

Veterinary Students' Wellness from Teacher's Point of View and Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

The wellness of the students in higher education is a global issue, which concerns students especially in medical, dentistry and veterinary field. Veterinary students experience a lot of various stressors in demanding environment. If the compensatory mechanisms aren't working properly, the situation may lead into chronic mental health issues such as depression and/or anxiety. Furthermore, mental health issues occur still after the graduation, as many veterinarians struggle with burnout and other mental health problems. Both veterinary students and veterinarians rarely seek for help, as the stigma around the topic is a major barrier. To improve the situation, early detection and resolving of mental health issues is essential. This survey investigated veterinary students' wellness from teachers' point of view in the Institute of Veterinary Medicine and Animal Sciences in Estonian University of Life Sciences, emphasizing mental health. The aim was to investigate the current attitudes and perceptions of the teachers, find what kind of tools are needed to improve the situation and gain more publicity to the issue.

Method: 19 teachers answered anonymously to an online survey, which included 30 questions. The survey was shared three times via e-mail during February 2020.

Results and conclusion: The teachers are at least somewhat concerned about the wellness of the veterinary students, and have often experienced the same stressors and issues. Teachers' attitude to resolve the problems is encouraging. Many of the wellness issues and their consequences could be prevented by open minded atmosphere, good communication skills and providing easier access to mental health care.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation (WHO) [1] defines a wellness as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." It's estimated that one fifth of the students in higher education have a mental disorder [2]. Approximately one quarter of veterinary students have symptoms of moderate to severe depression and almost one of third have symptoms of moderate to severe anxiety. Still, many don't seek for help due to fear of documentation and the current stigma around the subject [3]. Mental burden continues into post-graduation phase. The 2012 CVMA National Survey Results on the Wellness of Veterinarians (n = 769) found that 51% of respondents believed that they had suffered from burnout, and 90% of them believed, that the profession was a major contributing factor. In the same study, 19% of respondents had seriously thought suicide [4].

As the struggles with mental health start already during the studies and continue after the graduation, it's essential that the problem would be noticed and resolved earlier. The main stressors of the students include school workload, time management and pressure to succeed [5]. In addition, many stressors occur outside of school, such as financial and family issues [6].

The aim of the survey was to investigate how the teachers currently perceive the wellness of the students and what tools there are absent or present to promote the well-being, emphasizing the mental aspect. Also, we wanted to gain more publicity for the subject.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stress and mental health

Medical, dentistry and veterinary students have high rates of moderate/severe depression and moderate/severe anxiety. Only 24% of health care students with severe depression and 11% with persistent suicidal thoughts sought for any help. Three major barriers for seeking help were fear of documentation, lack of time and fear of unwanted intervention [3].

Veterinary students have significant level of stress. The stressors include variety of factors such as unsatisfactory family and personal relationships, financial insufficiency, excessive workload, lack of sleep, time demands, constant academic evaluation, academic concerns, difficulty to fit in and poor physical health [6]. Prolonged stress has negative emotional and physical consequences. Physical consequences include weight loss, poor sleeping habits, increased heart rate, difficult breathing and digestive problems. Emotional consequences include anxiety, anger, irritability and depression [7].

Being constantly stressed and lack of sufficient support system leads eventually into burnout. Characteristics of burnout are emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment. Prevention of burnout requires identifying the signs of the burnout by the students, so improving the knowledge how to recognise those feelings should be emphasized [6].

The 2012 CVMA National Survey Results on the Wellness of Veterinarians found that 51% of respondents believed they have suffered from burnout, but only 12% had it officially confirmed by a medical professional. The same survey revealed that 19% of respondents had seriously thought suicide and 9% had attempted suicide. Nearly half of them who had attempted suicide, felt that they are at risk to repeat [4].

Globally the annual number of lives lost by suicide exceeds the number of deaths combined from homicide and war. Veterinarians have four times higher risk to commit suicide compared to general population. The widely acknowledged risk factors in general population include personality traits, mental illness, alcohol and drug abuse, inherited and environmental factors. Personality factors (such as high achievers, perfectionism), professional isolation, work-related stressors and attitudes to euthanasia are thought to be contributing factors in veterinarians' high suicide rate [8]. One study suggests that the biggest contributing factor is the access to means and by restricting the access, veterinarians' suicide rate could decline [9].

Substance abuse

Recent study [10] performed in different health care university students in Europe, suggests that substance abuse (alcohol, cannabis and other illegal drugs) is concerning in university students. It emerges a social and health issue. Multiple factors are contributing to university student risk-related substance abuse, such as changed lifestyle, reduced paternal support and stressful events. On the other hand, living with the family and working during the studies are noted as protective factors. One parameter to evaluate self-care is a self-care agency. It's defined as an ability to engage in self-care, which is influenced by age, developmental state, life experience, sociocultural orientation, health and available resources. Self-care agency wasn't associated with the use of alcohol or drugs, but rather with the social and personal adverse outcomes derived from the drug abuse [10].

Stress, motivation and academic performance

Motivation is an important factor, when considering additional factors which may influence student learning and wellness. Motivation helps to maintain a healthy balance between demanding studies and personal well-being. It's shown that the medical students who are intrinsically motivated experience better well-being, and also tend to perform academically better and adopt deep learning strategies [11]. Another study suggests that the motivation, grades and stress form a triangular feedback-loop structure. If one of the factors declines, the other factors may be stabilised as protective psychological mechanism. For example decreased grades cause increased stress, and furthermore increased motivation to study, which in turn causes increased grades and corrects the initial decrease in grades. In real-life situations other factors (such as depression) may influence and modify responses, and protective mechanism may not function properly. It was also considered that motivation may have indirect association with stress through the academic performance. Therefore, students with lower intent may find it difficult to maintain strong academic performance, which may result in higher levels of stress [12].

Teacher's approach and behavior have an impact to the attitudes of the students, thus possibility to increase the motivation of the students and enhance learning process. One study showed that health care educators may take an advantage of powerful emotions to improve health and enhance learning. For example humor promotes learning, discovering and creativity by motivating the students to engage with new and challenging events [13].

METHODS

An online survey of 30 questions was shared via email to 145 teachers three times during February 2020. 19 responses (13%) were received, responses were given anonymously.

Table 1. Survey questions included in the analysis

Question	Response options
How long have you been teaching?	<5 years, <10 years, <15 years, >15
Do you have a degree in veterinary medicine?	Yes, No
If yes, how long is your experience in practical (clinical) work as a veterinarian?	<5 years, <10 years, <15 years, >15
How do you experience the clinical work as a veterinarian?	Hard but worth it, Hard but unrewarding, There is equal amount of good and hard days, Too much time consuming, Easy and rewarding, Other
How do you experience teaching?	Hard but worth it, Hard but unrewarding, There is equal amount of good and hard days, Too much time consuming, Easy and rewarding, Other
Do you think that studying is easier nowadays than it used to be?	Yes, No, Other
Do you think that students have realistic expectations about the veterinary profession?	Yes, No, Other
Do you think that students value enough their wellness and mental health?	Yes, No, Other
Are you concerned about the wellness and mental health of the students?	Not at all, Somewhat, Concerned, Very concerned
What do you think is the level of the communication between students and teachers?	Excellent, Good, Sufficient, Inadequate
Do you think that the level of communication between the teacher and the students is correlating with the performance of the students?	Strongly, Somewhat, Not at all
How do you think the communication could be improved?	Write your own answer
Choose three the most valuable characteristics of a student.	Hard-working, Extracurricular activities, Kindness, Trying his/her best, Honesty, Good grades, Good manners, Intelligence, Creativity, Flexibility, Modesty, Good communication skills, Other
How often the students exceed your expectations?	Often (daily or weekly), Rarely (monthly), Very rarely
How often are you worried, how the students are going to manage in veterinary profession?	Often (daily or weekly), Rarely (monthly), Never

What do you think causes the biggest stress for the students?	Economical issues, Social issues, Pressure to succeed, Insecurity about own skills, Competition with other students, The feeling of losing the control of the life, Other
What was your hardest experience during your studies and how did you cope with it?	Write your own answer
You have a student, who seems to be highly unmotivated to study. What do you think is the most likely cause for it?	Attitude against subject, Lack of study skills, Lack of control in life in general, Unhealthy life habits (lack of sleep, substance abuse etc...), Mental health issues (depression, anxiety etc...), Laziness, Other
Which substances do you think the students use and have a problem with? (You can pick multiple answers)	Alcohol, Cannabis, Hard drugs (heroin, cocaine...), Misuse of medicines (tranquillizers...), Tobacco, Other
How concerned you are about students' substance abuse?	Very concerned, A bit concerned, Not concerned at all
How strong correlation you see between the substance abuse and wellness issues?	High correlation, Moderate correlation, Weak correlation, No correlation
Have you ever experienced any problems with mental health (exhaustion, anxiety, depression, compassion fatigue, self-destructive thoughts)?	Yes, No
If yes, how did you cope or try to cope with your mental health?	Write your own answer
Are you aware of the high suicide rate and mental health issues of veterinarians and veterinary students?	Yes, No
Have you seen students who seem to have particularly high risk to commit suicide?	Yes multiple times, Yes once or twice, No
If someone in our university attempted suicide, what do you think should be the following procedures?	Stay quiet about the situation to protect one's identity, Give opportunity for professional help for the staff and students, Open discussion how to prevent the situation occurring again
What do you think should be done with the student who seems to be highly depressed or suicidal? (You can pick multiple answers)	Try to speak with the student and offer professional help, Try to speak with the friends of the student and express your concern, Talk with other teachers to get bigger picture of student's behavior, Contact directly the psychologist of our university, Keep an eye how the situation develops, Ignore the situation, Other
What do you think could be improved in students' wellness? (You can pick multiple answers)	Provide easier access to mental health care, Talk more openly about the pressure of the studies, Arrange activities outside the study field (sports, game nights...), The responsibility of the wellness is in everyone's own hands and there is not much that others can do, Other
Any wise words for the students?	Write your own answer
Any comments in general?	Write your own answer

8 (42,1 %) of the teachers who responded had been teaching over 15 years, 5 (26,3%) of the respondents had been teaching less than 5 years. 89,5% (17 teachers) had a degree in veterinary medicine and 77,7% (14 teachers) of them had practised clinical work as a veterinarian for less than 10 years.

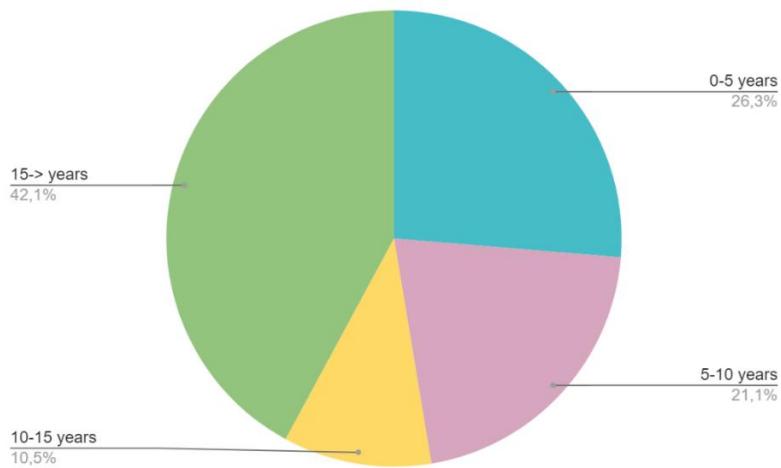


Figure 1. How long have you been teaching?

RESULTS

One of the goals of this survey was to see what is the teachers' view about their students and student well-being. First we wanted to know do teachers think that students have realistic expectations about the veterinary profession, on what 12 (63,2%) of the teachers answered "no". We also asked how often students exceed teachers' expectations, where 11 (61,1%) answered "rarely (monthly)" and 7 (38,9%) answered "often (daily or weekly)". Teachers were then asked to choose three the most valuable characteristics of a student, which can be seen in Figure 2. The most popular answers were "Trying his/her best", "Hard-working" and "Intelligence".

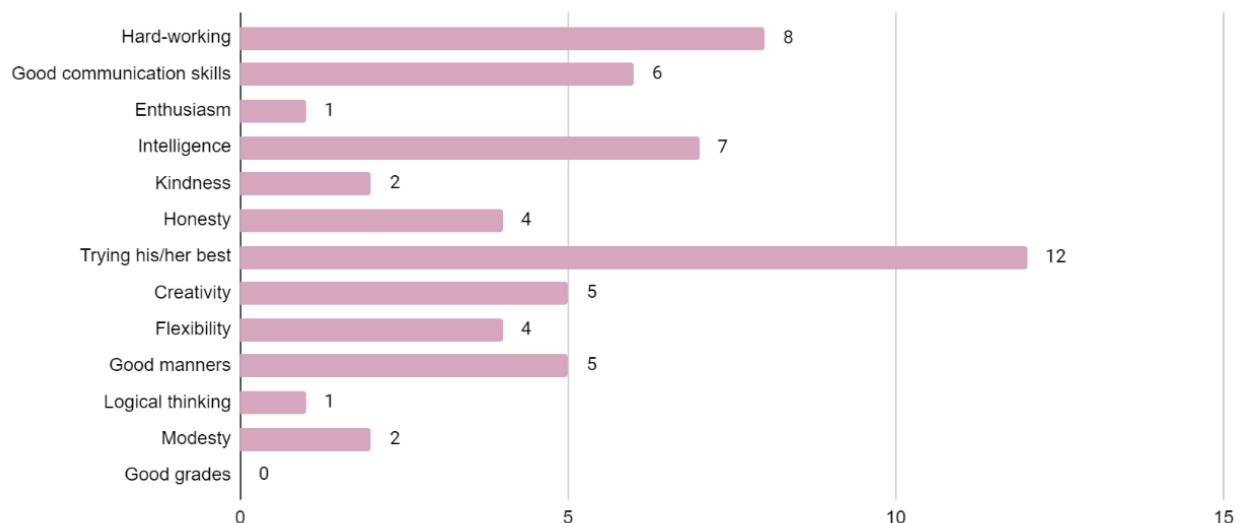


Figure 2. Choosing three most valuable characteristics of a student.

8 (42,1%) of teachers were worried often (daily or weekly) if their students are going to manage in veterinary profession, 11 (57,9%) said they worry rarely or never. When asking if the teachers thought that veterinary students value enough their wellness and mental health, 10 answered "no" and 9 answered "yes". 11 of the teachers were somewhat concerned about their students' wellness, 7 teachers were concerned and 1 was very concerned. As seen in Figure 3, the most common causes for stress in students were considered to be pressure to succeed (6 answers) and insecurity about own skills (7 answers). Rest of the answers were divided equally between competition with other students, the feeling of losing control of life and social issues (2 answers each). 13 of the respondents thought student wellness could be improved by providing easier access to mental health care, talking openly about the pressure of the studies and by arranging activities outside the study field (Figure 4). Teachers were also asked what do they think is the most likely cause of student being highly unmotivated to study. 7 (36,8%) chose the answer "Lack of control in life in general", 4 (21,1%) chose "Mental health issues", 4 (21,1%) chose "Attitude against the subject" and 2 (10,5%) chose "Lack of study skills". Other answers were "Depends on student" and "Different reasons, some are more interested in some subjects and some students are more active".

When asked how concerned teachers were about students' substance abuse, 10 (52,6%) answered "A bit concerned" and 2 (10,5%) answered "Very concerned" (Figure 5). 7 (36,8%) were not concerned at all. Substance abuse and wellness issues were found strongly correlated by 10 (55,6%) of the teachers, moderately correlated by 7 (38,9%) and weakly correlated by 1 (5,6%). Substances that students mostly use and have problems with were considered to be alcohol (chosen by 12 of the respondents) and tobacco (chosen by 10 of the respondents). 6 people also chose "misuse of medicines" and 4 chose "cannabis", as seen in Figure 6.

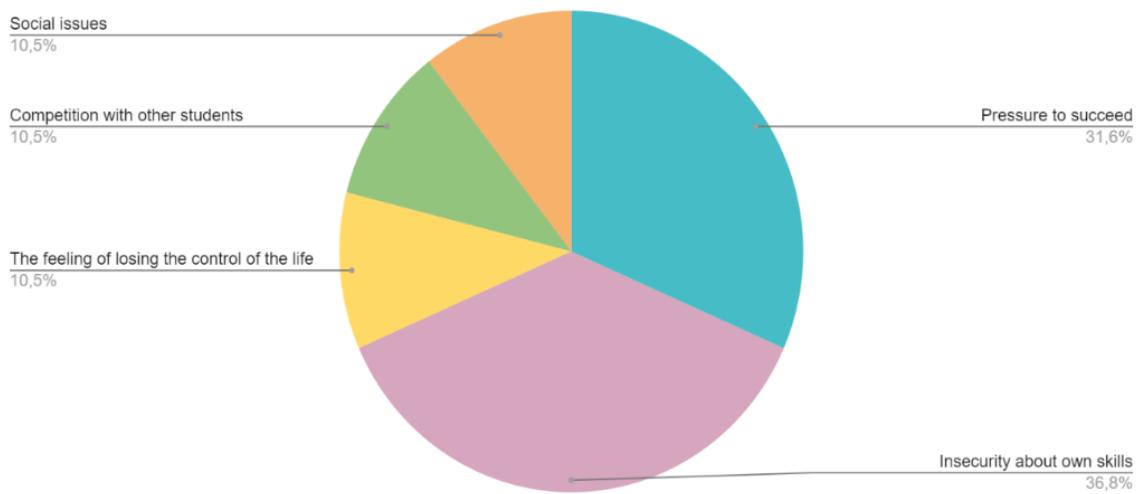


Figure 3. What do you think causes the biggest stress for students?

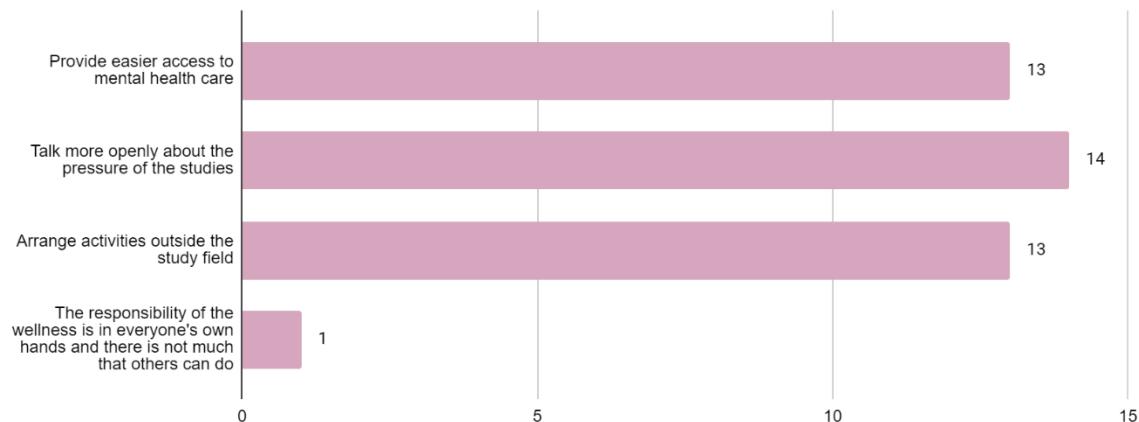


Figure 4. What do you think could be improved in students' wellness?

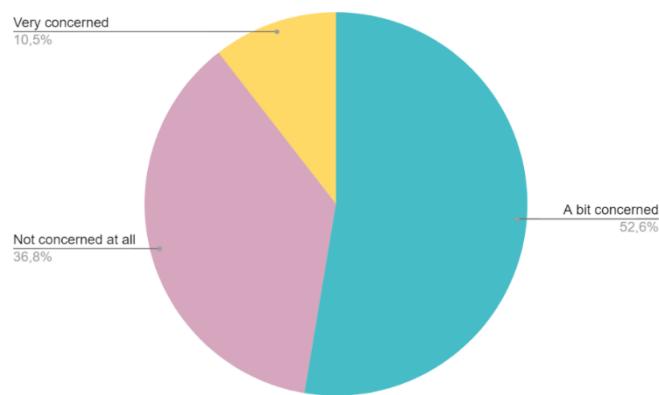


Figure 5. How concerned are you of students' substance abuse?

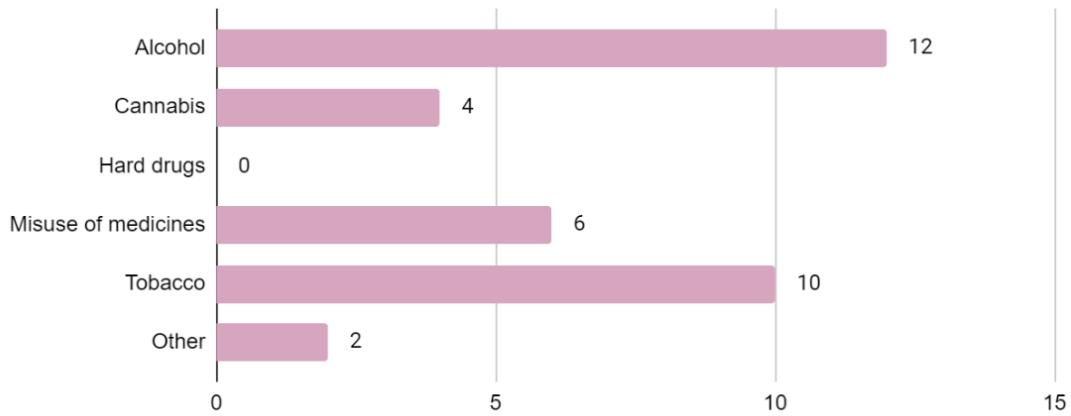


Figure 6. Which substances do you think the students use and have a problem with?

Since the survey was made from students to teachers, there was also curiosity about what the teachers thought about the level of communication they had with their students and was there anything that needed improving. When evaluating the level of communication between students and teachers, 4 (21,1%) thought it was good, 11 (57,9%) thought it was sufficient and 4 (21,1%) considered it to be inadequate (Figure 7). 6 (31,6%) thought this strongly correlates with the performance of students, 10 (52,6%) thought it somewhat correlates and 3 (15,8%) thought these do not correlate at all. In order to improve communication, teachers suggested that there could be a responsible teacher for each class for guidance and discussion. Contribution and open mindedness were hoped from both parties, teachers and students. “Teachers should encourage students to give feedback, and the students could be more active to express their thoughts”, said one of the comments. Smaller groups and more interactive classes were also mentioned.

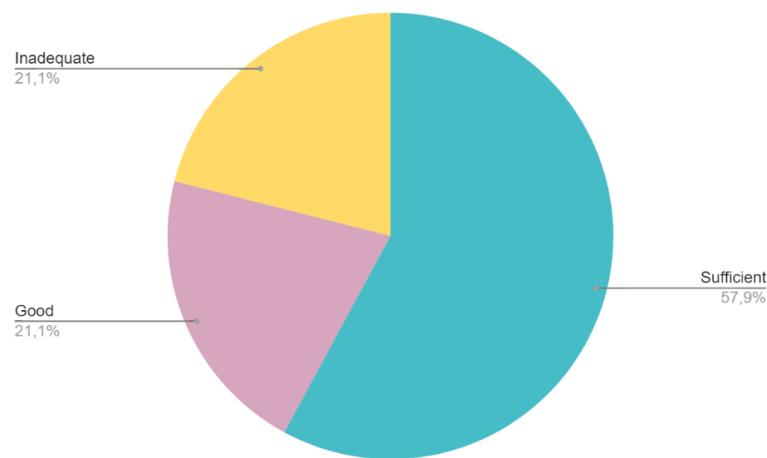


Figure 7. What do you think is the level of the communication between students and teachers?

As for the more serious part of student well-being, the survey asked if teachers were aware of the mental health issues and high suicide rate of veterinarians and veterinary students, 16 (84,2%) answered “yes” and 3 (15,8%) answered “no”. 1 respondent (5,3%) have seen students with particularly high risk to commit suicide multiple times, 4 (21,1%) had seen these kinds of situations once or twice, and 14 (73,7%) had never seen one. The question had answer options about what should be done with highly depressed or even suicidal students, 18 respondents (95%) chose “Try to

speak with the student and offer professional help". 11 (58%) chose "Keep an eye on how the situation develops" (Figure 8). In case someone in our university were to attempt suicide, teachers suggested there should be an opportunity for professional help given to both staff and students (14 respondents, 73,7%) or an open discussion on how to prevent the situation occurring again (5 respondents, 26,3%).

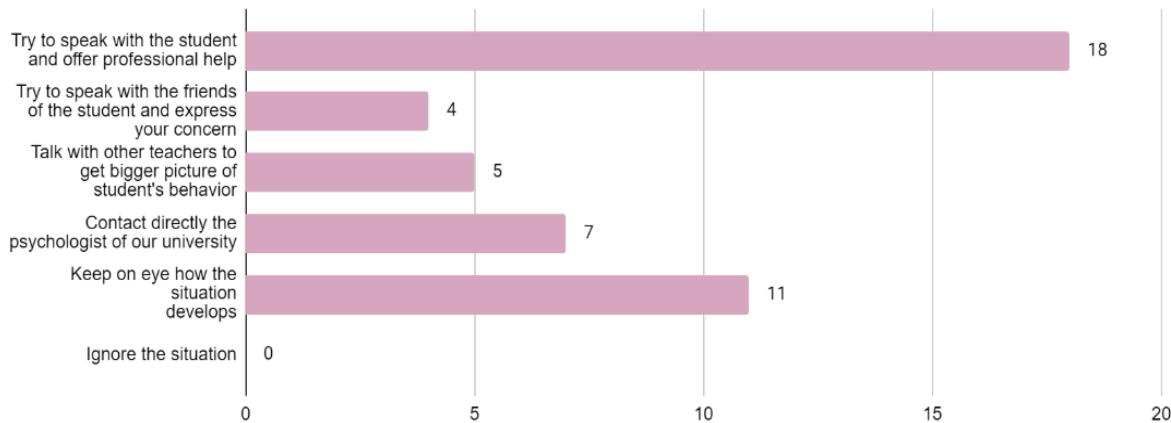


Figure 8. What do you think should be done with the student who seems to be highly depressed or suicidal?

Survey also included questions about teachers' own experiences in both studying and work life. Work as a veterinarian and as a teacher were mostly (11 answers in clinical work and 7 in teaching) considered to have both good and hard days. "Hard, but worth it" was the second popular answer also in both (4 answers in clinical work and 6 in teaching). When asking if studying is easier now than before, answers were divided equally between "yes" and "no". Hardest experiences during teachers' own studies were related with time management and study load. Some had also experienced pressure from their family and the animal owners. When asking if teachers have experienced any problems with mental health themselves (for example anxiety, depression or compassion fatigue), 10 answered "yes" and 9 answered "no". The ones who had experienced problems, told they had managed with the situation by seeking help from a professional, taking a year off, talking with friends and making lifestyle changes. Also cutting back working hours, hobbies and thinking about the good in life were found in the comments.

At the end of the survey teachers were able to leave their wise words for students:

- It is OK not to become a veterinarian.
- Nothing is as bad as it seems. Don't be afraid or ashamed to talk and ask for help.
- We all have bad days but you have to think positively.
- Be open minded, and please talk when you have problems - teachers will understand it and can make situation towards your needs (better timing, not giving extra pressure with exact deadlines; giving some homework instead of on-site lecturing etc.).
- I deeply care about my students well-being and mental health, thus I am always looking ways to make their life a bit easier. It could be incredibly difficult to discuss with the teachers about mental health problems for number of reasons (fear, stigma etc). It takes huge amount of courage to say, that I can't do this anymore to a teacher. Nevertheless, I think it should be perfectly acceptable to take a break from studies or even quit studies, if it all becomes too much to handle.
- Don't be alone with your problems, find someone you can talk to
- You have more serious situations with stress, because you are far from your families, so try to be more open and get friends in Estonia. It will help to keep your serotonin level high enough.

- Do what makes you happy! If you want to quit uni and choose another profession - DO IT! Even at last year.
- Stay positive. No one became a vet overnight. Keep an open mind. You'll make it in the end if you persevere.
- Think about good things in your life, be thankful! Even if everything seems to be wrong there are some small things that are good. Do not stay alone, go and speak to anybody you trust.

DISCUSSION

The results show that teachers have the same perception about the well-being of the students, as all of the respondents were at least somewhat concerned about the wellness and mental health of the students. Some of the teachers had experienced the same stressors as the students, such as economical issues, time management, relationships and excessive workload, which may advance the encouraging attitude to resolve the problems. Furthermore, majority of the respondents (94,7%) believed that the wellness could be improved by providing easier access to mental health care, open discussion and activities outside of school.

The teachers thought that the main causes of stress for the students were insecurity about the own skills and pressure to succeed. Medical students' greatest stressors are school workload, performance pressure and time constraints and lack of balance [5], which may be the case with veterinary students also. Insecurity about the own skills and pressure to succeed are factors, which are mainly formed by the student itself, but might be affected by other factors, such as excessive workload and time demands. Difficult or overwhelming amount of work leads to suspicion, whether the student really can handle everything and are one's skills enough to the complete the tasks and eventually graduate as a veterinarian. On the other hand, stepping out of the comfort zone is essential part of the learning process, thus becoming a veterinarian. As one of the respondents said "No one became a vet overnight", which is a good reminder for the students.

Veterinary students tend to be over-achievers [8], thus, valuing good grades and academic success. However, 61,1% of respondents said that students rarely (monthly) exceed their expectations. This finding may reflect the gap between the teachers and the students, as students may not clearly understand what teachers are expecting of them. In addition, roughly only one fifth of the teachers considered the communication between the teachers and students to be good, and nearly 80% as sufficient or inadequate. There is a place for improvement, as communication and performance was thought to be at least somewhat correlating. Al-Moihaimeed [14] suggests that the presentation and communication skills of a teacher are essential to achieve the learning goals. Lack of communication often leads to misunderstanding and consequently increases stress and uncertainty. Anyhow, communication should be interactive, hence students' role can't be denied. As one of the survey's comment said, students should express more their thoughts and teachers should encourage students to give feedback.

Majority of the respondents were aware of the high suicide rate of veterinarians and veterinary students, but nearly three out of four had never seen a student with particularly high risk. This finding may imply the conclusion that suicidal students don't stand out from the others, therefore it's difficult to recognise the problem. Detecting the early warning signs and bringing these issues out into the open is a great assistance in preventing suicides [8]. Hence, providing easier access to mental health care and enhancing open minded atmosphere is essential to prevent suicides. Even better, if suicidal thoughts or behavior could be stopped by interfering the problems, while they are easier to manage. For example, if visiting the school psychologist had a low threshold, students may start to resolve

their problems earlier and avoid long-term or overwhelming issues, which could eventually lead to suicidal thoughts or behavior.

Students' substance abuse concerned roughly two thirds of the respondents, and 94,5% thought substance abuse and wellness issues having at least a moderate correlation. Recent study [10] shows that 73,3% of health care students had consumed alcohol during the last year. Based on risk categories of WHO, 6,9% of the students were considered as hazardous drinkers. In addition, 22,1% of students had consumed marijuana and 6,8% other illegal drugs. Taking into account both physical and emotional adverse effects of the substance abuse, more actions should be introduced to prevent hazardous substance use in university students. Improved tutoring, educational campaigns, better adaption of new students and offering more options besides the alcohol in the events, could change the substance using behavior of the students. As a result, adverse outcomes related to both physical and mental health could be prevented or managed better.

Based on our knowledge, such surveys have not been done previously. The survey gives a new way to approach the issue, and hopefully encourages the teachers and students to talk and interact more openly. Although study concentrated into veterinary students, the pressure of university studies extends wider. Thus, the suggestions how to improve the wellness of the students can be applied in different faculties and universities. Nevertheless, the number of respondents is small and the results are not reliable. Also, it can be possible that only those teachers who valued the subject answered to the survey, which may considerably impact to the results. In future, studies should focus on to mechanisms how to resolve the issues related to the wellness and how they work in real-life situations.

CONCLUSION

The teachers are at least somewhat concerned about the wellness of the veterinary students, and often experienced the same stressors and issues. Many of the wellness issues and their consequences could be prevented by open minded atmosphere and good communication skills. Veterinary students rarely seek help for themselves and problems continue to develop, even after the graduation. Consistent work by tutoring, adaptation, providing help and education how to handle these issues, are essential to recognise the issues and improve the wellness of the students. In addition to improve the communication and collaboration between the students and teachers, the university could take apart and provide resources to execute these ideas in upper level.

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