

**Thursday, 1st July 2010
Dublin, Ireland.**

**Launch by the Minister for Mental Health and Disability,
Mr. John Moloney TD
of the
'Veterinary Assistance Programme',
a mental health promotion and suicide prevention initiative
targeted at the Veterinary Profession.**

The Minister for Mental Health and Disability, Mr. John Moloney TD, today launched the Veterinary Assistance Programme, a confidential support service available free of charge to all veterinary professionals and their families in Ireland.

The Veterinary Assistance Programme (VAP) is provided by the Irish Veterinary Benevolent Fund (IVBF), and aims to promote positive mental health and to provide crisis response at times of extreme stress. The development of this programme is supported by the HSE/National Office for Suicide Prevention.

Research shows that veterinary professionals report a high level of psychological stress and are known to be at increased risk of death by suicide, when compared with the general population. Drawing on this research, Mr Michael Roche, Chair of the IVBF, stated 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'*.

In 2008, the Irish Veterinary profession recognised that in order to address the issue of psychological stress, solutions had to come from within the profession. Facilitated by Donal Connolly, a former President of Veterinary Ireland, an All Island Working Group was established to look at 'Stress in the Veterinary Profession', involving delegates from veterinary representative, educational, support and regulatory bodies¹.

The HSE/National Office for Suicide Prevention, the HSE West /Regional Suicide Prevention Office and the Samaritans were also invited to participate in this Working Group, out of which a proposal was developed in 2009 for a Veterinary Assistance Programme, provided by the Irish Veterinary Benevolent Fund.

The Veterinary Assistance Programme became operational in March 2010 and it consists of a **24 hour Freephone Professional Counselling Helpline; access to Face to Face Professional Counselling; anonymous or "low-stigma" online Professional Counselling accessed through e-mail and real-time "Live Connect"; and a dedicated "Wellnet" internet website**, containing over 5,000 articles and resources on health, wellbeing, parenting, finances, legal information, consumer rights and workplace issues. The Veterinary Assistance Programme will be heavily promoted to the Veterinary Profession throughout the year.

Speaking at today's launch Donal Connolly, who initiated work on the programme, stated *'International evidence demonstrates that as a society and individuals, we can influence and look after our own mental health and well being. The veterinary profession has today made a significant beginning in providing a confidential assistance program directed at the entire veterinary profession, their partners and families, rather than targeting only those in psychological distress'*.

¹ The Working Group was made up of delegates from: Irish Veterinary Benevolent Fund, Veterinary Ireland, Veterinary Council of Ireland, Irish Veterinary Nurses Association, Veterinary Officers Association, Veterinary Defence Society, UCD Veterinary Medicine, VetNI, IFP Media (Irish Veterinary Journal), Samaritans, HSE and NOSF.

In 2009, the HSE/NOSP provided funding towards the establishment of the Veterinary Assistance Programme. The NOSP supported the initiative as it specifically relates to the implementation of actions from *'Reach Out: The national strategy for action on suicide prevention'*. The programme provides the NOSP with a model of good practice for supporting and intervening with professions who work in isolation and who have been shown to be at risk of mental health problems and suicidal behaviour. Furthermore through their work, veterinary professionals often engage with individuals who may be at risk of suicide. Therefore by increasing awareness among the veterinary professionals on mental health and well being, they can become key gatekeepers in preventing suicide among other at risk groups at a community level e.g. farmers'.

In inviting the Minister to formally launch the Veterinary Assistance Programme, Mr Roche concluded that *'The launch today of this Veterinary Assistance Programme is a significant step forward for our profession and a wonderful opportunity to begin addressing the situations that are causing stress and mental health problems amongst our colleagues. We are also more aware now of the valuable role we can play in our communities, particularly rural communities, where isolation and depression are common. It is a beginning and with continued effort we can make it easier for those in distress to tell us they are 'not having a great day'; that it is ok to ask for help and that when people do, understanding, support and services are available'*.

For further information contact:

<i>HSE Press Office:</i>	01 635 2840
<i>Donal Connolly:</i>	087 258 0651
<i>John Magee, Irish Veterinary Benevolent Fund:</i>	086 831 7822