

Congress discusses improving mental health in veterinary industry

By Glenneis Kriel | 16 April 2024 | 7:30 pm

The importance of mental health and ways to build resilience among veterinary practitioners were key topics at the World Veterinary Association Congress, held from 16 to 18 April in Cape Town.



Various speakers addressed ways to build resilience among veterinary practitioners at the World Veterinary Association Congress.

Photo: Glenneis Kriel

[Dr Ivan Meyer, Western Cape Minister of Agriculture](#), said during his opening address that South Africa only had about 4 920 registered veterinary and paraveterinary professionals.

The country, in effect, employed about 60 to 70 veterinarians per million people, in comparison with the international norm of 200 to 400 vets per million people.

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Meyer told *Farmer's Weekly* that the low number of veterinarians in South Africa not only posed a threat to the livestock industry and economic development, but resulted in a more stressful work environment, which increased the risk of veterinarians suffering from burnout and mental health issues.

The Western Cape Department of Agriculture is trying to address this by prioritising animal health services and biosecurity this year and is leading the implementation of the province's culture journey, aimed at improving wellness and the well-being of not only of citizens but everybody who works for the province.

Along with this, Meyer is advocating for the opening of more veterinary training facilities, specifically in the coastal provinces, and trying to create an environment that allows young veterinarians to thrive and stay in the industry.

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Prof Annemarie Hattingh of the University of Cape Town spoke about the state of disillusionment, disappointment, and potential anxiety, reflecting the dissonance between one's envisioned professional ideals and the pragmatic challenges encountered in various contexts, ranging from public and private veterinary services to coping with natural and man-made catastrophes.

She listed compassion fatigue, burnout, study debt, bullying on social media, traumatisation, and load-shedding as only a few of the stressors that South African veterinarians deal with.

She said nobody was immune to occupational stress: "Occupational stress is not a reflection of pathology, but a reality of the challenges we deal with. Do not try 'to tough' it out, but deal with your stressors before they catch up with you. Also 'ring-fence' your mental health, as it will benefit yourself, clients and colleagues."

Dr Etienne van der Walt, CEO of Neurozone, spoke about the rapidly paced global ecosystem, which was riddled with a number of pandemics. He specifically referred to the mental pandemic that is causing a steep increase in depression, anxiety, addictions and suicide.

He said that the 'great resignation' and increased staff turnover demanded a new way of thinking about the way we designed business ecosystems. This was particularly important for the veterinary profession, which had the additional challenges of compassion fatigue, small business challenges and unrealistic expectations from clients.

He emphasized the importance of resilience, sleep, exercise, nutrition, safety, mindfulness and high-performance energy for practical individual and team integration to enable veterinary professionals to unlock the best versions of themselves and the people they lead.

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Cuan Macnab-Holding, a consultant in business development and organisation resilience at Neurozyne, said that their survey, involving 570 [South African Veterinary Association](#) members, revealed that roughly 38% were likely experiencing clinical symptoms of depression, 37% anxiety, and 13% post-traumatic stress.

The participants scored relatively low in terms of resilience, and had considerably higher levels of burnout and insomnia than user averages.

Linear regression of the data indicated that the building of resilience in the sample of veterinarians could lead to significant measurable improvement in symptoms of anxiety, depression, insomnia, burnout and stress from external factors.