental health screening or check ups.
- 5 Peer support programs.
- 6 Formal or informal debriefing.
- 7 24/7 counselling hotline.
- 8 Suicide prevention & awareness training.
- 9 Financial education & support.
- 10 Bullying & discrimination training.

"I don't want any record or trace of mental health on my file, I don't want it to be used against me or my competence called into question"

## One positive change...

Respondents were asked 'if you could make one positive change to the veterinary profession that you feel would have the biggest impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the workforce, what would it be?'

Improved pay & award standards

Client & community education

Better workload & hours

Access to more vets & staff

Appropriate student selection

Medicare for pets

Policies for breaks & leave

Mandatory pet insurance

Upskill & register vet nurses

Improve vet board processes

## Conclusion

### Research overview

This research into veterinary wellness aimed to understand not only the current mental health status of those working in the veterinary profession, but also the factors that affect mental health. This included a differentiation between work and non-work-related factors with a deep dive into the work-related factors. The research also examined psychosocial risk and protective factors, prevalence of and attitudes towards help seeking and finally the appetite for future initiatives and actions to improve mental health and wellbeing.

### Mental health & wellbeing among the veterinary profession

The research gave a voice to over 2,500 people in the veterinary profession and allowed them to not only self-rate their mental health status but share their experiences when it came to mental health conditions.

Most people self-rated their mental health as very good or good, with 1 in 6 also rating their mental health as poor or very poor. Half of the cohort reported experiencing a mental health condition, with many finding the last 12 months particularly challenging,

**1 in 6 people rated their mental health as poor or very poor**

Women, students, veterinary nurses, and those aged between 25–29 were most likely to identify with having poor mental health or a formal mental health condition.

### Impact of veterinary work on mental health

While the veterinary profession is extremely diverse and varied in the types of workplaces, roles and ways of working, this research aimed to find commonalities irrespective of these factors.

People reported that although work and non-work-related factors contributed to mental health conditions quite equally, the overwhelming majority of respondents felt that work had a negative impact on their mental health, and they often left work feeling emotionally drained. Some felt they needed to take time off work due to their mental health, but there was still some reluctance to disclose the real reasons for this time off to their employer.

Negative interactions with the general public and challenging client behaviour had the biggest impact on mental health, this combined with an excessive workload and at times poor working conditions such as long hours, poor pay and lack of breaks proved to be too much, with some respondents sharing they have chosen to leave the profession to find work with better basic conditions and less stress.

Relationships with colleagues had a two-fold effect, proving to be a huge risk factor if things like incivility, bullying and poor culture were present, whereas positive relationships with colleagues was the single most important protective factor when teamwork, camaraderie and collaboration were actively present.

The impacts of the veterinary shortage were certainly felt, with many reporting long hours and excessive workloads meaning they did not have a good level of work/life balance and where work often intruded on their personal lives meaning they were not looking after their physical health as well as they could be.

### Help & support seeking

Seeking support or help is a critical step in the recovery process not only for those experiencing a mental health condition, but also for others to maintain good mental health.

**In the last 12 months almost 2 in 5 people had sought support or help for their mental health**

Although formal psychology treatment was preferred and recommended by the vast majority, people were also open to having a conversation with a manager or colleague.

Majority of people felt that the profession needed good role models and leaders to speak openly about their mental health and experiences as this would encourage others to be open, seek help and ultimately decrease the stigma that continues to exist around mental health.

Some felt they would be seen as weak if they sought help or support, that their situation was not 'bad enough' or that they would be a burden. While others felt they were risking their career by seeking help.

A sense of fear was reported to exist in relation to the veterinary board processes for registration as well as complaint handling, with many reporting they would not risk their reputation, career, or livelihood by seeking help, they would just instead 'push on'.

### Future initiatives

The voice of the profession has never been so important in terms of paving the way for the future than now. Opinions and insights were sought on what the future looks like for improving the mental health of the profession, this information was extremely valuable in providing key recommendations back to the AVA in order to determine next steps.

Initiatives to prevent mental illness are of highest priority and proactive, promotion of the positive aspects of work is also required, followed by initiatives that manage illness when it arises.

Addressing the impact the general public has on the mental health and wellbeing of those working within the industry should be considered a key priority through community education campaigns. Advocating for and working towards appropriate workplace standards and working conditions such as improved remuneration, veterinary shortage, working hours and policies relating to management of after hours and overtime to address issues such as overworking, fatigue and lack of work/life balance will also be important.

Addressing some of the financial stressors which exist in relation to veterinary care through potential government subsidies or other financial models will have a two-fold effect on financial stress and prevalence of customer abuse and disrespect.

Addressing some of the issues that exist within the identified at-risk groups could prove beneficial, this could include improving the student experience, focusing on diversity & inclusion, considering what flexible work looks like for the profession, reviewing the role of the veterinary nurse and paraprofessional roles as well as ensuring mental health supports are of the highest quality.

### Conclusion

This research has provided invaluable insight into the current state of mental health in the veterinary profession and the next phase will inform the path forward in addressing some of the issues that have been identified through the voice of the profession. SuperFriend are committed to continuing to support the AVA and bring these findings to life to make veterinary wellness a reality.

Thank you to every person involved in the veterinary profession for making this piece of work possible and contributing towards a thriving profession into the future.



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