Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

A Report on the First International Symposium for Veterinary Mental Health and Suicide Prevention

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Jenny Weston
BVSc BPhil PhD

Massey University

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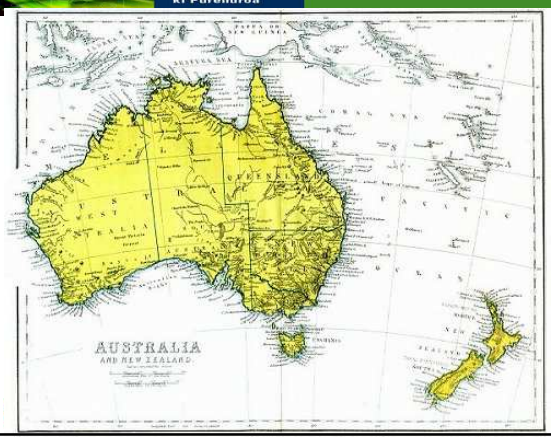

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Background

- New Zealand ~ 4.5 million people
- 2,750 currently registered veterinarians
- One veterinary school – Massey University
- 72% NZ registered vets trained at Massey
- AVMA accreditation since 2001
- 80 domestic and 24 international students per class
- 5 year BVSc programme
- Strong focus on mixed / production animal practice

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Background

- Australia ~ 23.5 million people
- Originally 4 veterinary schools, graduating ~ 400
- Now 7 veterinary schools and graduating ~ 750
- Less focus on agriculture
- A large corporate chain of small animal practices
- Federal / state system with 8 registering bodies
- A particular focus on mental health problems and training gatekeepers for suicide prevention amongst veterinarians in WA

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34 - 17

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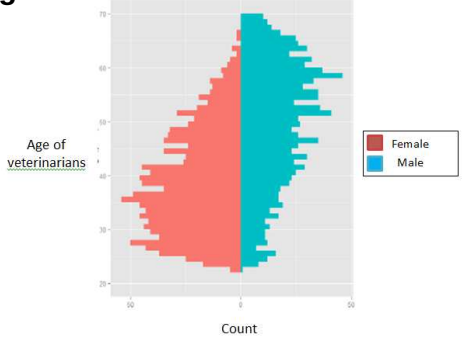
Age-structure of the Profession



Source: www.vetcouncil.org.nz/documentation/VCNZ_VeterinaryWorkforce2012-13.pdf

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- **Greatest sources of work-related stress:**
- Hours worked
- Client expectations
- Unexpected outcomes
- **Personal stressors**
- Concern about level of technical skill worse for women and < 34 y.o.
- “Living up to one’s own expectations”
- Personal relationships, debt, family needs

Gardner, D. H., & Hini, D. (2006). Work-related stress in the veterinary profession in New Zealand. *New Zealand Veterinary Journal, 54*(3), 119-124.

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- **Personal support structures**
- 83% of all respondents reported having good networks of family and friends to talk to about stress-related issues

- **There is a need to develop support strategies particularly for younger members of the profession**

Gardner, D. H., & Hini, D. (2006). Work-related stress in the veterinary profession in New Zealand. *New Zealand Veterinary Journal, 54*(3), 119-124.

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Anecdotally

- High levels of stress and suicide among veterinarians
- High rate of dropout from the profession of recent graduates (not just leaving clinical practice)
- Increasing resentment from recent graduates about the state of the profession and their working conditions
- Lack of an obvious career path for those in clinical practice
- Women less likely to be business owners – what is the succession plan for veterinary clinics?

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Impetus for the Event

- The Symposium was organised within about 3 months
- The idea of an individual small animal practitioner
- “Not One More Vet” Facebook page
- “By the profession, for the profession”
- PanPac conference
- Some company sponsorship
- Registration ~ US$70 for the day
- About 100 attendees in the room and another 350 registered at the same price for on-line access to real-time and recorded presentations

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Speaker: Julanne Frater

- Veterinarian and almost completed her specialisation as a psychiatrist
- Has researched coronial records in Queensland focusing on suicide
- Summarised suicide facts, myths and theories
- Australia has had a constant suicide rate for the past 150 years (10-11 per 100,000 annually)
- Veterinarian suicide a different methodology

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Speaker: Brian McErlean

- Works for the Veterinary Surgeons' Board in WA
- Instrumental in much of the good work there
- "The Mind of the Veterinarian"
- Recommends not allowing new grads to perform euthanasia for quite a period of time
- Concern about more young women in the profession and their differences – perfectionism, self esteem, anxiety
- Use humour to get the messages across
- Recommends not talking to veterinarians about means or methodology

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Speaker: Michael Paton

- Government vet in WA and runs their Graduate Support Scheme
- Mentor is arranged for each final year student at Murdoch University
- Mentors and students meet a couple of times at social events in final year
- Technology makes long distance mentoring possible
- These WA initiatives are planned to go nationwide through the Australian Veterinary Association but $$$

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Vet Confessionals
Corey Regnerus

Massey University Institute of Veterinary, Animal and Biomedical Sciences

- A Massey University vet student initiative
- Established in 2014
- Modelled after PostSecret, and attuned to the specific challenges faced by members of the veterinary industry

What is Vet Confessionals?

"We think that secrets separate us and make us different. But if you find the courage to share them, we shatter that illusion. We see that secrets aren't walls; they're bridges."

– Frank Warren (Founder of PostSecret)

- Provide a safe, anonymous, emotional and creative outlet for people in the veterinary industry
- Improve the mental wellbeing of vet and tech students and graduated professionals
- Facilitate communication between both groups
- Remove stigma associated with seeking help

What are the aims of Vet Confessionals?

1. Secrets are submitted
2. Undergo a vetting/moderation process
   Anonymity
   "Do no harm" – If a submission is deemed to have the potential to cause harm to others, it will not be posted
3. Secrets are posted on www.vetconfessionals.com and open to comments (also moderated)

How does Vet Confessionals work?

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- "My grades have always defined me. I was always "the smart girl" at school, and then my new friends at uni saw me the same way. Now I'm in vet and I know I should be able to ease up on the anxiety about my grades, but I can't help it. When I don't get the best grade I feel like I've let someone down. Maybe I've let myself down, or all the people who see me as the smart girl, I don't know, but I feel so worthless……What am I if I'm not the smart girl? Who am I then? How do I go on from losing my view of myself?"

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Other Speakers

- Jodie Wilson and Oliver Liyou – clinicians with personal experience of mental health problems
- David Bartram (UK) - keynote speaker
- Myself – the NZ situation: problems, research and support for veterinarians
- Jim Wilson – recent graduate from Massey but working in Australia, concerns of recent graduates: high debt, low salaries, oversupply of graduates, unsympathetic bosses, poorly run businesses

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Proposed Solutions

- **For students**
- Information about career options (other than clinical practice) for students
- Compulsory annual career counselling (and do they want to stay in Vet School?)
- Appoint early career mentors to final year students rather than as new grads
- Faculty and qualified vets to share stories of unexpected outcomes / mistakes we have made
- More regular contact from vets in practice while the students are at university

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Proposed Solutions

- **For Recent Graduates**
- Better working conditions (clinical practice needs to be more profitable?)
- Quick 10 minute breaks every 2-3 hours
- Protected time for 1 hour debrief each week with colleague or manager
- Website with information and how to get help – an international venture; for vets and those who care about them

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Proposed Solutions

- **For Recent Graduates**
- Industry reps trained as gatekeepers
- Make better use of skilled support staff
- Need to consider better support for all working in veterinary clinics and animal shelters
- Better use of social media to reach out to vets
- Combine the resources of AVA and NZVA for free webinars and development of resources

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My Thoughts

- Better support of recent grads is required
- Focus on resilience training for vet students
- Review selection into vet school
- Is changing job / career / profession normal for many these days anyway?
- Only allow 'approved' practices to employ new graduates
- Implement the University of Liverpool's peer support programme for veterinary students

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Acknowledgements

- Sponsors, presenters and attendees of the Symposium in Brisbane
- Conveners of this VWSW Summit for the opportunity to present

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