

*The emotional cost of  
being a veterinarian:  
where to from here?*

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# Background

- This paper on emotional health of veterinarians is the outcome of a PhD undertaken on occupational injury and disease in veterinarians
- Very little information about veterinarians and their emotional health - there have been some recent papers.
- Apparent high suicide rate but no evidence-based research
- Veterinarians listed with several groups by ABS and no way of identifying them separately for statistics such as distress and suicide rate

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# Objectives

The PhD overall objective was to determine risk factors for occupational injury and disease. This paper will concentrate on only those objectives relating to emotional health.

- 1. To assess the emotional health of veterinarians including stress, job satisfaction and distress.
- 2. To explore the effects that injuries and zoonotic diseases have on the emotional well-being of practicing veterinarians.
- 3. To determine the rate of

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# Methodologies

## Qualitative and Quantitative

- Interviewed 45 (14 F, 31M) veterinarians to determine how some injuries/zoonotic diseases arise including risk factors and also what are major stressors for veterinarians.
- This led to development of a qualitative instrument of 419 veterinarians (49% M, 51% F) to determine number of occupational injuries/ zoonotic diseases as well as emotional health, job satisfaction and general psychosocial well-being and drug taking. Standard demographic data was also obtained.



# Emotional health

- 80% perceived they were stressed
- 30% said they had had suicidal thoughts

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# Risk factors for subjects' stress

Long and unpredictable working hours

Thought of as malingerers by colleagues

Life event eg death of child, partner

Little social and family life leading to relationship breakdown

Marriage breakdown

Financial rewards compared with comparable professions

Back injury and little support from GP in diagnosis

Rural vet on own with little support

No training on how to manage a veterinary practice

Abusive and aggrieved clients

Lack of employers and colleague support

Lack of family support

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# Perceived risk factors for veterinarians' suicide

Powerlessness in job

Long and unpredictable working hours

Life events such as death of spouse or child

Marriage breakdown

Lack of support of employer

Easy access to drugs

Compassion fatigue

Personality

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# Quantitative study

- 8-page instrument to ascertain
  - demographic details
  - work-related factors
  - occupational injury
  - occupational disease
  - emotional health
    - perceived stressors in practice
    - perceived stress (distress)
  - job satisfaction
  - substance use

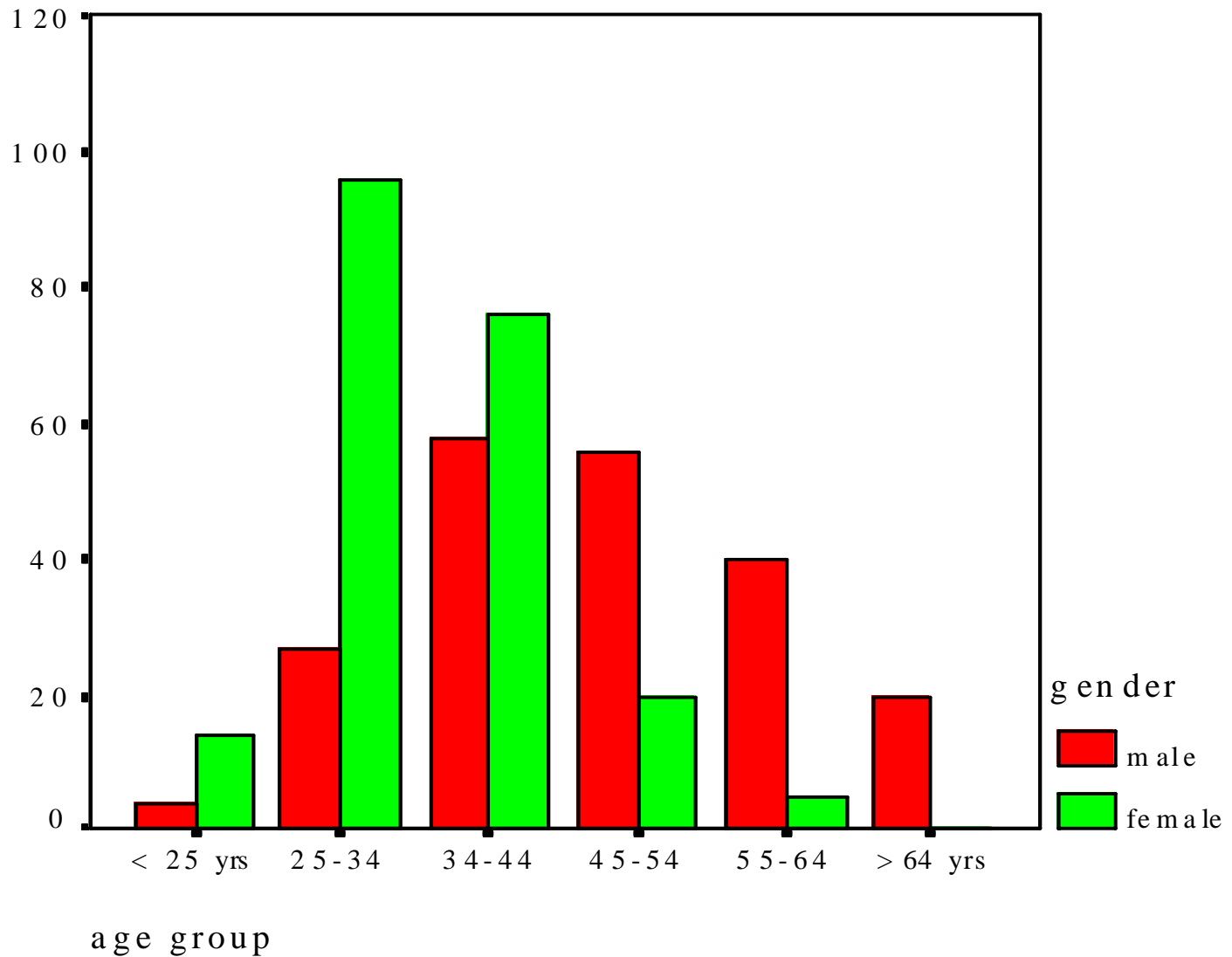
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# Type of veterinarians surveyed

Type of employment	Number	%
Private clinical practice	343	83
Government/regulatory	35	8
College/university with clinical	23	6
Zoo facility/marine park	1	0
Commercial/industry	5	1
Other	9	2
	416	100

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# Age of respondents



# Type of animal practice

Classification	Number of respondents	%
Small animal	207	52
Large animals	59	15
Mixed animal	124	32
Other animal	4	1
Total	394	100



# Mean hours worked per week by gender

Gender	%	Mean hours worked
Males	49	49
Females	51	39
Total (n)	374	44
Missing values*	45	
*These were retired, home duties or not working as a veterinarian		

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# Occupational injuries

- Fifty three percent of veterinarians had experienced at least one acute injury requiring half a day or more off work during their veterinary career. Of those injured, the range was from 1-4 major injuries with a mean of 1.8 injuries per person.

# Types of injury

Type of injury	% of total injuries
Dog and cat bites and scratches	23
Back injuries	22
Broken hand, wrist, finger & lacerations	16
Needle punctures and unspecified lacerations	11
Broken leg & severe laceration to legs	8
Arm, shoulder, elbow fractures and hyperextension	7
Fractured jaw, skull, face, concussion	6
Knee fractures, ruptured ligaments	4
Fractured ribs, chest & other fractures	2
Total	100

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# Job satisfaction

- Job Satisfaction Scale was included as another indicator of emotional health. The scale was adapted from that used by Warr Cook and Wall<sup>137</sup> and was modified slightly so that the questions related to veterinary practice.

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# Job satisfaction scale

1. Physical work conditions
2. Freedom to choose own way of working
3. Fellow workers
4. Recognition for good work
5. Immediate boss or partner
6. Amount of responsibilities
7. Income or rate of pay
8. Opportunity to use abilities
9. Industrial relations
10. Chance of promotion or pay increase
11. Out of hours work or being on call

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# Kessler 10+ (K10+ )

- used as a screening instrument and
- used to assess level of mental disorders in the community
- usually administered as
  - computer assisted personal interview (CAPI)
  - computer assisted telephone interview (CATI)
- In the study K10+ was used as part of the self-administered questionnaire so comparison between self-administration responses and telephone responses undertaken to show that results valid

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# K10 Self Report Measures for Adults

## *Instructions*

*The following ten questions ask about how you have been feeling in the last **four weeks**. For each question, mark the circle under the option that best describes the amount of time you felt that way.*

In the past 4 weeks, about how often did you feel tired out for no good reason

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel nervous?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel so nervous that nothing could calm you down?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel hopeless?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel restless or fidgety?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel so restless you could not sit still?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel depressed?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel that everything was an effort?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel so sad that nothing could cheer you up?

In the last 4 weeks, about how often did you feel worthless?

# Stress/Distress

- K10+
  - 5 point Likert Scale
    - 1 None of the time
    - 2 A little of the time
    - 3 Some of the time
    - 4 Most of the time
    - 5 All of the time

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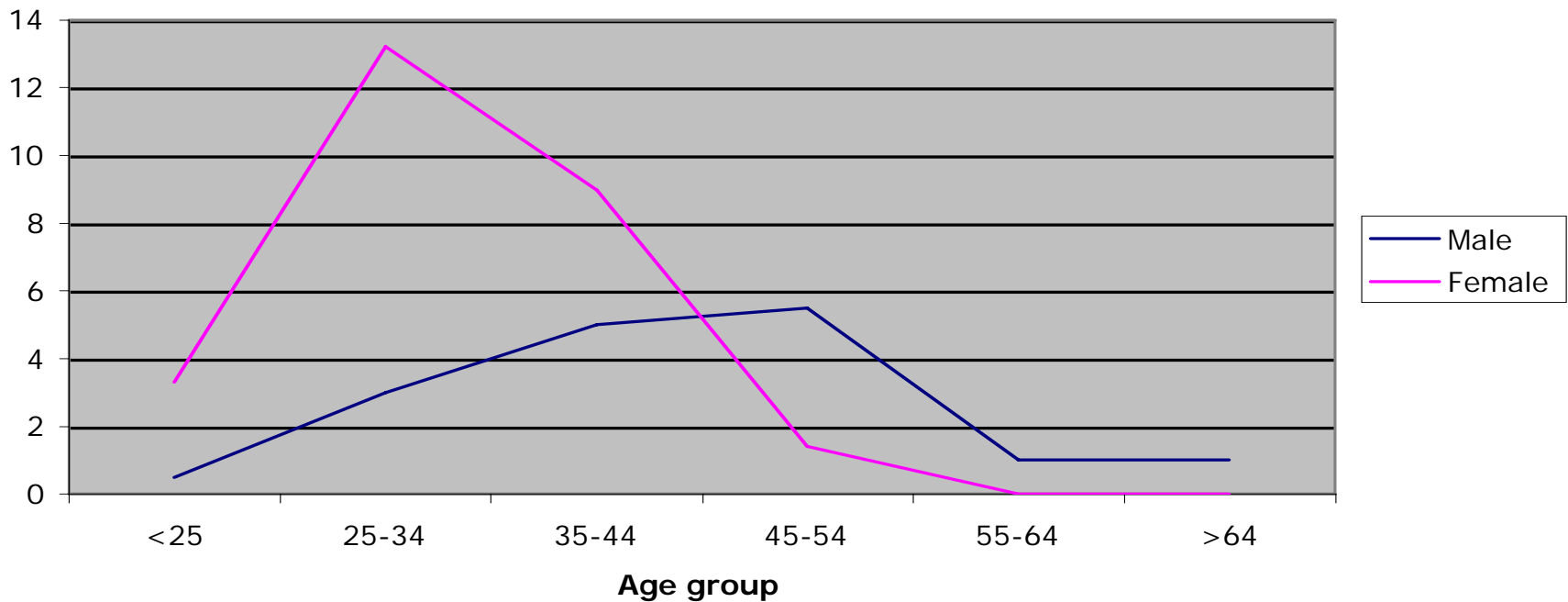
# K10+ Psychological Distress (PD)

- PD Scores from 10-50

- PD Low if score 10-15
- PD Moderate 16-21
- PD High 22-29
- PD Very High 30-50

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# Respondents with high distress levels by age group and gender



# Comparisons between study sample and NSW and WA general populations for high psychological distress (PD>21)

Age group	Study Male %	Study Female %	NSW Male %	NSW Female %	WA Male %	WA Female %
16-24	25	50	12.2	20.3	12.2	14.6
25-34	22	29	11.0	13.2	10.8	13.5
35-44	17	25	10.5	15.0	8.6	11.9
45-54	20	15	11.4	15.0	10.2	10.9
55-64	5	0	8.8	11.1	9.4	10.1
65-74	13	0	7.2	8.7	7.1	8.4

# Associations of distress

- No association with injury
- Significant association with back injury
- Substance use (alcohol, cigarettes, drugs) have significant association with distress
- Significant association with satisfaction attributes *fellow workers*

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# Logistic regression

- Stepwise logistic progression undertaken to determine predictors of distress
- Only three variables of any significance for distress:
  - Having a back injury in past 5 years
  - Taken drugs in past 12 months
  - Being less than 35 years of age

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# Suicide in veterinarians

- Statistics unavailable
- ASCO code 23 represents about 20 professional groups and ABS does statistics to the two digit level only.
- Not all states list the profession in the Coroner's records of death
- Victoria and Western Australia do record profession

# Cause of death of veterinarians

- Records of causes of death for 109 people were obtained for the 13 year period 1990-2002, After removing veterans, veterinary technicians and veterinary nurses, 89 records remained.
- Of these, 11 were classified as suicides (9 male and 2 female)

# Method of suicide Vic and WA

Gender	Year	Age	Cause of death
Male	1992	35	Cyanide toxicity
Male	1991	48	Injection of toxic substance
Male	1998	27	Drug toxicity
Male	1990	40	Drug toxicity
Male	1995	50	Acute intoxication
Male	1998	36	Hanging
Male	1993	47	Toxic effects of drugs
Male	1999	52	Drug toxicity
Male	1996	63	Gunshot wound to head
Female	1998	28	Pentobarbitone self injected
Female	1999	28	Drug toxicity

# Calculations to determine rate

- Because of low numbers of suicides (there were none in certain years) it wasn't possible to undertake an age-standardised rate.
- The number of registered veterinarians in Victoria in 1990 was 1150 increasing to 1500 in 2002.
- In 1990, WA had 400 veterinarians; 770 in 2002.
- Linear interpolation was used to estimate the number of veterinarians for the denominator in all the intervening years.
- An SAS program was written to perform the calculations and the rates were calculated using Poisson regression.

# Suicide rate

- Western Australia:
  - Rate of 52.6 per 100,000 (95% CI: 19.7– 140.1)
- Victoria
  - Rate of 41.8 per 100,000 (95% CI: 19.9 – 87.7)
- Combined rate
  - Rate of 45.2 per 100,000 (95% CI: 25.0 – 81.6)

Rate of suicide for general population in 2003 was around 12 per 100 000 (13 in WA and 11 in Victoria)

# Major stressors identified

- Aggressive, difficult or demanding clients (33%)
- Financial problems (19%)
- Staff difficulties (16%)
- After-hours workload (13%)
- Bosses (5%)
- Concern for patients and euthanasing animals (3%)
- Lack of perceived self esteem (<1%)
- Time management (<1%)
- Bureaucracy (<1%)

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# Limitations

- Qualitative interviews undertaken with veterinarians who had been injured/diseased.
- Small numbers in the profession may bias suicide rates. One more or less suicide will change results dramatically

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# Outcomes

- Two major seminars held on recognition of distress
- Think tank on ways to minimise distress and support veterinarians
- Evaluation of seminar run by ITIM Australia Limited (they provide counseling services for professional groups)



# The future?

- One day program on emotional health at AVA Annual Conference including plenary session
- Provide short courses on distress minimisation
- ITIM developing on-line courses for veterinarians especially those in remote locations
- Train regional “champions” to provide support to vets
- Programs on developing life skills and self esteem in UG veterinary courses

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or:

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# or depression:

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# We have happy vets!

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# Cartoons courtesy of veterinarian Frank Gasch

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