

Life outside work must be more than just sleep

Dear editor,

The Western Australian Veterinary Board passed a ruling in 2008 no longer requiring clinics to provide 24-hour emergency care. This was in response to its concern about veterinary surgeons' mental health issues. This may seem like a drastic measure, but in small practices (sometimes with a constant or one-in-two rota) that cover areas with a minimum radius of 200km, it had become a necessity. One remote practice in a one-clinic town now provides an on-call service until 8pm, then turns the phones back on at 8am. If an animal is sick in that 12 hours, it waits or dies – or the owner can drive for seven hours to the next clinic and hope that it provides 24-hour care.

This may seem cruel, but having worked with veterinary surgeons in remote towns in Australia who became substance abusers and suicidal, I think it is the only option. I am a compassionate veterinary surgeon, but I also believe in a right to a life outside of my work that is more than just catching up on sleep.

I would be very interested to know the incidence of work stress, suicide, substance abuse and mental health issues (and, indeed, other diseases) in vets with on-call duty versus vets without. This would be the true test of determining how on-call affects individuals within our profession. If a strong difference is found, I believe the regulators have a duty to address this, as the board in Western Australia has boldly done. As a profession, we can only give good care to animals if we take care of the surgeons who provide it.

Yours faithfully,

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