



president's COLUMN



Using effective communication to build healthy, thriving veterinary workplaces

We are all aware that the stress and strain of the past two years has been significant for veterinarians and their dedicated staff. While issues such as poor work-life balance, stress, and not feeling valued were a challenge before COVID-19, the pandemic greatly exacerbated these problems. And while the wellbeing of veterinary teams has always been a top priority of the AVMA, our focus on this area is intensifying with many efforts underway to address this complex topic.

Veterinarians' wellbeing has been the subject of much thoughtful discussion, and the latest Veterinary Wellbeing Study, conducted last fall by Merck Animal Health in collaboration with the AVMA, is Merck's third wellbeing study since 2017, and the first since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. With an expanded focus to include veterinary technicians and support staff, the study examines and brings critical awareness to the challenges impacting the veterinary profession, while highlighting the pandemic's impact on practitioners and staff.

Additional findings of this comprehensive study, released by Merck in January, revealed that the main barriers impacting practitioners are the shortage of qualified staff and that not all clinic or hospital employees have access to mental health tools. Further, it showed that the challenges brought on by the pandemic had a significant impact on veterinarians and clinic staff, and two-thirds of those who reported distress lack healthy methods for dealing with stress. For more information about the Veterinary Wellbeing Study, please visit merck-animal-health-usa.com.

The study suggests that creating healthy workplaces is achievable by focusing on fostering a strong sense of belonging to the team, developing a high degree of trust in the organization, and creating an environment for candid and open communication among team members. In fact, the Merck study found that these three variables are key to positively influencing wellbeing and creating a thriving workplace culture.

In an effort to help members build a healthy, thriving veterinary workplace, the AVMA is further expanding its focus this year on promoting workplace wellbeing through outreach, programming, consultation, and collaboration. Because communication is so integral to our lives and workplaces, how we talk about wellbeing, and the language we use, matters greatly. While we may not all be wellbeing experts, we are all communicators, and so we play a vital role in how we interact as team members. Our focus is on developing authentic connection, trust, and rapport, and to have candid dialogue so that, as a team, we can successfully navigate the challenges that come our way.

The new AVMA Train-the-Trainer Wellbeing Educator Program, made possible through an educational grant from Merck, is one way we are helping build healthy teams. The training focuses on the link between effective communication and workplace wellbeing. It highlights core communication skills that build trust, increase rapport, and help create healthy, sustainable work cultures. Participants in the Train-the-Trainer program will be equipped with the materials needed to conduct relationship-centered training in a wide variety of settings. For more information, please visit avma.org/trainthetrainer.

The first training session occurred January 6 during the AVMA Veterinary Leadership Conference in Chicago. The next training will be a virtual event held on April 14. While the application period for the April training closed March 4, two additional training sessions will be conducted later this year. I encourage you to take advantage of this new opportunity so that, together, we can improve veterinary wellbeing by communicating and interacting in ways that build trust, increase rapport, and help our teammates flourish.

To help further address these important issues, Merck recently pledged an additional \$100,000 to help develop new mental health and wellbeing tools and resources specifically for veterinary technicians and support staff, as well as to provide continued support for our Workplace Wellbeing program and Train-the-Trainer program. We are grateful for this support and look forward to our continued work together. Be sure to look to avma.org/wellbeing for resources designed to support all members of the veterinary team.

Improving wellbeing is a shared responsibility that requires a committed effort by all members of our community. Practice teams, business owners, veterinary colleges, state VMAs, and individuals all have important roles to play. The AVMA, in collaboration with many other veterinary associations and groups, remains committed to creating resources that support healthy individuals and teams. Consistently taking care of our own physical and emotional health offers not only individual benefits, but also gives us the ability to deliver better care for our patients and support our teams.

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I want to hear from you. Please reach out to me with your comments, questions and concerns at presidentcolumn@avma.org.