

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Developing a Plan to Prevent Mental Health Problems in the Veterinary Workplace



Jenny Weston
BVSc BPhil PhD

THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Acknowledgements 1

- School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne, Australia:
 - Dr Nicola Reavley
 - Dr Kathryn Page
 - Dr Allison Milner
 - Ms Irina Tchernitskaia
 - Associate Professor Tony LaMontagne
- Institute for Safety, Compensation and Recovery Research (Australia)



THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND



Workplace prevention of mental health problems GUIDELINES FOR ORGANISATIONS

These guidelines consist of actions organisations can take to prevent common mental health problems in the workplace. It is hoped that they will be used to improve the practices of organisations as they work to reduce the risk of job stress and mental health problems in the workplace. The guidelines are intended to complement existing legislative requirements for occupational health and safety and the prevention and management of discrimination and harassment.

- <http://prevention.workplace-mentalhealth.net.au/>



THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

Introduction



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

- An increasing burden
- Increasingly stringent Health and Safety in Employment legislation
- Important that those affected are involved in developing strategies to prevent mental health problems in the workplace and take responsibility for the strategy





THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

Methodology



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

- Participants are facilitated during a workshop to prioritise and adapt general workplace mental health strategies to increase their relevance and appropriateness for their sector
- Work in focus groups according to type of employment or common interests





THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

Step One



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

- Identify the protective and contributing (negative) factors for a variety of poor mental health outcomes (e.g. high stress levels, mental disorder, burnout, risk of suicide)

Your Experience		
Mental Health Outcomes	Protective Factors	Contributing Factors (Negative)
High Stress Levels		
Depression or other mental health problems		





THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

Step Two

Consider each contributing factor in terms of impact, prevalence and growth (high, medium and low) then decide on overall importance.

Theme of the contributing factors (from the first table)	Impact (H/M/L)	Prevalence (H/M/L)	Growth (H/M/L)	Overall (H/M/L)

Step Three

- Identify the top 5-10 issues for your situation
- Brainstorm actions, policies or procedures that could reduce the contributing factors (must be SMART)
- Prioritise the areas for implementation in terms of relevance, feasibility and impact (high, medium or low) and then rank the most important actions

Your organisation

Areas of guidelines for implementation	Relevance (H/M/L)	Feasibility (H/M/L)	Impact (H/M/L)	Priority 1-6 or more

Step Four

- Develop action plans according to timeline
- Then put them into place

Area of focus	Action
Short Term (Quick Wins/ 0-6 months)	
Medium Term (6-18 months)	
Long Term (18 months and beyond)	



Veterinary Workshop

- Held in Melbourne, Australia in October 2013
- 30 participants, 21 female
- Balance of ages from 25 to 65+
- Included some managers / nurses
- Clinical practice, universities, government vets, allied groups



Findings 1: Work-related Stressors

- Workload / work-life balance
- Lack of support / social isolation
- Profession being undervalued / low salary
- Client expectations
- Your own expectations
- Career transition (mainly new grads)
- Gender issues (juggling career and family, moving to a new/rural area)
- Mental health issues / perfectionism
- Poor leadership / business management



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Findings 2: Areas for action

- **Development of a positive work environment**
- Balance job demands with job control
- **Provision of workplace support / fair workplace**
- **Development of management and leadership skills**
- Effective management of performance issues
- **Appropriately rewarding employees' efforts**
- Mental health education / policies



THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Veterinary Student Workshop

- Held recently at Massey University
- Worked in conjunction with colleagues from the School of Social Work Dr Michael Dale, Dr Polly Yeung and Jessica Verryt (Masters student) and Stuart Gordon (Vet School)
- Invited representatives from each year of the BVSc and BVT programmes
- MUHEC approval



THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

Background

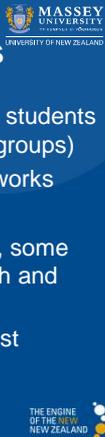
- Embedding a new curriculum, now running in the first 3 years of a 5 year programme
- Some problem-based learning
- More integration of subjects e.g. structure and function as one course through 3 semesters, introductory anaesthesia, pharmacology, radiology and surgery in one course
- Reduced hours for lectures, focus on day one skills/knowledge (curriculum creep!)



THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND

Students: Protective Factors

- Interaction with: vets in the real world, vet students in other years, peers (especially in study groups)
- Outside interests, hobbies or support networks
- Exercise, sleep & healthy eating
- Within Vet School: VetStart, staff mentors, some material in the curriculum on mental health and wellness, free student counselling service
- Interest clubs and talks on topics of interest



Students: Protective Factors

- Students being organised – making lists
- Availability of lecturers for questions
- Skilled / sufficient demonstrators in prac classes
- Adding in case examples and time for questions within lectures
- Lecturers recounting their own mistakes
- Developing better study skills



Students: Contributing Factors

- **Workload**
- **Assessment**



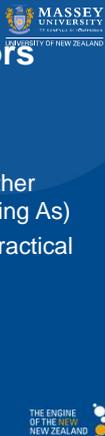
Specifically:

- Clarify what is essential in the learning material
- Coordination of teaching material
- Well-prepared teachers
- After hours commitments to patient care when on clinical rotations
- Timing and amount of assessment
- Stick to the timetable (especially for assessment)
- Lack of regular feedback



Students: Contributing Factors

- Personal predispositions of students: perfectionist, competitive behaviour
- Grades allocated to bell-shaped curve rather than on merit (students were used to getting As)
- Having to complete lots of farm and vet practical work in the holidays
- Financial stress (also due to prac work)
- Other personal crises



Students: Contributing Factors

- Poor coping behaviour e.g. alcohol
- Lots of staff teaching into one course
- Most interactions with animals are a negative experience (animal is dead or will die)
- Negativity from some staff
- Emphasis in the course on vets being prone to poor mental health
- Perceived stigma against mental health problems



Suggested Actions

- Clarify our expectations of the students with regards learning outcomes and what is core material
- **Listen to and act on student feedback**
- Assessment: amount, relevance and timing
- Course organisation: timetabling, online learning resources, coordination between lecturers and topics



Suggested Actions

- Refreshers on coping and emotional intelligence
- More student social events without alcohol
- Animals (particularly cats and dogs) for positive interactions at vet school
- More information on mental health
- A database or review site for prac work placements (farm and vet clinics) – potential for abuse



Interesting Comments

- One group of students suggested that at least annual counselling should be mandatory for all students
- Another group of students questioned whether the faculty were receiving enough support themselves or had excessive workload



Conclusions

- No real surprises with what the students were saying
- All of the suggested actions revolved around changes that the organisation needed to make rather than around their own behaviour
- The new curriculum was well planned but its implementation hasn't been monitored sufficiently
- Students have higher expectations and are more demanding compared to 15 years ago



Suggestion

- It isn't being "a vet" or "a vet student" which is the complete source of mental distress in these populations
- Can we educate prospective students about these issues so they enter the vet school prepared for high workload and high emotional demands?
- Can we select for resilient students?



Acknowledgements 2

- Within the Institute of Veterinary, Animal & Biomedical Sciences: Stuart Gordon and all the students who participated
- Within the School of Social Work: Dr Polly Yeung, Dr Michael Dale and Jessica Verryt



Questions?



MASSEY UNIVERSITY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

THE ENGINE OF THE NEW ZEALAND
