

Veterinary helpline reports 500% rise in service contact

A RECORD number of vet professionals contacted the confidential Vetlife Helpline in 2017, figures have revealed.

Volunteers responded to 1,737 contacts (681 telephone calls and 1,056 emails) last year, and the statistics mean, over the past five years, contact with the 24/7 crisis service has risen by 500 per cent.

Vetlife officials believe the increase in the volume of contact is partially down to being successful in encouraging more veterinary staff to feel willing and able to do so.

However, they also suspect the level of distress and difficulty experienced by those making contact is increasing.

Vetlife Helpline manager Rosie Allister said: "Certainly, the types of contact we are now getting are not about less serious things than they used to be.

"That's absolutely not the case. The level we've had, in terms of levels of difficulty people are experiencing, has actually increased."

She said it was good people were sharing their problems and appealed to all profession members to continue access-

report by

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ing the service, as Vetlife had the capacity to handle every contact in complete confidence.

Open to all

Dr Allister said: "Contact has increased, but I don't want that to put off anyone who is thinking about [doing so]; we are available 24 hours a day, and want to hear from anyone in the veterinary community who is struggling.

"Telephone calls and emails to [the] helpline can be about any issue – it doesn't have to be related to work. Common themes are concerns about mental health, workplace stress, and employment and career issues, but the community can contact us about anything. We'll be there to listen."

Dr Allister said common themes emerging in 2017 were people in practice struggling in terms of the support they were being given, as well as whether they wanted to stay in practice.

A "high level" of mental health concerns were also expressed.

Dr Allister said another worrying field was for "people in leadership positions" suffering problems with pressure and debt. It was, she said, a really broad range of difficulties – up to, and including, suicide.

About 30 per cent of the contact was from nurses, Dr Allister revealed, adding she believed they were "under-represented" in the 2017 figures.

One area that showed a marked increase in use was the online Vetlife Helpline. Dr Allister said: "Because this is not a standard email service – rather, an online, secure messaging service on our website – we cannot see people's email addresses when they contact us.

"Users can make up a name – they can call themselves Robocop if they want to – it doesn't bother us. In fact, we encourage them to [do so]. We're only concerned that they do contact us.

"Because of that anonymity there are definitely people who contact us online who wouldn't telephone us.

"We find, as well, the level of distress and crisis we see on emails tends to be higher than

on the telephone, so we get contact from people who are really struggling – those who are suicidal and self-harming – on email more than we do on a telephone line now."

Ease and flexibility

Dr Allister suggested the ease and flexibility of electronically contacting Vetlife may be another factor in its rising use.

She said: "If you're busy or on call, it's difficult to have a confidential, half-hour telephone conversation, but you can send an email on your mobile during a lunch break or from the car."

In a bid to reach more veterinary professionals, Dr Allister said the organisation wanted to

explore using text and instant messaging, but admitted that would present a funding challenge to Vetlife, which depends entirely on the generosity of the veterinary community.

Vetlife Helpline, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2017, offers confidential support to everyone in the veterinary community.

Trained volunteers are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year – via telephone and email – to offer support on a wide range of personal and work-related issues.

Vetlife is also seeking support and funding to expand the service. To get involved visit www.vetlife.org.uk/support-us

Veterinary help and support

Vetlife

www.vetlife.org.uk

0303 040 2551 (24 hours, 365 days a year)

Anonymous email

<https://helpline.vetlife.org.uk>

Veterinary Defence Society

www.thevds.co.uk

01565 652737

