

Title: Being a Veterinary Doctor: A Qualitative Study Exploring Veterinary Doctors' Perspectives

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Introduction and aim. The mental health of veterinary professionals is negatively impacted by daily challenges such as many competing demands, lack of control over work schedules, and conflicting relationships with leadership. These lead to high rates of chronic stress and burnout, job dissatisfaction, and a high risk of suicide (1). The study sought to explore perspectives, experiences and needs in caring for and working with animals and their owners from a sample of Italian veterinary doctors.

Materials and methods. In this qualitative cross-sectional study, a sample of 18 Italian veterinary practitioners were interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore experiences, attitudes, beliefs, needs and barriers in working with animals and their owners. Interview transcripts were analysed using *thematic framework analysis* (2).

Results. The themes that emerged from the interviews showed high levels of burnout and stress among participants. The main drivers of work-related dissatisfaction included heavy workload that does not reflect adequate salaries and difficulties in balancing private and work life due to long shifts and unpredictable schedules. Furthermore, one crucial factor leading to high levels of stress and high turnover rates is non-cooperative relationships within the clinical team. In fact, vet practitioners, especially during their early years of career, reported a sense of isolation and lack of support. Difficult relationships have also been identified between clinical staff and animal owners, particularly when managing therapeutic decisions and the costs of treatments. Moral injury is also an emerging source of stress, due to difficult therapeutic decisions to be made that are also negatively affected by unrealistic expectations of animal owners as well as lack of agreement between colleagues. A recurring concern among participants was the perceived lack of communication and relational competencies. Veterinarians often expressed uncertainty about their communication approach with animal owners and voiced the need for enhanced communication and relational skills, as well as a desire for specific training in this area. Some positive aspects related to the profession have been identified, including continuous learning, stimulating work environments and the chance to nurture long-term positive and fulfilling relationships with both animals and their owners.

Conclusions. Our data highlight participants' urge to better balance their work and personal life, as well as the need to perceive a sense of affiliation to their professional role and community. Participants have furthermore highlighted their extreme need for specific training to enhance their communication and interpersonal skills to be better equipped to effectively manage internal and external communications and conflicts.

References

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