

Things You Should Learn about in Veterinary School!

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After seven or so years of veterinary school, many feel that they now know all they need to know in order to be a successful veterinarian. However, the VDA has identified a number of integral skills that should be taught at veterinary school, but seldom are.

Courses on 1: Psychology and mental wellbeing, 2: Communication, 3: Practice management and 4: Consent forms and record keeping, as part of the veterinary curriculum would help the veterinary professional immensely in everyday practice, as well as in their personal lives.

Psychology and mental wellbeing

Of primary importance would be a course on human psychology. Practicing veterinarians are often faced with numerous challenges. They experience high stress levels, mental fatigue; burnout and depression; and possible suicidality. One of the main causes of this is dealing with difficult animal owners. In an ideal world, if owners could be removed from the situation entirely, the stress involved in veterinary practice could all but disappear. In the alternative, if veterinarians could better understand human personality types and the various possible mental disorders each client or co-worker they encounter may be dealing with, veterinarians would be able to persevere and overcome the various situations they encounter on a daily basis. Sending veterinarians into private practice without a working understanding of human mental behaviour leaves the veterinarian barely equipped to practice and dangerously exposed to stress and frustration.

In the same vein as human psychology are the subjects of mental wellbeing and self-care. Knowledge of these subjects are vitally important assets for anyone in a high-stress environment to learn about. A veterinarian who is working long hours, dealing with difficult clients, all the while trying to co-exist with other staff members in a practice, is already walking a tightrope over the precipice. Add to this any kind of stress in their home environment and personal life, and it could be all it might take to tip the veterinarian over the edge.

It is well acknowledged that the majority of people who choose to enter the veterinary profession are tender-hearted people, who wish to work for the well-being of the animals they treat. Such personalities are not equipped to deal with the tragedies and dramas of everyday practice. Facing an attack on their own self-worth, many depressed veterinarians turn to drugs or alcohol in order to self-medicate. Sadly, some conclude that suicide is the only way to relieve them of their despair.

When one considers how much the profession takes out of the veterinarian (it is a demanding career), it is only logical that they need to prioritize their own health in order to be more successful in their careers. Things like making sure to stay hydrated and eat a healthy diet,

having a hobby outside of work and home, as well as getting enough sleep, all play an essential role in overall well-being and the ability to cope with stress. Healthy life-balance habits are not generally spoken about or encouraged in veterinary school - and they should be!

Communication

A communication course would go a long way in assisting veterinarians with interactions between themselves and animal owners, co-workers in the practice, and suppliers. By being able to successfully communicate in the workplace, a veterinarian can often avoid unnecessary complaints to the veterinary board. Every veterinarian should learn assertiveness, confident communication, how to deliver bad news, and how to set boundaries as primary elements of a communication course.

Assertiveness: During their practicing life veterinarians will inevitably encounter a variety of situations in which they would need to stand up for themselves - from the breeder who only wants half the dose of a vaccine given to their small animal because they believe it is too much for a small dog, to an animal owner who wants a prescription medication without having to bring in their animal for a check-up, to having to address the fact that money has been going missing from the cash register or drugs are missing from the dispensary. Learning how to be assertive comes in most communication courses and would vastly improve the veterinarian's life skills in these situations.

Confidence: Veterinarians should be taught how to talk to clients about the cost of a procedure without doubt or hesitation. Veterinarians often underestimate their worth and the worth of the service they provide, and will often undercharge for their work. Many also try to ingratiate themselves with their clients by offering discounts. Vets should be confident enough to clearly and concisely explain the estimated costs involved in the treatment of the animal. Then they should also be able to manage the animal owner, who may now be unhappy about paying the estimated price (but conversely wants everything possible done)! Another hazard is when a vet runs diagnostic tests on the client's animal and after doing so the client is dissatisfied to hear that the results are 'normal' - as the client now perceives the process as a waste of time and a money-making exercise for the veterinarian and is therefore reluctant to pay for services rendered. Many times the animal owner will plead with the veterinarian to follow a \$1 000 course of recommended treatment for their animal, but tells the veterinarian that they only have a budget of \$100 - which then leaves the veterinarian scratching around for a MacGyver-type solution to the problem, while feeling stressed and somewhat manipulated (whether intentionally or unintentionally) out of earning fair payment for their work.

Delivering bad news: Another combination of communication and psychology that a veterinarian should be taught is how to deliver bad news to animal owners. If veterinary students were to learn techniques on how to deliver bad news to animal owners while they are still studying, it would greatly reduce later stress and build self-confidence. At the same time, it would be ideal if the veterinarian could learn tips on how to defensively deliver bad news to owners, without opening themselves up to liability or legal action from the owner. The VDA has developed many strategies over the years that would assist the practising veterinarian, and many veterinarians join our organisation especially to gain access to our unique knowledge and advice for this reason.

Setting boundaries: As veterinary medicine is a "helping" profession, veterinarians feel obliged to help. Whenever and whatever the question, they struggle to say "NO". We need to think of boundaries as the mechanism we can use to protect ourselves from emotional harm. Enforcing our boundaries is how we demonstrate respect for ourselves, and are an ultimate act of self-love and self-care. Without boundaries we become ineffective at caring for others, because we are depleted. For example, when we are struggling with unhappy circumstances in our personal lives, assisting in a euthanasia may not be in our best emotional interest. It may be necessary to ask a colleague to take over this task so that we can concentrate on dealing with our personal issues.

Of particular importance is boundary setting with clients - always dealing with them at arm's length and never letting them dictate the terms of the relationship. Veterinary medicine requires us to be empathetic with our patients, clients, and coworkers. At first consid-

eration, setting boundaries may seem counterintuitive; whereas, in fact, employing healthy boundaries enables us to maintain the space between us and others while being empathetic. Successful boundary setting is one of the most powerful tools we have against compassion fatigue and, when practiced, can sustain us indefinitely in our career and our lives.

Owning and managing a veterinary practice

Vet students are often coached by their professors that owning their own practice is the foremost goal to achieve, so as to afford to pay off their debts and student loans. Yet, the majority of veterinarians lack any basic business or management knowledge and are not taught any of this in school. Many of the pitfalls vets face could be avoided or mitigated with a short course in business management.

Record-Keeping and consent forms

There is also much variability within veterinary practices in documentation of records and consent forms. Many vets only learn these skills from the first clinicians they work with, or at their first job. They then tend to continue using the same procedure (if any existed to begin with) throughout their practicing years. The main problem with this is that not using updated consent forms - or using cobbled-together forms full of legal inconsistencies and loopholes, leave the veterinarian open to lawsuits and complaints against them. Poor record-keeping only further buries the veterinarian in the hole that poor consent forms create as once there is a complaint or lawsuit against the veterinarian, the lawyers prosecuting against the veterinarian will be able to easily detect the errors or omissions and use them against the veterinarian. A veterinarian who has not kept proper records will not be able to offer up a good defence for themselves, and this could result in huge legal fees and mounting stress and strife for the veterinarian, sometimes ending with a loss of license to practice when this may not have been a fair or warranted outcome. Many veterinarians approach the VDA with cases caused by poor record keeping or inferior forms. Vets who are already members of the VDA will find that we provide examples of such resources in the Members' Handbooks and, equipped with these, members can practice defensively and competently into the future.

It is imperative to remember that, while it's important to be patient and professional with co-workers and animal owners, there will be many times during your career when it is necessary to stand up for yourself, and for your license to practice. If you would like to learn more about the VDA and how we support our members, write to us at info@vetdefenceco.com.

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