

## Introduction

Veterinarians often live with mental ill-health (Killinger et al., 2017), the profession has a disproportionate rate of suicide (Stoewen, 2015), and veterinary nurses (VNs) can experience higher levels of distress than other veterinary professionals (Foote, 2023). Mental health (MH) education during VN curricula can enhance student outcomes and develop skills that will benefit their lives beyond education. Yet, little is known about the MH education that is provided across veterinary nursing diplomas and degrees.

### Research aims:

- 1) Review and evaluate MH education for student VNs and understand how to implement MH education into curricular design.
- 2) Understand tutors' and current and past students' experiences of MH education, and the effectiveness of this learning.
- 3) Provide evidence-based recommendations for inclusive educational enhancement of VN curricular.

## Methods

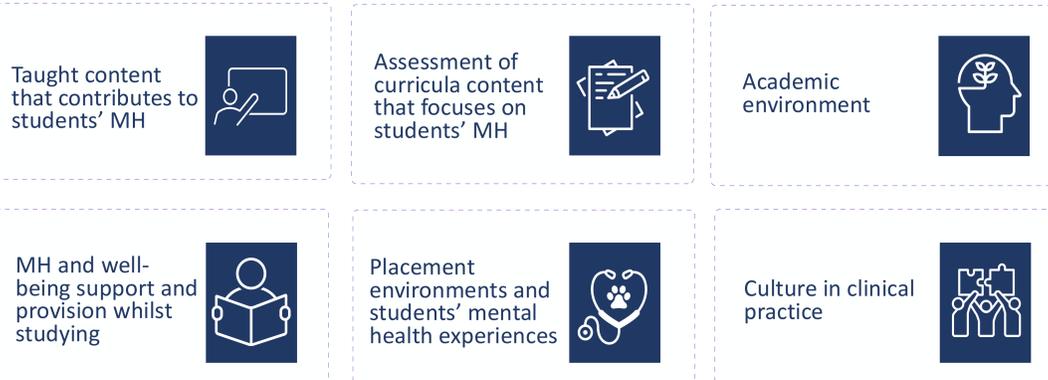
Phase one: A review of accredited institutions' online material, supplemented by an open-ended survey and webinar to gather more detailed insights. The findings were organised into themes and, where appropriate, these were linked to the RCVS Standards.

Phase two: Online interviews with 27 VN tutors, student VNs, and qualified VNs between July and October 2024. Interviews were informed by the findings of phase one, were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using abductive thematic analysis (e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006).



## Key Findings and Summary

The findings highlight six themes in current MH education provision, which each encompassed several sub-themes:



### Narrative summary of findings and take-home messages:

MH support is evident, but there is a gap between training and real-world practice. Many students feel unprepared for the emotional and professional challenges of VN. Placements significantly impact student well-being, but experiences vary. Supportive environments help, but some students struggle with high workloads, lack of mentorship, or toxic workplace cultures. Workplace culture can be tough, with long hours and outdated expectations. Support from universities during placements is mixed. While some feel supported from regular check-ins, many students feel disconnected and don't know where to turn when struggling with their MH. Existing MH initiatives often feel like a tick-box exercise. Long waiting lists and unclear support pathways leave some students relying on private support at financial cost to themselves. Strong professional relationships help staff cope, but they're not always present. When mentorship and teamwork are in place, they provide much-needed emotional and professional support.

## Recommendations for Enhancing VN Curricular

- **Recommendations for taught curricula enhancements:**
  - Integrate MH into course learning outcomes.
  - Teach in small groups where feasible; in-person sessions are essential.
  - Develop students' assertiveness and confidence to foster positive communication with colleagues in clinic.
  - Interprofessional taught content with veterinary surgeons and nurses.
- **Training and support for veterinary nurses, educators, surgeons, and practice managers:**
  - Embed MH support in veterinary practices to support students on placement.
  - Mandatory training for all delivering and supporting MH content, including clinical supervisors.
  - MH awareness training for veterinary surgeons and practice managers.
- **Student MH and (dis)ability assessment during their education:**
  - Create student passports, linked with a single central record, that outline students' needs and contact information.
  - Consider fit between students' needs and placement opportunities.
  - Cascade relevant information regarding students' needs to tutors and clinical supervisors.
- **Develop communities of well-being practice.**



## Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks to the participants who took time to share their experiences. Your honesty and input have been invaluable in shaping this research. We thank the RCVS and Mind Matters for their support throughout the research. Your commitment to improving MH education in VN made this work possible.

## References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Foote, A. (2023). Burnout, compassion fatigue and moral distress in veterinary professionals. *The Veterinary Nurse*, 14(2), 57–102. <https://doi.org/10.12968/vetn.2023.14.2.90>
- Killinger, S. L., Flanagan, S., Castine, E., & Howard, K. A. (2017). Stress and depression among veterinary medical students. *Journal of Veterinary Medicine Education*, 44(1), 3–8. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jvme.0116-018R1>
- Stoewen, D. L. (2015). Suicide in veterinary medicine: Let's talk about it. *The Canadian Veterinary Journal*, 56(1), 89–92. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4266064>