

Veterinary Ireland launches mental health support initiative in face of high stress and suicide rates amongst vets

“A variety of research shows that veterinary professionals report a very high level of psychological stress and are known to be at increased risk of death by suicide, when compared with the general population,” according to Dr. David MacGuinness MVB MRCVS, President, Veterinary Ireland. “It has been concluded that the proportional mortality ratio for suicide amongst the veterinary profession is four times that of the general population and around twice that of other healthcare professionals”.

Veterinary Ireland has launched a new ‘**Vet Support Ireland**’ initiative, to help support vets, vet nurses and lay staff in their mental health and wellness. The announcement was made at the Veterinary Ireland Annual General Meeting and Conference in the Mullingar Park Hotel, today (Friday 22nd November, 2019), which was officially opened by Andrew Doyle T.D., Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture Food & the Marine.

The new Vet Support Ireland service is manned by eleven trained supporters who are either vets or vet nurses, providing support on a voluntary basis. Irish vets can find out information about the service through a website www.vetsupport.ie and contact the supporter they feel they can most relate to on a completely confidential basis.

Veterinary Ireland President Dr. David MacGuinness says he was fortunate in his early years as a vet to have been able to speak with his father, who was also a vet, about traumatic cases, issues and stresses of work. “He was in effect my mentor and I was tremendously lucky to have had him by my side to provide advice and reassurance in those years,” says Dr. MacGuinness.

“My own experience is that young vets and rurally based vets in particular can find themselves in much more isolated circumstances. These trained supporters will hopefully help people in stress by giving them the tools and support and reassurance to help to manage their pressures and difficulties.”

“In the context of the alarming levels of suicide amongst vets in Ireland and the UK, we want to highlight the importance of nurturing emotional and mental wellbeing and make mental health an issue that is as widely talked about and accepted as physical health,” said Dr. MacGuinness.

The tip of the mental health iceberg

“Suicide is often described as the tip of the mental health iceberg,” said David McKeown BVMS CertSHP ARAgS MRCVS, who practised as a vet in Co. Antrim for 25 years followed by a career with the Veterinary Defence Society. He has been involved in developing Vet Support Ireland.

Speaking to Veterinary Ireland delegates in Mullingar, David McKeown explained that research amongst the veterinary community in Northern Ireland confirmed the perceived need for peer support locally to combat and hopefully reduce the incidence of poor emotional health within the wider veterinary community.

“We know that this service can work. A Vet Support service was launched in Northern Ireland in 2017 and has interacted with 180 colleagues so far. Some of the contacts have quite serious life issues that they want to talk through, but we have seen that the majority are seeking help to think their way through worrying concerns. These include making career choices, work related stress, communication difficulties with clients and colleagues, relationship breakdowns at work or at home, bullying, lack of assertiveness and isolation or lack of support and direction,” said David McKeown.

Currently nine vets and two registered veterinary nurses have undergone training and assessment for the programme and this number may expand in response to demand. The initial and ongoing training allows them to help worried and distressed colleagues, understand what is going on for them, and then encourage them to move forward - one step at a time. Vet Support team members believe that since they are either vets or nurses the service has an immediate potential advantage in terms of empathy with a colleague who is worried for whatever reason.

The work of Vet Support Ireland www.vetsupport.ie will be an addition to the existing Veterinary Assistance Programme (VetAP) which runs a crisis referral helpline staffed by counsellors. It was set up a decade ago as an industry collaboration which includes the Irish Veterinary Benevolent Fund, Veterinary Council of Ireland, and Veterinary Ireland. **The Veterinary Assistance Programme crisis line number is 1800-995-955**

The AGM of Veterinary Ireland also saw the formal handover of the chain of office from outgoing Veterinary Ireland President Dr. David MacGuinness MVB MRCVS, Avenue Veterinary Hospital, Dundalk, Co. Louth to incoming President Conor Geraghty MVB CertDHH from Geraghty & Neary Veterinary, a multi site large animal and equine practice in Mountbellew, Co. Galway. Conor Geraghty has held a number of roles with Veterinary Ireland including Chair of Veterinary Ireland's Food Animal Group and Chair of the Cattle Association of Veterinary Ireland (CAVI).

ENDS

Date: 22nd November, 2019

Issued on behalf of Veterinary Ireland by:

Antonina Ni Dhuinn, Progress Communications

Tel: 01 – 2766117 nina@progresspr.ie