In response to an identified need, Australian Veterinary Mental Health Awareness and Suicide Prevention Ltd’s was structured and is a registered health promotion charity. The charity’s aims include promoting the prevention and control of mental ill health and related diseases amongst veterinarians in Australia and others within the veterinary profession. The company seeks to do this by:

1. promoting and supporting positive mental health and wellbeing within the veterinary profession
2. raising awareness of, and the factors contributing to, poor mental health and suicide within the veterinary profession
3. promoting help seeking behaviours in relation to mental health and suicide prevention within the veterinary profession
4. raising awareness, promoting and developing skills and techniques within the veterinary profession to address mental health issues
5. developing and maintaining a database of resources and information relevant to mental health issues
6. promoting and encouraging further research and development into mental health issues within the veterinary profession, and
7. Provide support and training to and establishing a network of support persons in order to provide personal support to those in the veterinary profession in relation to mental health and suicide prevention issues.

Research has demonstrated that veterinarians are twice as likely to suffer from severe depression as the Australian population. Burnout is also a major issue for veterinarians, the rate being almost twice that of a non-veterinary pursuit.

The Victorian Coroner reported in 2015 that veterinarians have a suicide rate of 38.2 per 100,000 - the highest of any group, four times the national average. Indications are that this high suicide rate amongst veterinarians may be prevalent across all Australian States. Ease of access to lethal drugs is a major contributor to suicide in the veterinary profession. Lethal drug access coupled with high rates of depression can be a lethal cocktail.

The key findings of the Australian veterinary workforce modelling report (2015) states that unless we initiate change, Australia will experience a significant oversupply of veterinarians. Therefore, managing intake into veterinary courses or generating new demand for services is necessary. This projected scenario will cause significant unemployment or underemployment and it is likely to have a significant impact on the mental wellbeing of veterinarians.

This is not the only issue faced by veterinarians. In addition to reduced employment prospects, veterinarians deal with the effects of low incomes (which are decreasing), high student debt levels, and later retirement from practice along with failed expectations in attaining life’s ambitions or goals.

Recent changes to Occupational Health and Safety legislation defines health not only physical but also mental health and where a risk has been identified positive steps must be taken to
reduce that risk. Steps to reduce the risk can be changes in management style and practices or providing the opportunity for individuals to acquire the skills to be capable of managing that risk.

The charity’s present activities are twofold. Firstly present brief seminars to outline the mental health status of veterinarians, techniques to maintain mental well being, signs of suicidal ideation and preventative procedures when someone is suicidal. Secondly facilitate two day vetlifeaustralia seminar/workshops to learn the personal skills required to maintain and improve mental health and constructed to address the issues identified by veterinarians.

Unfortunately the major constraints to our charitable activities are financial as at present we do not have a sponsor and are limited to donations from a concerned non veterinary organisation, a pharmaceutical company, as well as some veterinarians and practices.

More information can be found at vetlifeaustralia.com.au or by contacting vetlifeaustralia@gmail.com.

All the best
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