

## *Work situations that generate stress in veterinarians*

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**Abstract:** Veterinarians frequently encounter trauma, pain, suffering, and death in their work, and are thus subjected to professional burnout. Therefore, this study aimed to identify the events that generate stress in these professionals. For this purpose, qualitative research was conducted with 123 veterinary medicine workers, who were providing direct assistance to patients in the city of Santa Maria/RS, through an open questionnaire administered online between June and July 2021. The results show that the work situations that generate stress among veterinarians are associated with overwork, pressure from managers and employers, professional devaluation, relationship problems with colleagues, and difficulties in dealing with guardians. In contrast, few workers have developed personal tactics to face work stress. Identification of these situations is essential for the development of strategies in search of better working conditions and quality of professional life among veterinarians.

**Keywords:** Professional burnout, Occupational stress, Veterinary medicine.

**Título:** Situaciones laborales que generan estrés en los veterinarios

**Resumen:** Los veterinarios se enfrentan con frecuencia a traumas, dolor, sufrimiento y muerte en su trabajo, por lo que están sometidos al desgaste profesional. Por ello, este estudio pretendía identificar los acontecimientos que generan estrés en estos profesionales. Para ello, se realizó una investigación cualitativa con 123 trabajadores de la medicina veterinaria, que prestaban asistencia directa a los pacientes en la ciudad de Santa Maria/RS, a través de un cuestionario abierto administrado en línea entre junio y julio de 2021. Los resultados muestran que las situaciones de trabajo que generan estrés entre los veterinarios están asociadas a la sobrecarga de trabajo, la presión de los gerentes y empleadores, la desvalorización profesional, los problemas de relación con los colegas y las dificultades en el trato con los tutores. En cambio, pocos trabajadores han desarrollado tácticas personales para afrontar el estrés laboral. La identificación de estas situaciones es esencial para el desarrollo de estrategias en busca de mejores condiciones de trabajo y calidad de vida profesional entre los veterinarios.

**Palabras clave:** Agotamiento profesional, Estrés laboral, Medicina veterinaria.

Work is dynamic and changes daily, and workers' health and quality of life are influenced by increasing transformations, triggering

negative consequences such as stress (International Labour Office, 2012). Complex activities, technical procedures, and exposure to

health risk factors are significant causes of these consequences (Ângelo & Chambel, 2013; Rosenstein, 2012).

In the work environment, several conditions can make a profession stressful. Working under pressure, constant noise, uncertainties and difficulties (Rodrigues et al., 2013), accumulation of activities, performance of several tasks simultaneously, pressures and demands, anger, devaluation, and competitive environment (Silva & Salles, 2016) all lead to greater physical and mental exhaustion among workers.

Considering these circumstances, health professionals stand out because they work in unhealthy environments, with exposure to diverse occupational risks and intense emotional triggers when dealing with patients (Lundgrén-Laine et al., 2011; Meneghini et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2014). These workers need to deal with conflict and obstacles with each patient, which can lead to helplessness, sense of failure, exhaustion, and stress (Shinan-Altman et al., 2016; Urbaneto et al., 2011).

As health professionals, veterinarians devote themselves intensely to the animals they care for and empathize with their guardians; they are thus exposed to various stressors (Zani et al., 2020). These professionals feel overwhelmed by long working hours, working in shifts, spending considerable time on their feet, having little time to rest, low pay, and few prospects for professional growth (Nett et al., 2015).

Excessive work influences the quality of professional life significantly and can cause professional exhaustion. In this scenario, veterinarians exhibit high stress levels during work because only one professional sees patients; schedules and follows up on tests; performs surgical procedures; deals with scarcity of resources; makes the necessary referrals; manages hospitalizations and emergencies; prescribes, discharges, and guides the guardians; and becomes involved from the beginning to the end of care. Thus, it is of high importance to conduct investigations aimed at obtaining knowledge about these aspects.

Thus, this study aimed to identify the situations that generate stress in veterinarians, based on the following guiding question: Describe a situation that makes you feel stressed in your work environment and the strategies you use to deal with it.

## **Method**

### *Design*

This was an exploratory descriptive research using a qualitative approach, conducted through a questionnaire administered online and directed to teaching veterinarians, assistants, and graduate students who provide direct assistance to patients in the city of Santa Maria/RS.

### *Participants*

One hundred and twenty-three professionals working both in private and public institutions participated in the study, proportionally

organized according to the number of answers from workers of these two categories.

*1. Inclusion criteria*

- a. Being a teaching veterinarian, assistant, or graduate student.
- b. Providing direct assistance to patients in the city of Santa Maria/RS.

*2. Exclusion criteria*

- a. Workers who had no direct contact with patients.
- b. Who performed their professional activities in other cities.
- c. Who did not answer the open questioning (non-mandatory).
- d. Who did not agree with the informed consent form.

*Procedure*

The online instrument was available for response between June and July 2021, and 102 answers to the following question were obtained: Describe a situation that makes you feel stressed in your work environment and what strategies you use to deal with it. The analysis was based on the framework proposed by Bardin (2016), through repeated readings of the material to understand and group the central and recurring ideas. The research followed the ethical principles from Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council, and was approved by the Research Ethics Committee under the CAAE number 44995021.6.0000.5346.

**Results**

Among the participants, 72.4% were female and 27.6% were male, working in all shifts, 51.2% worked in a public hospital and 48.8% in private clinics and/or home care. Most professionals (78.1%) were between 20 and 40 years old, and 80% had a graduate degree. The analysis procedure generated two thematic units: work situations that generate stress in veterinarians and personal strategies for coping with work stress in veterinarians.

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The activities of veterinary doctors can lead to suffering, exhaustion, and stress, because these professionals face exhaustive work shifts, pressure from managers and employers, professional devaluation, relationship problems with colleagues and difficulties in dealing with guardians, in addition to living with pain and seeing suffering every day. From this perspective, the participants mentioned dissatisfaction with the excessive workload. The interviewees stated that work overload causes physical and emotional exhaustion, leaving them with no time even for their basic needs:

*Excess of work and few people to perform the activities. In general, I end up working more hours during the day, and I eat and sleep very badly (MV-47).*

*Work overload, lack of workforce, and overtime are burdening me even more (MV-51).*

*[...] when I am feeling overwhelmed to the point of not even being able to drink water [...] (MV-90).*

*Too many patients in a short period of time to dedicate to complex cases or to the reception of needy guardians. I can't be caring and empathetic enough due to the backlog of tasks (and writing about it is making me cry now) [...]. Feeling of exhaustion and being swallowed up by the accumulated time and commitments [...]. Feeling that I am becoming a worse person, less empathetic and colder (MV-77).*

These statements show that work overload generates negative feelings. Although professionals want to solve problems and dedicate themselves more to patients, this is impossible due to excessive workload and insufficient number of professionals. Added to this is the pressure from managers and/or employers:

*Pressure and emotional blackmail to take on more patients/procedures than one can physically and emotionally handle [...] (MV-27).*

*[...] be obliged to have certain conduct because it is the conduct of the owner of the clinic [...] (MV-29).*

*[...] especially in hospital environment where we try to give the best to the patient, and many times we are not heard [...] many times we had no voice [...] (MV-37).*

*Nowadays, almost any situation is a reason for stress....Messages in WhatsApp groups related to work already cause me palpitations*

*(nostalgia for the time when there was no WhatsApp...) (MV-100).*

The pressure experienced by the professionals causes additional stress, which can directly interfere with the professional's health and performance, because it leads to anguish and concern. The reports also show that the lack of recognition and professional devaluation are associated with situations that cause suffering:

*Lack of appreciation of the veterinary service and ignorance of the population about the costs necessary to maintain this service (MV-78).*

*Lack of recognition. People not having patience to wait for test results and ignoring recommendations (MV-106).*

*Professional devaluation by the sector coordinator, lack of respect at work (MV-04).*

*[...] Having the value of my work questioned... (MV-29).*

The statements show that lack of recognition in the work environment, especially by the patients' guardians, is also linked to situations that cause stress. In the same way, the participants refer that burnout at work depends on many variables, interpersonal relationship being one of them. In this context, they mention that the existence of conflicts between colleagues is one of the stress triggers:

*about the cost of procedures, ask for discounts [...] (MV-09).*

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*The fact that the guardians do not understand that animals have a limited life span, and as they are increasingly attached to the animals, they end up wanting from us what we cannot give. Thus, this phase of farewell and acceptance by the guardians that life has come to an end wears us out too much (MV-22).*

*Pressure from guardians and animals that do not respond to treatment, which ends up making me worry 24 hours a day (MV-96).*

*Guardians demanding to cure incurable diseases (MV-93).*

*[...] WhatsApp messages and constant calls, including non-business hours and weekend [...] (MV-119).Lack of respect, hierarchy, and negligence by colleagues, especially younger professionals [...] (MV-13).*

*Uncooperative colleagues. For several and several times explaining the need, for example, of analgesia in a patient before a radiographic exam... (MV-58).*

*[...] Lack of understanding of colleagues for the limitations we have in the diagnosis with the devices we have, the distrust from some colleagues in the diagnostic impressions [...] (MV-69).*

*[...] Ego disputes, toxic environment [...] (MV-77).*

*[...] Exclusion and mockery in the work environment [...] (MV-99).*

It is noticeable that workers are aware of the importance of teamwork and how their interpersonal relationship affects the work

environment. Moreover, the statements elucidate many difficulties in dealing with guardians, prevailed by dealing with people who are anxious, inopportune, and not very understanding, as well as answering messages and phone calls outside office hours:

*[...] Almost all guardians complain*

Therefore, veterinarians experience situations that generate stress in the work environment, and the exhaustion of several professionals is clear from the reports. However, the reports also show that few workers develop strategies to deal with these situations, which is demonstrated in the following section.

### *Personal strategies for coping with work stress in veterinarians*

Veterinarians' working conditions are stressful, especially when it comes to dealing with pain, suffering, and death every day. Adding this to all the factors listed in the previous section, these workers are expected to suffer from work stress and professional burnout if they lack tactics to cope with these situations. The statements highlighting their strategies are presented below:

*[...] practice physical activity, read, watch shows about things that interest me unrelated to work (MV-68).*

*[...] mindfulness, physical activity, spirituality, permanent personal development (MV-111).*

[...] *I try to breathe deep and count to 20 not to freak out* (MV-04).

[...] *I try to think that I should worry only about my part of the patient care process, offering my best work, and not blame myself if the structure or the guardians do not match my efforts, even though I feel sorry for the animal* (MV-19).

[...] *I take a deep breath and see that there is no way I can solve these situations* (MV-102).

[...] *I do not always know how to deal with these situations, which is why I am undergoing treatment....Working with certain teams becomes more stressful, for example.....I try to distance myself, change procedures with a colleague, and work in the place/team that I feel more comfortable with* (MV-100).

[...] *I take a deep breath and think about my son...* (MV-52).

[...] *I am medicated, medication prevents me from freaking out* (MV-49).

[...] *I went to the psychiatrist, and I go to therapy because of that* (MV-57).

[...] *I do nothing, I just wait for the end of the day when I can rest at home* (MV-92).

[...] *I have no strategies* (MV-119).

[...] *I try not to think...* (MV-122).

[...] *I cry and try to get away* (MV-99).

[...] *I try to ignore it and go on with life* (MV-95).

[...] *I just survive...* (MV-81).

The statements show that veterinarians feel exhausted, and many professionals do not have

personal strategies for coping with stress. Some workers reported being in treatment, while others used these interviews to vent and express their feelings.

From these reports, it can be seen that most professionals want to solve problems and do their job in the best way. However, when this is not possible owing to the overload of work, they feel incapable and disappointed. That is often why veterinary doctors work automatically, which impairs their ability to help patients.

## Discussion

From these reports, it can be seen that most professionals want to solve problems and do their job in the best way. However, when this is not possible owing to the overload of work, they feel incapable and disappointed. That is often why veterinary doctors work automatically, which impairs their ability to help patients.

This study identified several sources of occupational stress in veterinarians, such as work overload, pressure from managers/employers, professional undervaluation, conflicts with colleagues, and difficulty in dealing with guardians, showing that personal strategies of coping with work stress are ineffective or nonexistent and that they even become a source of anxiety sometimes.

Recognition of the feelings that cause suffering in the work environment is significantly important to improve the quality of professional life of veterinarians and the care

provided. Perception of the factors that cause suffering can encourage institutions and workers to create a more collaborative and pleasant organizational environment, reducing the risk of work-related illness.

This study intended to initiate the elaboration and implementation of preventive measures to reduce work-related harm to veterinarians, as well as to improve working conditions and patient care.

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