

Depression is a real disease, not a weakness

Dear Editor,

May I congratulate Bradley Viner for demonstrating a total lack of understanding shown in his *Reflections* column (31st October issue). It does much to propagate the misunderstanding surrounding mental health problems when it comes to vets. It is with great concern that I recall his name on the RCVS elections form to become one of the people governing our profession. Now I am glad I didn't vote.

So, why am I so annoyed? I am currently being treated for depression, now some nine months along the road to recovery. It is a long, and difficult, path to follow. However, with the help of those close to me, and the right medication, things continue to get better. During this time, I have made the decision to be open about my illness, hence this letter.

Before getting help for my condition, which was probably about 10 years at least, I would be very moody, with some of the smallest things triggering off bouts of depression out of all proportion. During this time, you feel the world is entirely against you – even though you know deep down that it isn't. Then someone may say that dreadful phrase: "There are other people in the world far worse off than you". Suddenly your emotions are churning faster than ever and you are beside yourself with a mixture of rage, hatred for yourself for being depressed and hatred for the person who said it. When, eventually, you are able to climb out of this pit, you feel drained and full of regret for what has preceded.

Depression is due to an imbalance of serotonin within the brain. As vets, this should make us aware that this is a real disease and not just something the weak amongst the profession suffer from. Is it really reasonable to expect vets to be better than other people at controlling their own levels of serotonin, just because they are vets? I don't think so. The effect of serotonin balance was well-described by Martyn Phippen (3rd October issue). This was an excellent article about getting through depression. It certainly struck a chord with me and, I suspect, others who have managed to get help in time.

I accept that depression doesn't always equal suicide, but it often can. My antipathy with Mr Viner centres around his comment that, as vets, we are far better-off than other people. The implication was that there was little reason for vets to commit suicide.

The extension of this was then to say that we commit suicide just because we are good at it. Well, certainly we have the means within easy reach most of the time. I, for one, do not regret my decision to follow the path of becoming a vet. However, that did not prevent me from becoming ill. Would it not, though, be better to consider why so many vets consider suicide as the only way to solve the issue? Certainly, when I did try to seek help, I was concerned about the effect it could have on my potential career ahead. So concerned that the doctor I was talking to said it would be best to do things off the record. The result was that nothing happened until much later.

As a profession, we appear to have let a stigma build up surrounding mental health issues. Things are, though, beginning to change for the better. The Vet Helpline (07659 811118; local rate answering machine service) is a very good first step for anyone just wanting to talk and get very helpful advice.

As a profession, we are constantly told and instructed about how to communicate with clients better. It is about time we felt able to start communicating to each other how we feel, without embarrassment or fear of being misunderstood. Please, Mr Viner, next time think before putting pen to paper.

Yours faithfully,

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