

DELEGATES DISCUSS SUICIDE TOPICS

THE 12th European Symposium on Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour (ESSSB) took place this year in Glasgow.

ESSSB is the largest and most prestigious suicidology conference in Europe and is recognised as one of the most influential in the world, bringing together leading academics, policy makers and practitioners from across the globe. The conference aims to promote cutting-edge research to stimulate new thinking, to share insights and expertise, and to enhance mutual learning of science, policy and practice. More than 350 delegates from 37 countries were welcomed to the conference. There were more than 400 oral and poster presentations at the event.

David Bartram, a veterinary surgeon researching suicide and mental health in the veterinary profession – in association with the University of Southampton's School of Medicine – delivered an oral presentation called "Veterinary surgeons and suicide: a

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reports on his presentation to a congress discussing suicide and suicidal behaviour, during which he referred extensively to the profession

hypothetical model to explain risk". He told delegates that veterinary surgeons were at high risk of suicide, with a proportional mortality ratio around four times that of the general population and around twice that of other healthcare professions.

Although there had been much speculation regarding mechanisms of increased suicide risk in the profession, there was very little empirical research, he explained.

A review of current knowledge about possible influences on the suicide rate among veterinarians, and factors elevating the risk in other occupations and in the general population, was used to propose a hypothetical model to explain suicide risk

in veterinary surgeons. Based on testable constructs, it attempted to clarify a complex interaction of possible mechanisms across the career life, and facilitate a more focused approach to research.

Work-related stressors

Such mechanisms include the characteristics of individuals entering the profession, negative effects during undergraduate training, work-related stressors

(such as long working hours, inadequate support, emotional exhaustion, client expectations and unexpected clinical outcomes), ready access to and knowledge of means (medicines are typically stored in practice premises and deliberate self poisoning is the most common

method of suicide in both male and female veterinarians), stigma associated with mental illness, professional and social isolation, and alcohol or drug misuse (mainly prescription drugs, to which the profession has ready access, such as ketamine, benzodiazepines and opiates).

Contextual effects, such as attitudes to death and euthanasia (formed through the profession's routine involvement with euthanasia of companion animals and slaughter of farm animals), and suicide contagion (due to direct or indirect exposure to suicide of peers within this small profession) are other possible influences.

Research is required to validate the model and to inform the development and timing of appropriate interventions. A cross-sectional study to determine the prevalence of psychological morbidity using standard instruments and to identify psychosocial risk factors in the profession's work environments

has recently been completed; the results are being prepared for publication.

There are now a number of initiatives planned and underway to develop an evidence base from which effective interventions can be developed to help reduce the levels of psychological distress in the veterinary profession. The author believes high

exposure achieved by presenting related research at non-veterinary conferences may help to stimulate further awareness and interest of mental health within our profession, among research workers in the fields of sociology, psychology and medicine. Such multi-disciplinary collaboration offers the most potential for reducing the suicide rate among veterinarians. ■



The author provided a veterinary perspective to delegates.

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