

Mental health issues, problems and illnesses affect many people in veterinary clinics.

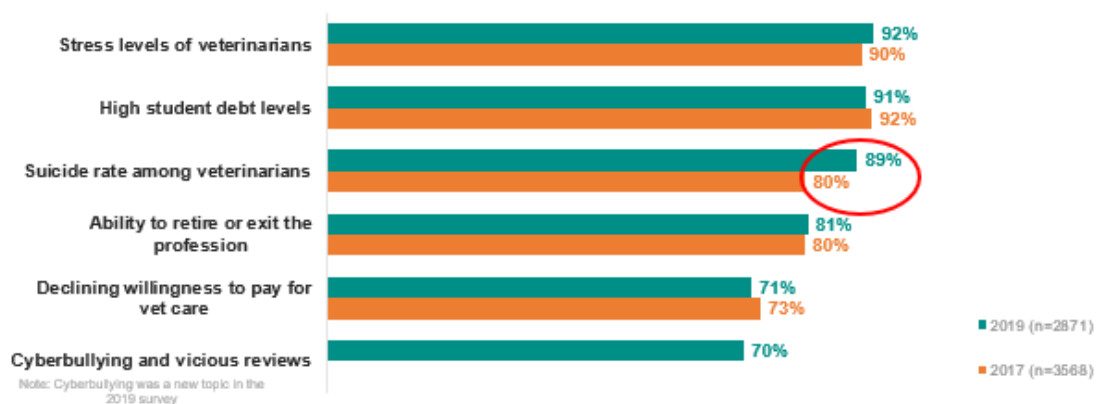
A study conducted by the Ontario Veterinary College and published in 2020, of more than 500 Canadian veterinarians, indicated that roughly a third of the participants have anxiety, with another third considered borderline. Almost one in 10 were classified as having depression; about three in 20 were in the borderline category. Forty-seven percent of respondents scored high on emotional exhaustion, one of three components of burnout. Three-quarters of respondents fell below the mean on resilience scoring for the general U.S. population.¹

A comprehensive study on veterinary wellbeing in the USA conducted in 2017³, and repeated in 2019¹⁰ and 2021⁹ shows that 67% of USA veterinarians, including 79% of associate veterinarians, report feelings of depression, anxiety, panic attacks, or compassion fatigue (burnout) within the past year.² Additional information from these studies follows:

- The 2021 study showed that the percentage of veterinarians with serious psychological distress as measured by the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale has increased to 9.7% in 2021, compared to 6.4% in the 2019 study due in large part to the ongoing pandemic. Among staff, the prevalence of serious psychological distress was nearly twice as high (18.1%). In addition, half of staff respondents (49.6%) and approximately one-third (30.5%) of veterinarians reported high levels of burnout (veterinary burnout scores were nearly 40% higher than physician burnout score according to the Mayo Clinic Physician Burnout Scale)
- In the 2021 study 92% of respondents rated increased stress as one of their top mental health challenges, 88% cited student debt and concerns about the risk of suicide as leading stressors for veterinarians

Leading Concerns of Veterinarians: Stress, Debt and Suicide

Leading Concerns of Veterinarians In 2019 and 2017 (Top 5 Only)

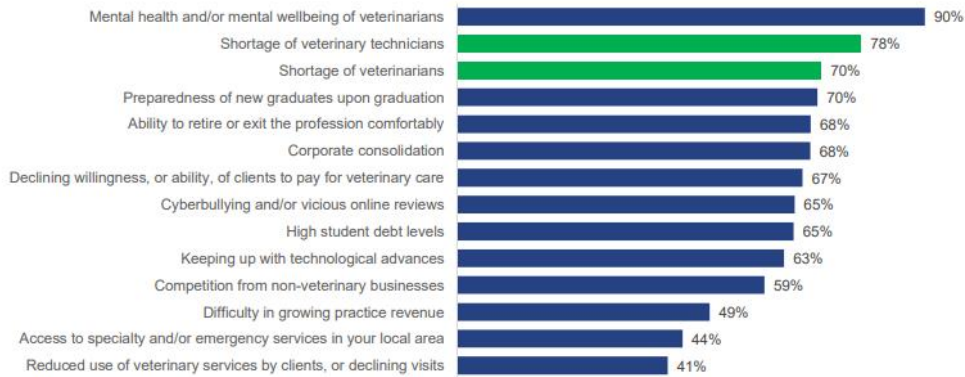


Cyberbullying a serious concern, but not as common as expected.

- More than 90% of veterinarians and veterinary staff reported that the shortage of qualified veterinary staff has been one of the biggest concerns throughout the pandemic. Adding to

these concerns, 81% of staff and 67% of veterinarians faced challenges with their clinics being short-handed due to employees spending time away from work for illness or family care. In addition, both staff and veterinarians emphasized their anxieties surrounding the risk of increased exposure to COVID-19 (63% and 61%, respectively) and longer work hours (51% and 46%, respectively). In Canada, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association 2020 workforce shortage study showed that the mental health is the number one issue facing the Canadian veterinary profession nation wide, by 90% of responding veterinarians. In Canada open Positions for veterinarians and veterinary technicians are at an all time high with 40% or more practices looking for at least one veterinarian and technicians. It is a chronic problem – 66% of those clinics have been looking for longer than 4 months, 33% for more than a year

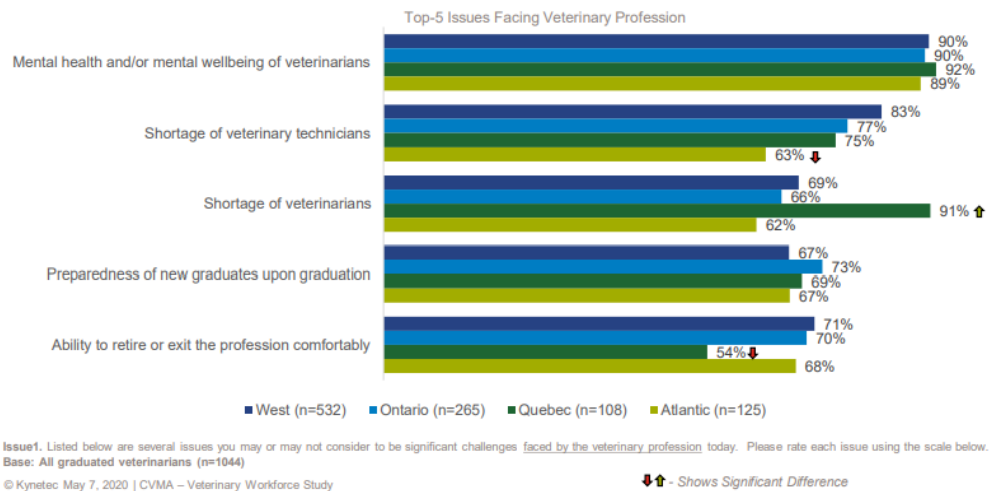
Issues Facing the Veterinary Profession



Issue#1. Listed below are several issues you may or may not consider to be significant challenges facied by the veterinary profession today. Please rate each issue using the scale below.

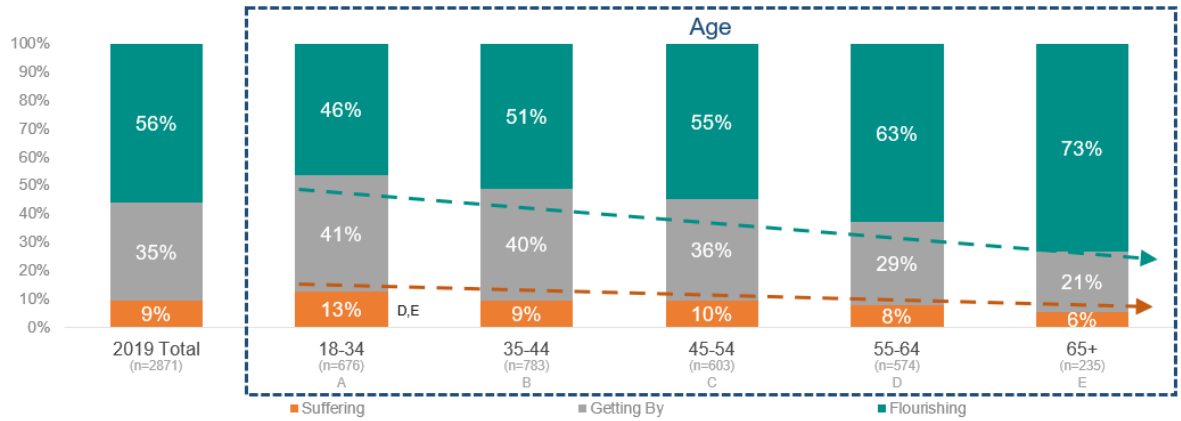
Base: All graduated veterinarians (n=1044)

Significant Difference in Issues Facing the Veterinary Profession, by Region



- Female veterinarians and younger veterinarians are faring the worst
 - The 2019 data shows that female veterinarians are twice as likely to have serious psychological distress vs their male counterparts, a significant difference. Women are a substantial and growing proportion of the veterinary work force representing $\frac{3}{4}$ of the veterinarians in Canada
 - Significantly more younger veterinarians had serious psychological distress, that is 9.6% of male veterinarians < 45 years old and 8.5% of female veterinarians < 45 years old than older veterinarians (≥ 45 years old) and this was also significantly higher than among their counterparts in the general US population

Wellbeing is Lowest among Younger Veterinarians



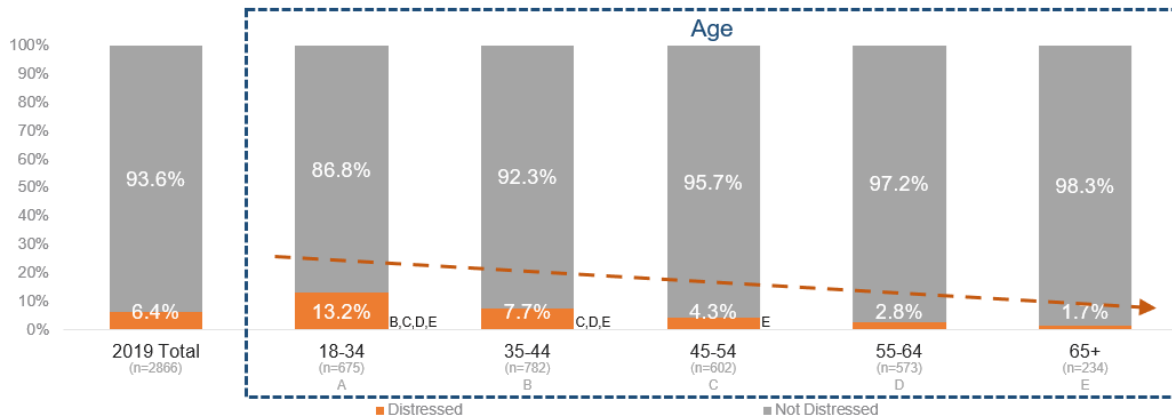
Wellbeing Index
Base: All Respondents

Veterinary Wellbeing Study Slide: 11
Wellbeing

X - Indicates a statistically significant difference between categories
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Younger Veterinarians Much More Likely to Suffer from Serious Psychological Distress = 45 CDN DVMS early in their career



MH1. Results based on results of Kessler 6.
Base: All Respondents

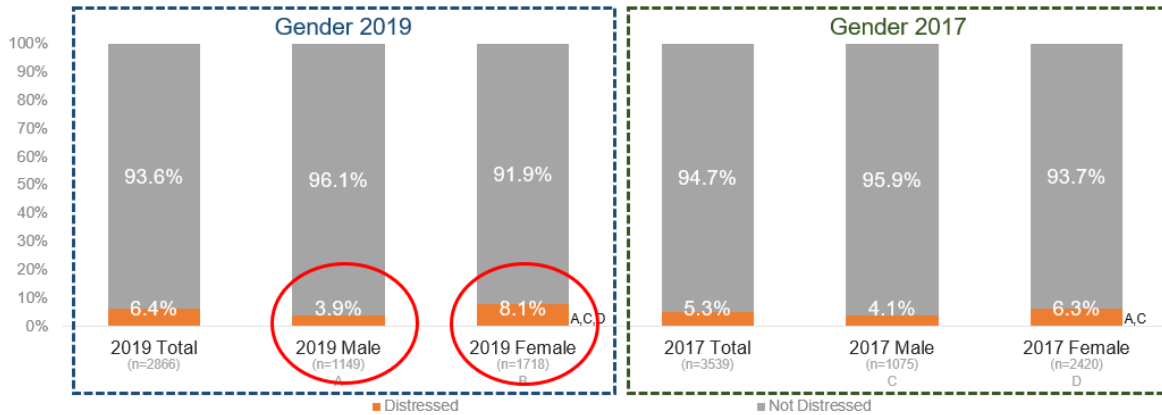
Veterinary Wellbeing Study Slide: 16
Mental Health

X - Indicates a statistically significant difference between categories
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Women Experience Higher Levels of Serious Psychological Distress than Men = **3/4 CDN DVMs**

Increase from 6.3% to 8.1% in female veterinarians is statistically significant.



MH1. Results based on results of Kessler 6.
Base: All Respondents

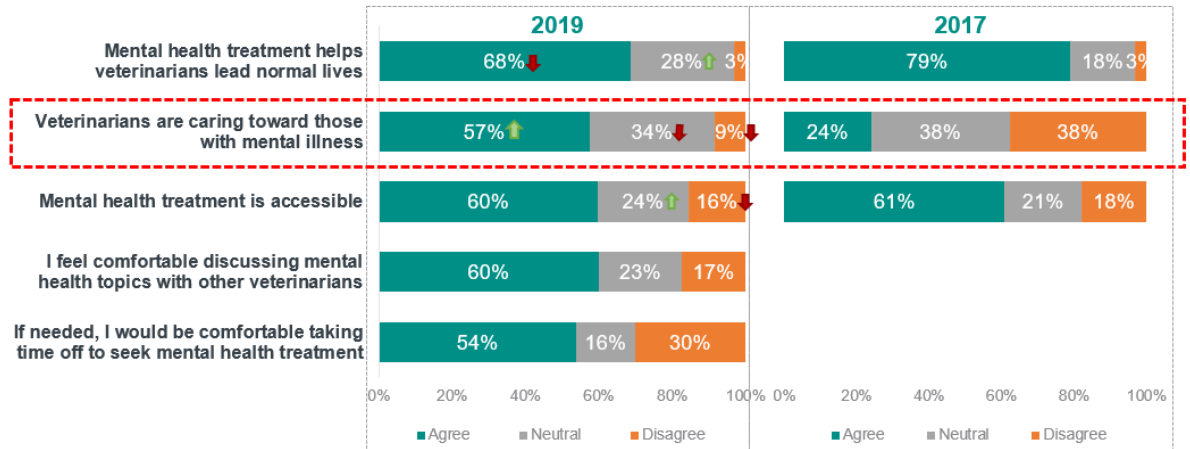
Veterinary Wellbeing Study Slide: 17
Mental Health

X - Indicates a statistically significant difference between categories
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- Lifestyle and work factors associated with a higher prevalence of psychological distress included being single (9.3%), working more than 45 hours per week (6.9%), especially common among those who always or often worked evening hours (9.4%), and working more hours or fewer hours than they desired (8.4% and 6.4% respectively). Student debt appeared to be a key driver of serious psychological distress with prevalence as high as 11.3% which did not vary substantially with amount of student debt.
- Stigma issues:
 - The 2019 study showed that 60% of veterinarians feel comfortable discussing mental health topics with other veterinarians however only 54% would be comfortable taking time off to seek mental health treatment. Half to three quarters of veterinarians who are assessed as having serious psychological distress disagree with the statements that “People are generally caring and sympathetic to people with mental illness” and half to three quarters of veterinarians who are assessed as having serious psychological distress disagree with the statements that “Treatment can help people with mental illness lead normal lives”. Only 1 in 2 veterinarians with serious psychological distress receive mental health treatment.²

Significant Improvement in Perceived Attitude Towards Those With Mental Illness

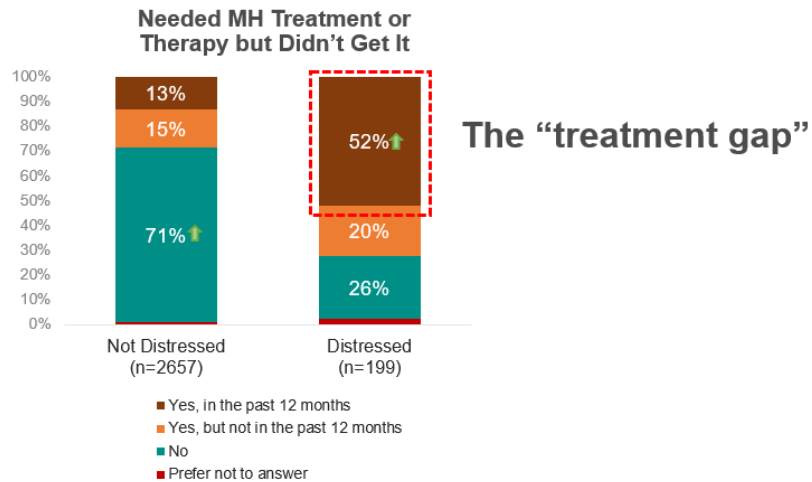


MH9. Please indicate your agreement with the following statements using the scale provided.
 Base: All Respondents [2019 (n=2871), 2017 (n=3540)]

Veterinary Wellbeing Study Slide: 19
 ↑ ↓ Indicates a statistically significant difference between 2019 and 2017
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Half of Those Distressed in Last Year Did Not Receive Treatment



MH2-8A. Have you ever...?
 Base: All Respondents [Not-distressed Veterinarians (n=2657), Distressed Veterinarians (n=199)]

Veterinary Wellbeing Study Slide: 20
 Mental Health
 ↑ - Indicates a statistically significant difference between distressed and not distressed veterinarians
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- Suicide:
 - Separate studies done by the Alberta Veterinary Medical Association³ and the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association⁴ show that 20% of veterinarians and technologists have reported thinking of suicide to the point of having a plan to take their lives
 - A USA study showed that veterinarians are much more likely to think about suicide than non-veterinarians and are more than 2.7 times more likely to attempt suicide. Particularly concerning are younger veterinarians and female veterinarians. Over 11% of veterinarians between ages of 26-34 and 8.9% between ages of 35-49 have thought about suicide, this latter age group more than 3X more likely than the general population to think about suicide. 9% of female veterinarians reported having thoughts of suicide more than three times their peers in the general population and vs. their male veterinary counterparts though male veterinarians are more likely to attempt suicide.²

Suicidal Thoughts, Veterinarians v. Non-Vets

All	No	Yes	Percent
NSDUH	7398	252	3.6%
Veterinarians	2614	225	7.5%



*Past 12 Months = 966 CDN DVMS
25 CDN DVMS attempt suicide annually

By Age	% Yes	26-34	35-49	50-64	65+
NSDUH		5.2%	2.6%	1.8%	1.5%
Veterinarians		11.1%	8.9%	4.3%	2.7%

*Past 12 Months

By Gender	% Yes	Male	Female
NSDUH		3.3%	3.3%
Veterinarians		5.5%	9.0%

*Past 12 Months

- Veterinary Wellbeing Study Slide: 26 Copyright © 2018 Intervet Inc., d/b/a Merck Animal Health, a subsidiary of Merck & Co. Inc. All rights reserved. US-COR-0318/0012  
 - In spite of an increase in serious psychological distress among veterinarians from 2019 to 2021, there was no increase in the prevalence of suicide ideation or suicide attempts within the prior 12 months among veterinarians.² Prevalence of suicide ideation in the prior 12 months was higher among veterinary support staff than among veterinarians (11% vs 7%) and prevalence of suicide attempts in the past 12 months was also higher among veterinary support staff (0.053% vs 0.022%)¹
 - In the most comprehensive investigation of suicide among U.S. veterinarians to date, this 2019⁷ study showed that veterinarians, technologists and veterinary assistants are at risk of suiciding with pentobarbital (drug used to euthanize animals and in each veterinary clinic in locked drug safe) with approx. Of the 73 veterinarians who died by suicide, 25 percent used pentobarbital. In 72 percent of the veterinarians who died from pentobarbital poisoning, the death-related injury occurred at home
 - Based on research there are several important risk factors for suicidal rates:
 - - Nature of the work (moral distress and ethical challenges; exposure to illness and death in animals, knowledge of usage of lethal medicine – habituation to death), hours worked (long hours, working more hours or less hours than desired), carrying financial debt, social isolation, certain personality types such as neuroticism, predisposition for anxiety, perfectionism, high achievement orientation

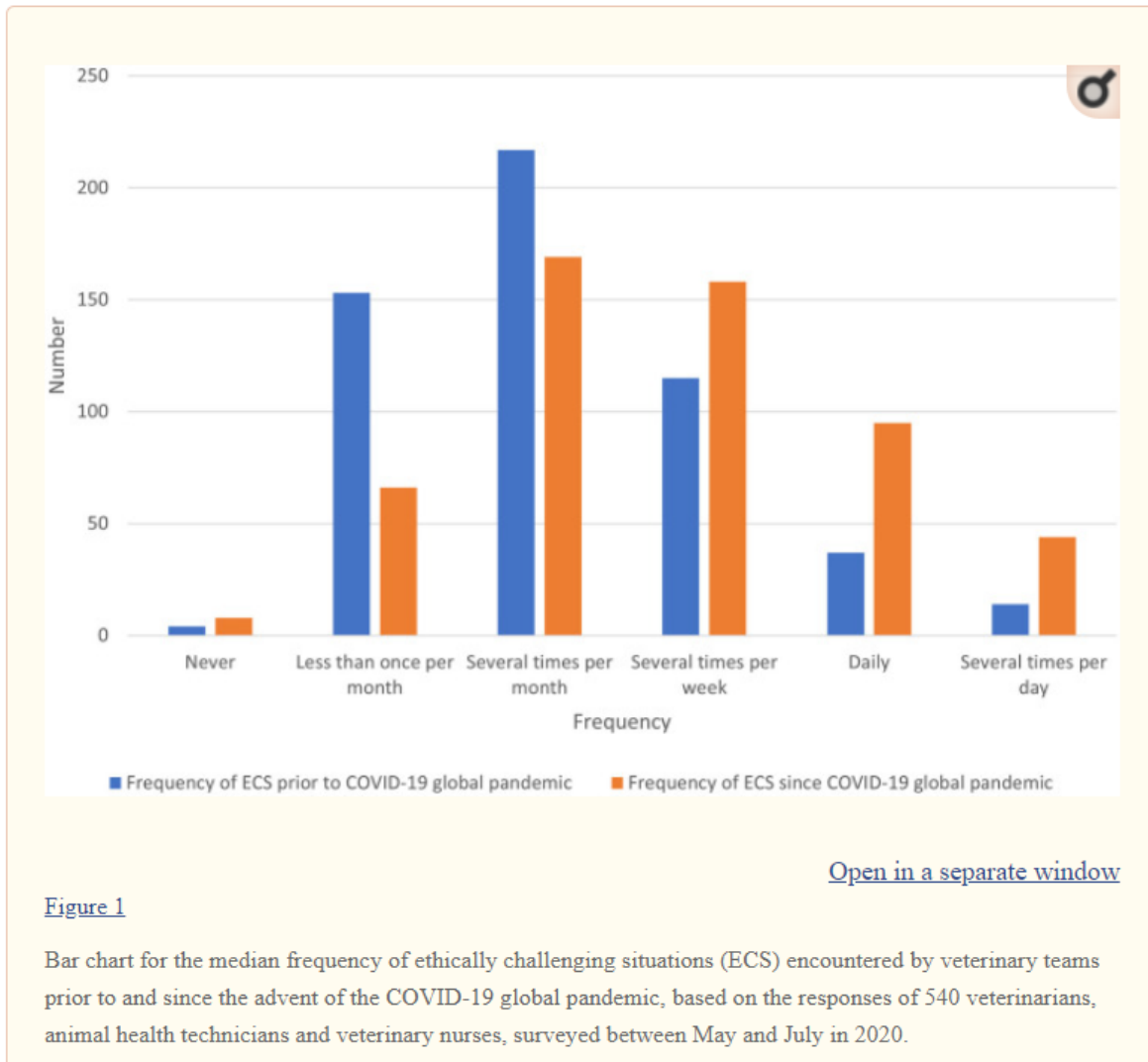
Mental health problems are very high in veterinary students as well. Results of a Student AVMA Mental Health & Wellness Task Force¹ in 2015 indicated that:

- 67 percent had experienced a period of depression, and of those, 37 percent said the period lasted longer than two weeks, which meets the clinical definition of depression.
- 60 percent had a family history of depression, anxiety, or substance abuse. 47 percent had a personal history of depression, anxiety, or substance abuse.
- 25 percent were taking medication for diagnosed depression or anxiety.
- 5 percent had seriously contemplated suicide. In addition, results showed rates of suicidal ideation went up 0.5 percentage points for every \$50,000 a student was in debt.
- Anecdotally, mental health, mental illness, and suicide in veterinary technicians and support staff have been tragically under-researched. Veterinarians are not the only people in our practices who are affected and veterinary support staff are unquestionably at risk for mental health problems and mental illnesses including risk of suicidal thoughts and suicide. A UK study revealed that 92.8% of veterinary technologists are at moderate to high risk burnout with elevated risk of depression and suicide with similar rates from a USA masters research study.^{5,6}

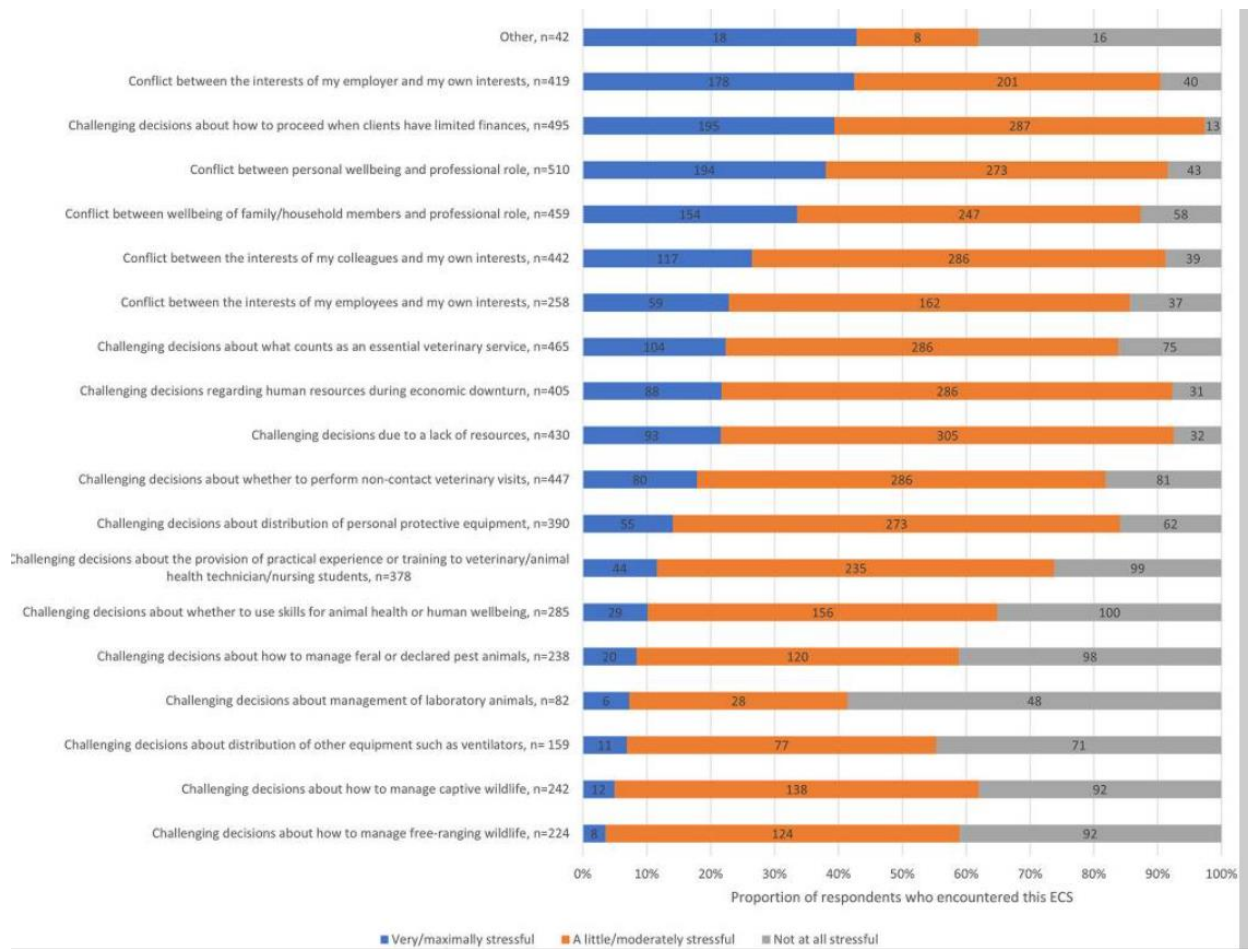
Ethically Challenging Situations i.e. ECS (Moral Distress/Moral Trauma)

- “The experience of knowing the right thing to do while being in a situation in which it is nearly impossible to do it”
- ECS have measurable negative impact on safety, psychological distress, compassion fatigue, and professional quality of life
- The frequency of ECS encountered by veterinary team members increased following the advent of the pandemic (Figure 1 below). Prior to the pandemic, the median frequency with which veterinary team members reported encountering ECS was several times per month. Following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the median frequency increased to several times per week. Due to a range of factors, including an increased frequency of established ECS such as client financial limitations, increased workload experienced by many veterinary teams, and the emergence of new or novel ECS associated with the COVID-19 pandemic itself.

The frequency of ECS encountered by veterinary team members increased following the advent of the pandemic (Figure 1). Prior to the pandemic, the median frequency with which veterinary team members reported encountering ECS was several times per month (interquartile range (IQR) once per month to several times per week). Following the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the median frequency increased to several times per week (IQR several times per month to at least once daily) ($r_{SP} 0.619, P < 0.00001$) (Table 2).



The three most common ECS (encountered at least several times per week since the advent of the pandemic) were: *challenging decisions about how to proceed when clients have limited finances* (64.4%, $n = 348$), *conflict between personal well-being and professional role* (64.3%, $n = 347$), and *conflict between the interests of clients and the interests of their animals* (59.6%, $n = 322$). These were followed by *challenging decisions about what counts as an essential veterinary service* (48.1%, $n = 260$), *conflict between well-being of family/household members and professional role* (46.3%, $n = 250$), and *challenging decisions about whether to perform non-contact veterinary visits* (46.3%, $n = 250$).



Above is Stacked bar chart for the most stressful ethically challenging situations encountered by veterinary team members since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, based on the responses of 540 veterinarians, animal health technicians and veterinary nurses, surveyed between May and July in 2020.

The most stressful ECS was perceived to be conflicts between the interests of clients and the interests of their animals, reported as very or maximally stressful by 50.2% ($n = 250$) of the 498 respondents who had encountered it. More than one third of respondents reported the following ECS to be very stressful or maximally stressful (Figure 3): other (42.9%, $n = 18/42$), conflicts between the interests of my employer and my own interests (42.5%, $n = 178/419$), challenging decisions about how to proceed when clients have limited finances (39.4%, $n = 195/495$), conflict between personal well-being and professional role (38.0%, $n = 194/510$), and conflict between well-being of family/household members and professional role (33.6%, $N = 154/459$).

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4. Miller, L. "Wellness of veterinarians: CVMA national survey results." *CVJ* 53 (2012): 1159-60.
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10. Volk, J. O., Schimmack, U., Strand, E. B., Vasconcelos, J., & Siren, C. W. (2020). Executive summary of the Merck Animal Health Veterinarian Wellbeing Study II. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 256(11), 1237-1244.
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This summary was written by Dr. Kathy Keil. Dr. Keil studied cognitive and neuropsychology in her undergraduate and graduate psychology degrees prior to attending veterinary school. She is not a licensed psychologist. She has training in Mental Health First Aid, safeTALK suicide awareness, ASIST suicide intervention, and is licensed to teach safeTALK. She regularly teaches suicide awareness and basic intervention skills to veterinary professionals and ways for them to take care of their own mental well-being. She is chair of CVMA Wellness Advisory Group and co-chair of the ABVMA Member Wellness Committee and a technical services veterinarian with Merck Animal Health. She is the leading force behind the Merck-CVMA "It's Time to Talk about Mental Health in Vet Med" Awareness Campaign. She can be reached at kathleen.keil@merck.com

