

As the owner of his own Melbourne veterinary clinic for over a decade, Dr Michael Heath was hardly a newcomer when he had an epiphany a few years ago that changed the way he worked.

While away in India on a volunteer dogs' spaying program, Dr Heath realised it was the first time in a long time he had gone without euthanasing an animal. It was then he appreciated just how much of an impact that part of the job back in his Melbourne clinic was having on him.

"I didn't realise how regular euthanasing of animals was taking a toll," Dr Heath recalls. "The Indian project was no-kill, so I had to find solutions to treat various cases in other ways. I was so surprised at how


differently I felt in my approach to my work when I was not euthanasing animals on a regular basis, and also not dealing with the distress of pet owners, and my own emotions about doing it as well."

Dr Heath says it was the first time he had to acknowledge the value of time away from a work task that was causing genuine grief, and he now commences every year with a schedule of short and longer breaks to be taken throughout the year. "I realised it's essential for me to get away from the things

Some vets reveal euthanasing pets can be one of the most emotionally draining aspects of the job. Fortunately, there's an AVA program to help manage this distress.

By **John Burfitt**

DEATH TOLL



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**Dr Lindsay Hay, Baulkham Hills
Veterinary Hospital**

that wind me up about our work, and having time out is so important to how I perform in the longer run.”

Needle and the damage done

Dr Heath is not an isolated case in terms of the emotional toll euthanasia takes on vets. “Pet loss and grief management is a very significant source of stress and contributes to the risk of professional burnout for all practice staff,” Dr Lindsay Hay of Sydney’s Baulkham Hills Veterinary Hospital says. “We need to facilitate the grief that our clients feel about the loss of their pet as well as recognise the impact pet loss has on our staff as well as ourselves,” Dr Hay says. “Compassion fatigue is a very real threat in our profession and, therefore, grief management is both a customer service and a staff workplace health and safety issue that can never be underestimated.”

In her 2014 Macquarie University report ‘The Distinct Role of Performing Euthanasia on Depression and Suicide in Veterinarians’, Dr Monique Crane concluded: “We found that the more frequently a veterinarian performed euthanasia in an average week, the greater their risk of depressed mood, suggesting that the performance of euthanasia is a source of stress within this occupation.”

The impact of stress in the veterinary profession has been widely reported in recent years, with findings that poor psychological health is common. Whether it’s a new graduate starting out or a seasoned vet with decades of experience, acknowledging that processes like euthanasia along with client distress can take an emotional toll should not be underestimated. When such issues are identified, a vet must have a range of coping mechanisms at their disposal, says Dr Paula Parker, president of the Australian Veterinary Association (AVA).

“If a vet finds aspects of their job difficult or challenging, you need to look at ways of how to manage that rather than pretend it is not an issue, or put on a brave face,” Dr Parker says. “When you most need help might be the least likely time you reach out and seek help. It can help if we are all cognisant about that and know what to do at that point.”

Mental health first aid

To assist with such issues, the AVA launched the Mental Health First Aid program in 2016, to help veterinary staff identify the signs of mental health issues, both personally and in their colleagues. In a mixture of workshops and online learning, the program explores depression, anxiety, psychosis and substance misuse. To date, 378 veterinary professionals across Australia have been trained. Workshops will be held in Hobart, Perth and Adelaide in the coming months. Also available through the AVA is a 24-hour telephone counselling service.

“Our aim is to have someone in every vet clinic in Australia having done the course who knows how to handle these issues among their colleagues when they are under stress, and how to assist them,” Dr Parker says. “One thing people can find tricky when someone is having a difficult time is knowing how to have that first conversation. Too often we don’t know how to deal with it, so we say nothing and just hope it goes away, but that’s when it can get much worse.”

The focus in recent years on resilience in the workplace has been a good move for the profession, Dr Lindsay Hay claims. “Dealing with euthanasia in a positive way is important—make rules, only do it for the right reasons and be prepared to say no,” he says. “We owe our pet patients a dignified end to their lives and that is a good thing when done well. It is also very satisfying if we can maintain a positive relationship with our clients through the hard times.”

Establishing self-care practices that allow the vet to slow down helps them gain clarity, Karen Gately, human resources consultant and author of *The People Manager’s Tool Kit*, says. “Some vets might feel the need to be strong to do their job well, but that raw emotion that sits underneath that professional mask might be very tough to cope with. We need to educate people that it is okay to have those feelings.

“Compassion fatigue is a real thing, and as a vet, it is part of the job. If you can see signs of it, then taking time out might help you deal with it. Also know that taking time out is not a bad thing. In fact, it might be the smartest thing you do all year and might guarantee you make it through the years ahead.” ▼