

One Health Une santé

One Welfare: The role of veterinary professionals

Caroline Ritter, Meagan King

As veterinary professionals (*e.g.*, veterinarians and technicians), you prioritize the health and welfare of animals under your care. You likely also often prioritize the health and well-being of your colleagues and staff. But to what extent do you consider your own well-being and how it is related to the well-being of the people and animals around you?

Newly emerging research supports the concept that the welfare of animals is interconnected with human well-being. This thinking builds on the “One Health” concept to consider “One Welfare,” a distinct but complementary framework. The One Welfare framework expands the focus from health and disease and includes important aspects that contribute to human and animal well-being, such as affective states (*e.g.*, pleasure, pain, fear).

The One Welfare framework expands on the One Health framework and acknowledges that physical health is just one of the many factors that contribute to the well-being of humans and animals.

The One Welfare framework highlights key interrelationships among animal welfare, human well-being, and the physical and social environments (Figure 1). There are numerous examples of how the One Welfare framework applies to veterinary professionals in various specializations.

The effects of animal welfare on human well-being

Animal welfare concerns that veterinary professionals encounter in their daily work can have negative effects on their mental well-being, especially when combined with other stressors such as long work hours, interpersonal conflict, or financial pressures. Further, being involved in making emotional, euthanasia-related decisions, carrying out avoidable euthanasia, or following a client request to postpone euthanasia while an animal’s welfare is substantially compromised can negatively affect the well-being of veterinary professionals. In some extreme instances, veterinary professionals must deal with disease outbreak events, including

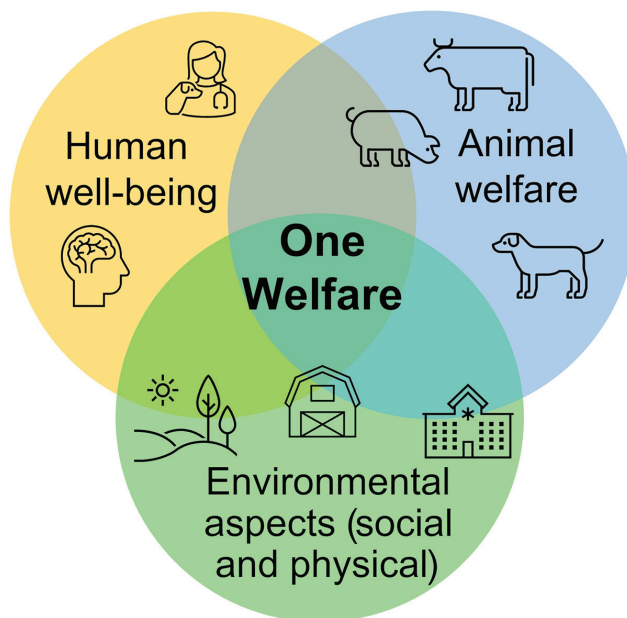


Figure 1. Overview of the One Welfare framework.

culling large numbers of animals using methods that may compromise animal welfare in order to achieve a swift response with limited resources. These incidents can have profound effects on the individuals involved, as reflected in high depression rates and greater post-traumatic stress disorder scores (1).

On a positive note, there are also examples of how people can benefit from their interactions with animals, although these experiences are often nuanced. For instance, shelter staff experienced greater job satisfaction when more animals left the shelters with positive outcomes (live release rates). However, higher live release rates were also correlated with more secondary traumatic stress and burnout in animal shelter employees (2). Perhaps this was because those shelters had more resources to allocate staff to care for abused or neglected animals, and so staff spent more time with those animals, formed stronger attachments, and were more deeply impacted when a live release was not possible and

Department of Health Management, Atlantic Veterinary College, University of Prince Edward Island, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island (Ritter); Department of Animal Science, Faculty of Agricultural and Food Sciences, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba (King).

Address all correspondence to Dr. Caroline Ritter; email: carolineritter@upe.ca

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the animal was euthanised. All this highlights the complicated relationship between human and animal outcomes.

There are many situations in which animal welfare can affect the mental well-being of veterinary professionals, both positively and negatively.

The role of the veterinarian on client and animal well-being

Although the welfare of animals often directly affects human well-being, the effect of a veterinarian's mental health on their clients and patients is less clear. Specifically, the relationship among the quality of care veterinary professionals can provide, their own mental well-being, and client satisfaction appears to be complex. For example, poor mental health scores in Canadian veterinarians were unexpectedly associated with relatively higher client satisfaction (3). This observed complexity is likely partially due to the multifaceted veterinarian-client relationship, but it is also important to recognize the multitude of interwoven factors that affect human well-being, which include physical health, emotional/mental well-being, environmental, financial, occupational, social, intellectual, and spiritual components.

Due to their often long-standing relationships with clients, veterinary professionals are in a position that may enable them to identify mental health struggles in their clients and provide early support. The veterinarian-farmer relationship is a key element of the Sentinel program (4) that was implemented in 2016 with the aim to reduce psychological distress and number of suicides within the Quebec farming community. In the program, individuals who regularly interact with farmers, including veterinarians, identify and support farmers at risk.

Further, animals' welfare or behavior often reflects their caretakers' well-being and can provide important clues during veterinary visits. Examples include elderly clients who are no longer able to care for their animals due to declining physical or mental health. Further, most cases of animal abuse, neglect, or hoarding involve individuals who are at the lower end of the mental health continuum, *i.e.*, experiencing poor mental health or mental illness.

Veterinary professionals are in a position to identify mental health struggles in their clients, and often animal welfare or behavior can provide important clues.

If a veterinary professional can support the mental well-being of their clients, this may have a direct positive effect on animal welfare, as the client can then focus on the needs of the animal(s) instead of being absorbed by their own mental health struggles. Further, successfully supporting clients to maintain high welfare standards can directly affect client well-being by fostering, for example, self-esteem and perceived self-efficacy. On dairy and swine farms, improved animal health and performance was associated with lower stress and better mental health scores in farmers, and the farmers found it easier to take care of their own well-being (5).

Linking the environment to human and animal well-being

One Welfare also considers the physical and social environments — whether for you, your colleagues, your clients, or the animals under your care. Personally, you can consider your own social environment and the support system you have outside of work. In addition, as a member of a veterinary team, are you fostering and contributing to a healthy work environment that values your employees and healthy communication? Similarly, you may consider the physical and social environments of your clients and their animals, and how these affect the clients' capacity to care for animals.

Internal factors and their social and physical environments affect animal owners' capacity to care for their animals.

It is also important to consider that an animal caretaker's current capacity may not be the same as their capability — and the same applies to you. Therefore, just as you show compassion towards others, you should extend that kindness to yourself.

One Welfare also relates to sustainability, biodiversity, food security, and food safety. For example, veterinary professionals working with wildlife have a crucial role in conservation and management of wildlife populations, and often in preservation of ecosystems that provide habitat for the wildlife and important resources and services for humans. Those working with companion animals, captive wildlife, or agricultural animals may advise their clients on animal housing and socialization opportunities that can have impacts beyond the animals' welfare. For example, when managed correctly, pasture access for livestock has the potential to improve animal welfare, by allowing for natural behaviors, while also benefiting the environment (for instance, by reducing greenhouse gases and promoting biodiversity) (6,7).

Considerations regarding the care and housing of animals also address the fact that animal welfare goes beyond physical health to include the animals' affective states (*i.e.*, mental/emotional well-being) and the freedom to express natural behaviors — particularly those in which the animal is highly motivated to engage. As a veterinary professional, do you consider and advise clients on all 3 concepts of animal welfare?

Implications and resources for veterinary professionals

Veterinary professionals are likely to encounter cases of poor animal welfare and client well-being, and other factors, such as long hours, might further affect their own mental health. In the long term, poor mental well-being is unlikely to be sustainable and might negatively affect clinical performance. This will lead to suboptimal patient care and jeopardize animal welfare.

Veterinary professionals should be seen as each clinic's greatest assets, and taking care of these assets is crucial for optimal and sustainable patient care.

However, within the often hectic clinic routine, it might be challenging to establish healthy habits that foster a variety of the components that contribute to mental well-being. The American Animal Hospital Association published a resource (8) compiling examples on how individuals, but also the veterinary practice as a team, can promote and build these habits. Resources to help learn to identify and respond to symptoms of poor mental health in others, such as the Mental Health Commission of Canada's Mental Health First Aid workshop (9), are also available. However, just as we should go beyond preventing negative outcomes such as disease and stress in animals and provide positive experiences, we should strive for positive well-being that allows veterinary professionals to thrive in their profession instead of simply getting by. Further, when each individual member of the veterinary team is left to cope with unfavorable (and often preventable) external factors, the individual effort will need to be perpetual, and success is uncertain.

To sustainably prevent negative mental health outcomes in veterinary professionals and promote positive well-being, systemic changes to the clinic environment are often needed.

When interacting with clients, noticing an animal caretaker who struggles with mental or physical challenges might suggest that the animal's welfare is in jeopardy. In addition, veterinarians should consider that an animal with poor welfare might be a sign of poor well-being in the animal's caretaker. To help react to (suspected) cases of animal or human abuse, the Links Group in the UK developed a guide (10) especially for the veterinary team. However, it is important to note that veterinary professionals are generally not equipped to provide extensive mental

health counselling to their colleagues and clients, and they should not jeopardize their own safety (*e.g.*, in a suspected case of animal abuse). These responsibilities should be left to experts such as therapists and animal protection officers. However, veterinary professionals can initiate crucial first steps; *e.g.*, through empathetic communication and referral to appropriate resources.

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