BVNA
British Veterinary
Nursing Association

BVNA VN Profession Survey

Preliminary Results

Published October 2024

Introduction

As the only independent representative organisation for veterinary nursing, the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) undertook to survey the profession to highlight any opportunities, risks and current issues. The survey and its report will be used to identify practical support, whilst providing evidence for policymakers such as UK Government and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), plus stakeholders such as educators and employers. It will provide key data to inform and support strategic BVNA campaigns, such as our ongoing work to achieve statutory protection of the 'veterinary nurse' title alongside wider reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966).

The overriding aim is to ensure that future BVNA policy and campaigns reflect the needs of individual registered and student veterinary nurses (RVNs/SVNs), as well as the profession as a whole.

This is a preliminary report which highlights a number of the key findings. A full report will be published by the end of 2024.

The survey will in future be carried out bi-annually; the subsequent reports measuring progress against actions and to identify future areas of work.

We would like to thank all those who took the time to complete the survey.

Comment from BVNA President 2023-5, Lyndsay Hughes RVN:

"I am delighted that BVNA has undertaken this work to understand more about the veterinary nursing profession, and gain further insight into issues that are currently affecting our members alongside the wider profession. As BVNA continues to work with policymakers in the pursuit of positive change, we rely on the input from individual registered and student veterinary nurses in order to influence this progress. Your voice really does matter.

"I hope readers find these initial results insightful; we look forward to sharing the full survey findings later in 2024."

Contents

1   Data collection

The 2024 survey was launched at the beginning of Veterinary Nursing Awareness Month (VNAM) on 1st May 2024 and closed on 30th June 2024. The survey was online only and was sent to BVNA members, lapsed members, prospective members, veterinary allied industries and educators.

We received 1,878 responses in total across the veterinary nursing profession, including RVNs, SVNs, and other associated roles. The 'other' category includes those who had previously qualified but were not currently on the RCVS Register of veterinary nurses. Participation in each question was optional.

2   Demographic profile of respondents

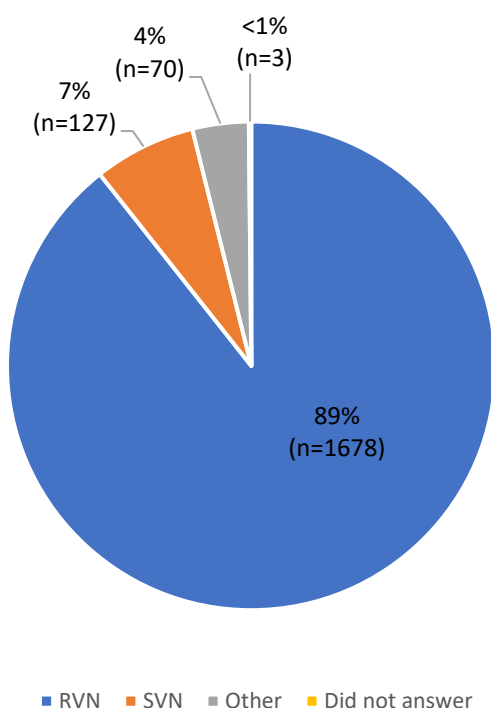The vast majority of responses were provided by RVNs (89%, Figure 1) and those identifying as female (96%).

Figure 1: Respondent registration status

When asked to provide information about the types of practice worked in, the highest proportion of respondents worked in corporate practice (56%, Figure 3), and small animal general practice (58%, Figure 4).

4%
(n=81)

7%
(n=131)

6%
(n=114)

26%
(n=494)

56%
(n=1058)
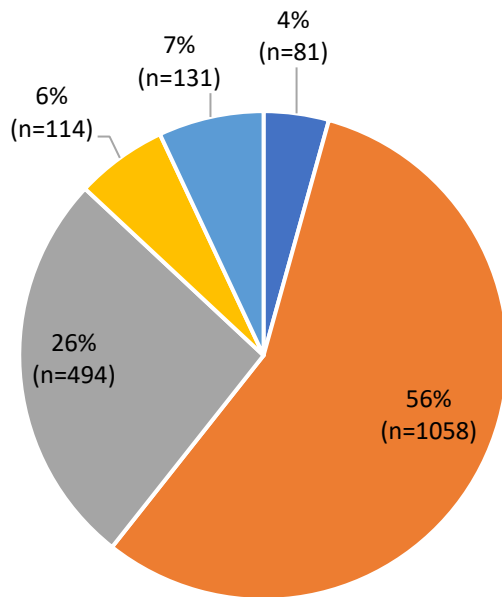
■ Charity ■ Corporate practice ■ Independent practice ■ Other ■ Did not answer/not applicable

Figure 2 Proportion of respondents by veterinary practice ownership

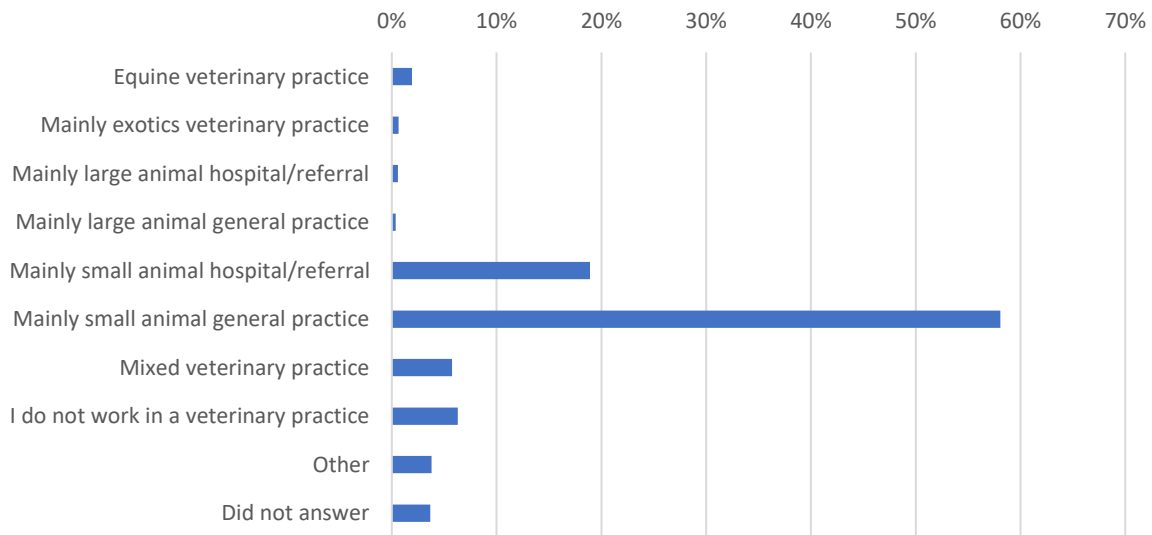|	0%	10%	20%	30%	40%	50%	60%	70%
Equine veterinary practice								
Mainly exotics veterinary practice								
Mainly large animal hospital/referral								
Mainly large animal general practice								
Mainly small animal hospital/referral								
Mainly small animal general practice								
Mixed veterinary practice								
I do not work in a veterinary practice								
Other								
Did not answer								

Figure 3: Proportion of respondents by type of practice and species treated

2.1   Health and neurodiversity

Stress and health are issues that may have a significant impact on the retention and recruitment of staff. The survey sought to understand more about the extent that the veterinary nursing profession is affected by stress, along with chronic illness and neurodiversity, and whether they have sought or received support.

Respondents were asked whether they felt that they have been negatively affected by working in practice. Over 90% stated that they had been negatively affected to some extent, with 24% stating that this happened often (Figure 4). Yet, only 37% stated they had sought out help to support themselves.
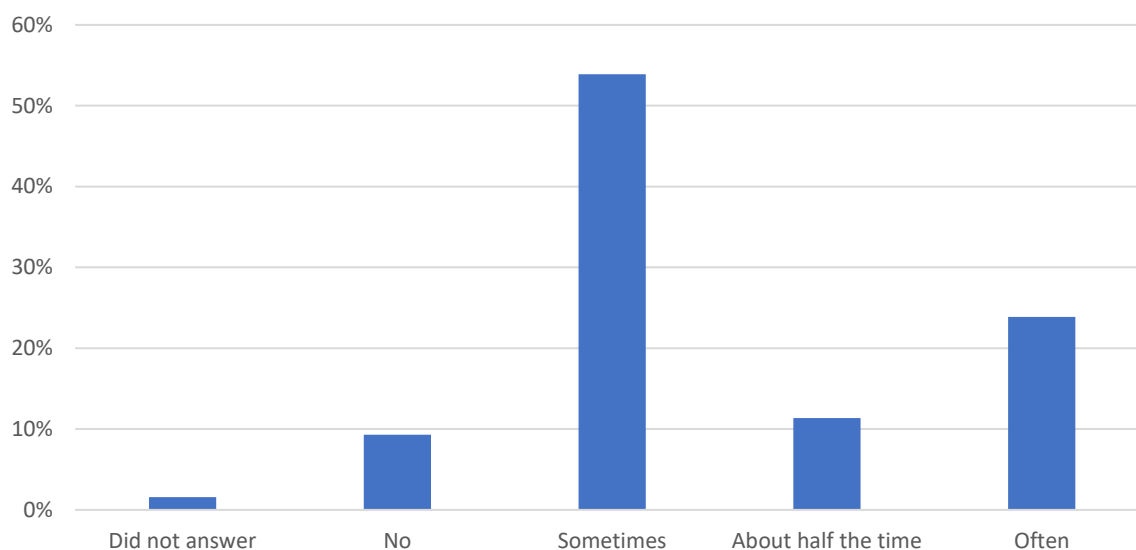

Figure 4 The frequency that respondents felt they had been negatively affected by working in veterinary practice

Nearly a third of respondents indicated that they were also living with a chronic illness (Figure 5). Amongst the prevalent conditions mentioned included endometriosis, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, arthritis and depression. Of the 577 respondents who indicated that they were living with a chronic illness, 79% (n=457) said they felt comfortable to discuss their condition with their manager.

While only 42% (n=240) of those living with a chronic illness had requested reasonable adjustments in the workplace to support them with their condition, the majority of those who had made requests were currently receiving such support (84%, n=201).
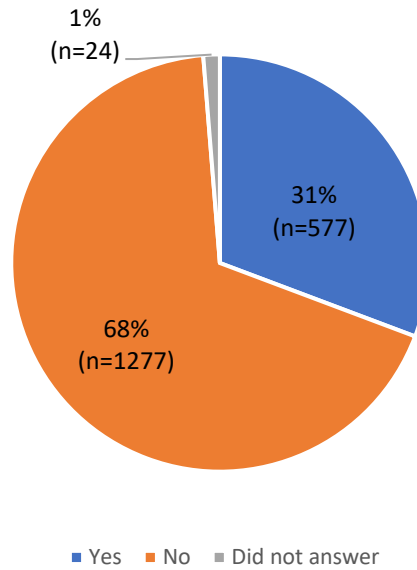
Figure 5 The proportion of respondents living with a chronic illness

We also sought to understand more about the prevalence of neurodivergence amongst the veterinary nursing profession; nearly 1 in 5 respondents indicated that they either considered themselves, or had been diagnosed, as neurodiverse (Figure 6). Types of neurodiversity indicated by respondents included autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, Aspergers and ADHD.

Of those who considered themselves neurodiverse (n=339), 62% (n=210) were comfortable to discuss this with their manager and 24% (n=82) had requested reasonable adjustments to be made in the workplace. The majority of those who had made such requests had received some level of support, however to a lesser extent than in relation to chronic illness (70%, n=57).
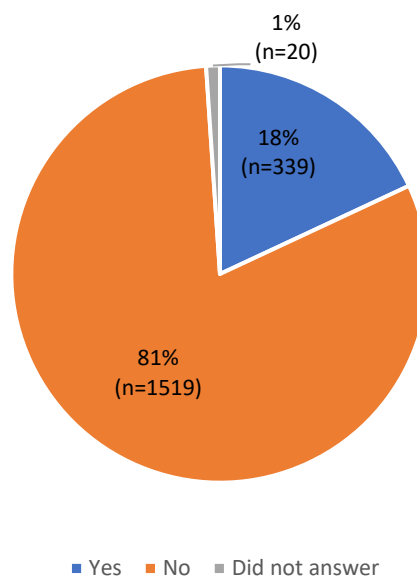

Figure 6 The prevalence of neurodivergence amongst respondents

3   Retention and Recruitment

This section looks at a number of factors that may impact on retention and recruitment of the veterinary nursing profession.

3.1   Salary

Salary has often been quoted as one of the main reasons that the profession struggles with retention and attracting people to the profession.

The survey gathered responses from 1,678 RVNs in total and our preliminary results will look at this group as a whole, though salary will be explored and dissected further in clinical/non-clinical RVN roles, plus SVNs within the final report.

The largest proportion of RVN respondents had a salary of £25,000-£30,000, followed by £30,000-35,000 (30% and 24% respectively), (Figure 7). This appears to be in-line with Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) Salary Report for Veterinary Nurses 2024, which identified the median salary for RVNs as £28,360 (range £26,897-£31,038)[1].
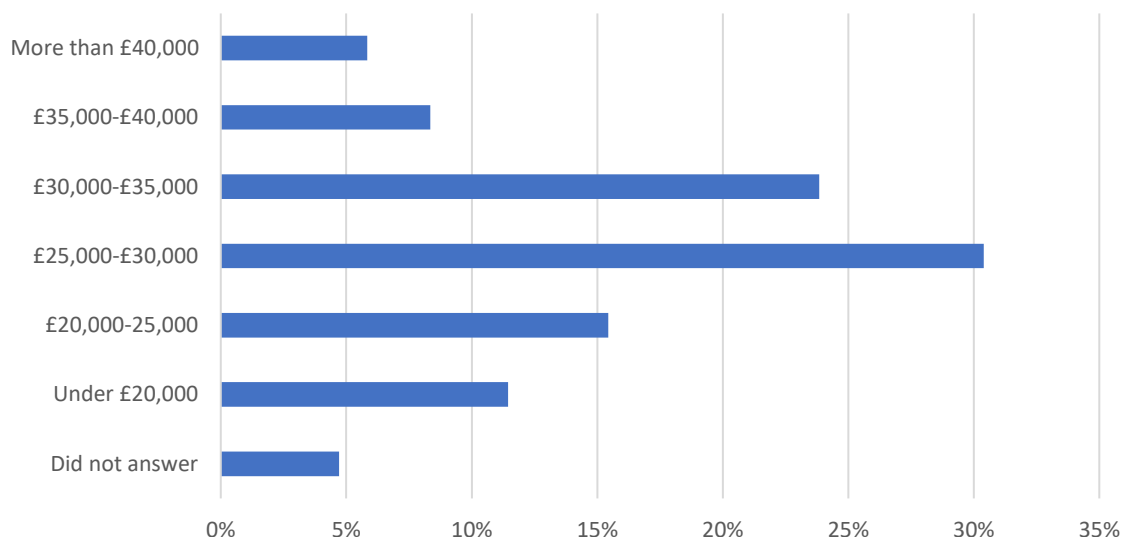

Figure 7: Proportion of RVN respondents (n=1,678) by salary

The survey also asked respondents their feelings surrounding their salaries, and whether they feel this fairly reflects the work they carry out. In response to the statement "I feel that my practice pays me fairly for the responsibilities I have", 38% of RVN respondents disagreed with this statement, while 34% agreed.

[1] https://spvs.org.uk/2024-salary-survey/

3.2   Staff Retention

The survey also sought to explore future plans of respondents to remain in clinical practice, and as part of the wider VN profession.

Of the RVNs currently working in clinical practice (n=1131), 40% plan to remain in a clinical role for the next five years (Figure 8). However, 17% of respondents indicated that they plan not to remain in clinical practice for the next five years. The full report will explore possible future career plans in more detail; further insight into retention issues may help to predict or mitigate the possible impact on the workforce in clinical practice in future.
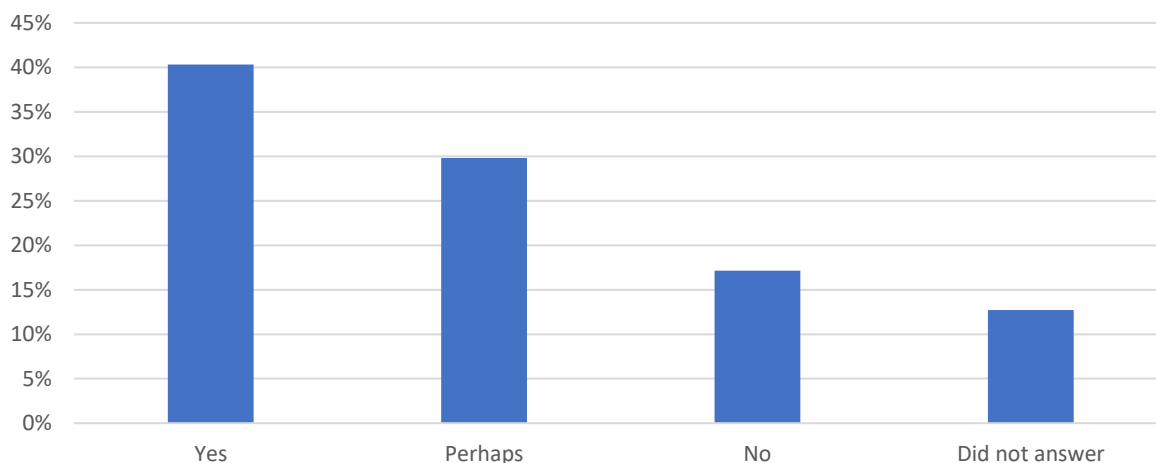

Figure 8 The proportion of RVN respondents currently working in clinical practice (n=1131) planning to remain in a clinical role for the next 5 years

3.3   Veterinary nursing as a career

We asked a number of questions in the survey to understand more about how veterinary nurses regard their role, and the future of the profession.

Encouragingly, 80% of respondents felt valued as part of the veterinary team, although only 36% of respondents would recommend veterinary nursing as a career, with 41% stating they would 'perhaps' recommend it (Figure 9).
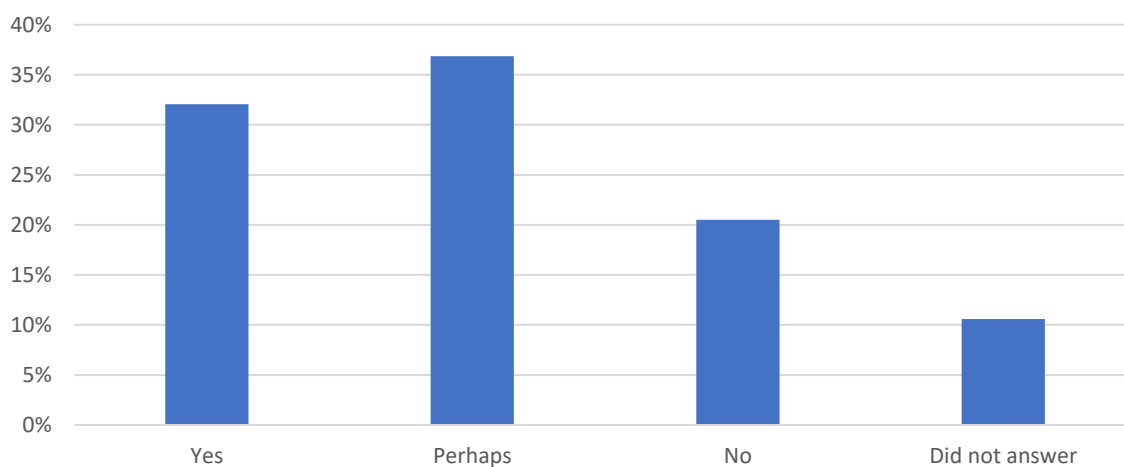

Figure 9 The proportion of respondents who would recommend veterinary nursing as a career path to others

4   Training

The survey looked to understand the veterinary nursing profession's feelings surrounding both pre-registration training, and also subsequent development opportunities once qualified.

When asked whether their training had adequately prepared them for professional practice, 74% of respondents felt their training prepared them for their role. However, over a quarter of respondents felt they do not use all the practical skills they are taught (Figure 10). The utilisation of veterinary nurses within Schedule 3 is explored further in the next section.
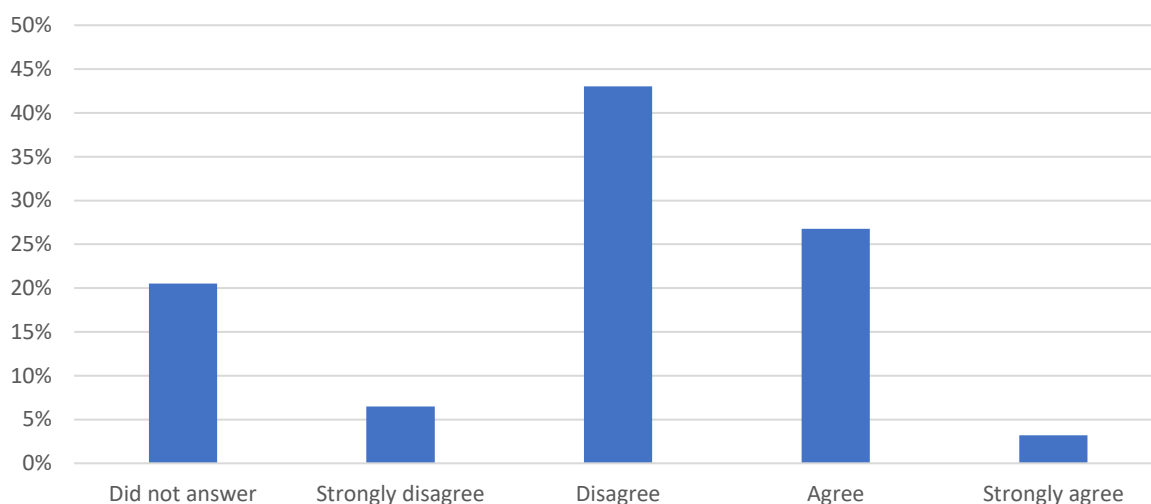

Figure 10 The extent to which respondents agreed with the statement "The practical part (Day One Skills) of the VN training covers skills that I don't use in practice

Respondents were also asked whether they felt there were opportunities to grow professionally as an RVN; the highest proportion said "yes" (37%), however 21% felt there were not (Figure 11).
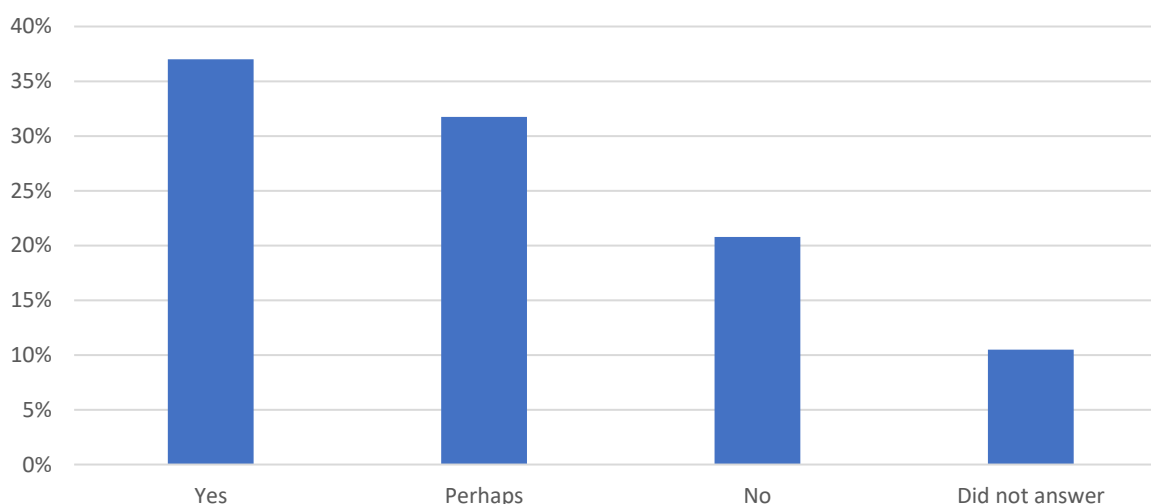

Figure 11 "Do you feel there are opportunities to grow professionally as an RVN?"

4.1   Schedule 3

We also sought to understand more surrounding current confidence and utilisation of veterinary nurses within Schedule 3 tasks. The final report will explore further the tasks which RVNs are undertaking frequently, as well as those where RVNs could be utilised further – both under the current Veterinary Surgeons Act, and in any possible future legislation.

When asked whether respondents feel confident in completing Schedule 3 tasks, the highest proportion responded that it depends on the task (47%, Figure 12). The vast majority of respondents however did feel comfortable to speak up if they did not feel confident to complete the task (87%).
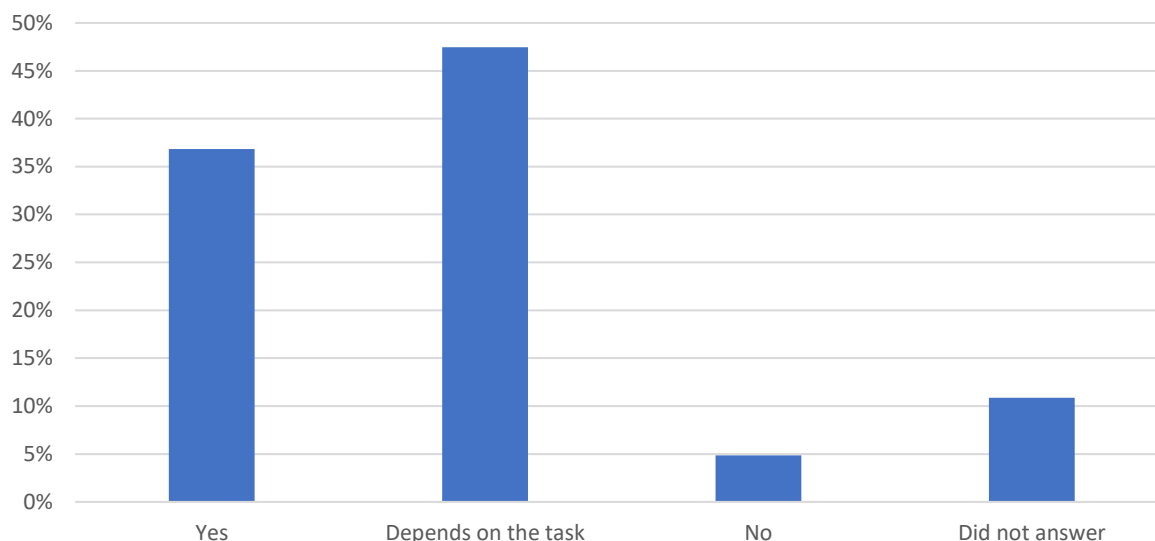

Figure 12 "Do you feel confident in completing Schedule 3 tasks?"

We followed this with a question to identify the types of specific tasks respondents are most commonly completing in practice (Figure 13). This will be explored in more depth within the full report; however, our initial findings suggest there may be many missed opportunities for veterinary surgeons to delegate tasks to veterinary nurses and therefore improve efficiency amongst the veterinary team.

Respondents mention that their confidence in Schedule 3 tasks depends on the specific task, as this underlines their accountability and need to carry out tasks only when competent and confident. It is important that RVNs and SVNs feel able to speak up when they do not feel confident in a task; it is encouraging that such a high proportion do feel able to express this. However, given that such a high proportion still note that their confidence in Schedule 3 depends on the task, this could also indicate a need for further training and higher utilisation of these skills, should the individual wish to.
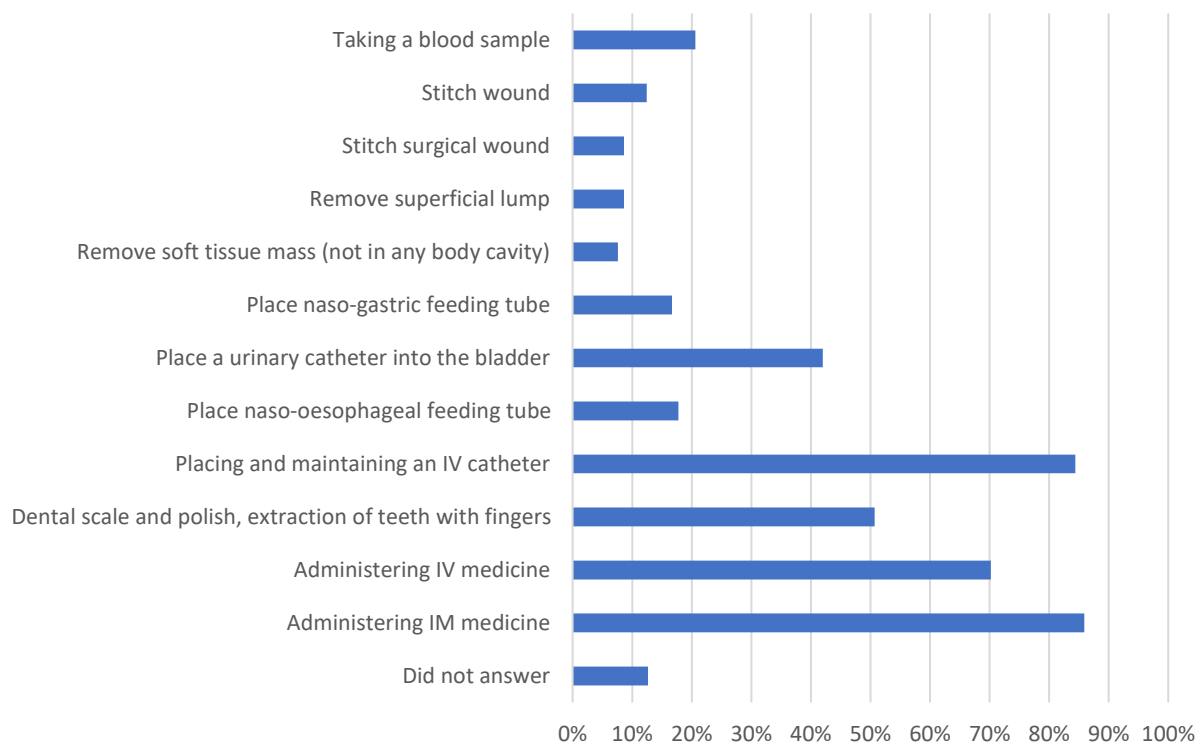
Figure 13 Schedule 3 tasks most commonly being completed by respondents

5   Use of the 'veterinary nurse' title

BVNA has long been campaigning for the title of 'veterinary nurse' to be protected in law. In a survey conducted by BVNA in 2022, with over 12,000 respondents from the veterinary profession and the public, it was identified that 48% of more than 8,000 respondents from the veterinary profession knew someone who was called 'veterinary nurse' without being appropriately trained or regulated[2].

Results in the BVNA VN Profession Survey 2024 reinforce this previous survey, with 52% of respondents knowing someone inappropriately referred to as a 'veterinary nurse' (Figure 14). This could indicate that there is increasing awareness of this issue, but also highlights that more needs to be done to ensure that only those who are appropriately qualified and regulated are making use of this title. One of the key areas we will explore within the full report is to understand more about how and why the 'veterinary nurse' title is being used inappropriately.

Our initial findings highlight that 16% of respondents (n=292) claimed that their practice/employer refers to an untrained member of staff as a 'veterinary nurse' – and we feel this requires further exploration.

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[2] https://bvna.org.uk/project/bvna-protect-the-title-campaign/

2%
(n=33_
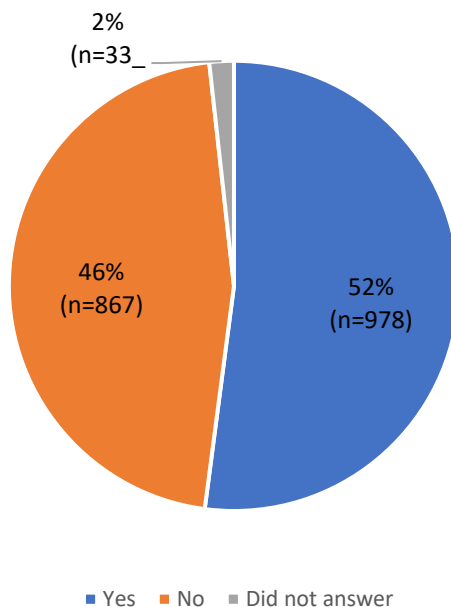
46%
(n=867)

52%
(n=978)

■ Yes ■ No ■ Did not answer

Figure 14 Respondents who know someone referred to as 'veterinary nurse' without having achieved the VN qualification

We evaluated the profile of practices these individuals work in, to be able to start to indicate where this issue may be most commonly occurring. Of the 292 who identified that their practice was referring to unqualified personnel as 'veterinary nurse', 51% work in corporate practice, with 33% working in independent practice (Figure 15).

5%
(n=16)

3%
(n=8)

7%
(n=21)

33%
(n=97)

51%
(n=150)

■ Charity ■ Corporate practice ■ Independent practice ■ Other ■ Did not answer
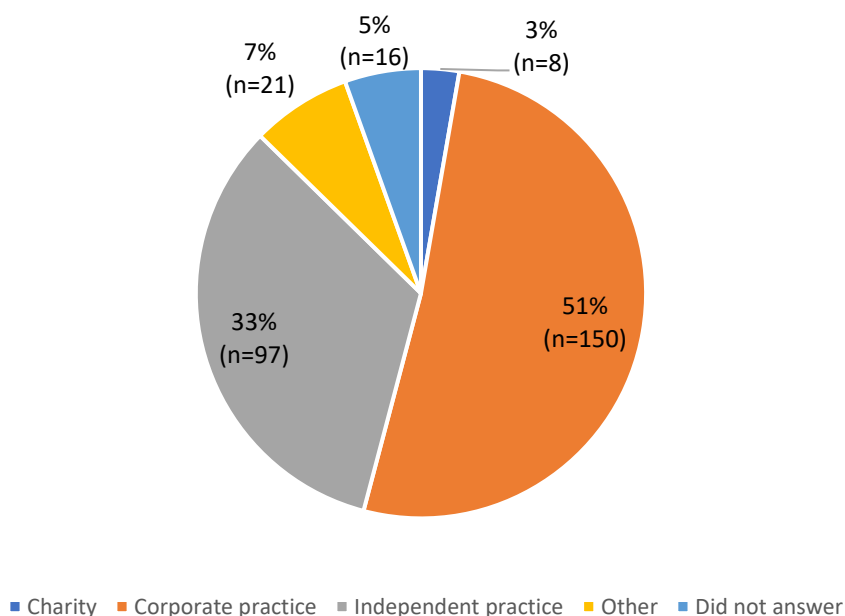
Figure 15 Respondents who work in a practice which refers to an untrained member of staff as 'veterinary nurse' (n=292), by type of practice ownership

However, it should also be noted that these proportions are similar to the overall types of practice ownership recorded by all respondents (Figure 2), which suggests that the inappropriate use of the 'veterinary nurse' title by unqualified staff remains an overall issue within the sector, as opposed to specifically originating from a certain type of practice. Further evaluation of our findings in the full report will help us to understand this issue in more depth, including possible geographic trends.

In light of these early findings, BVNA would urge employers to consider how non-qualified personnel are referred to – in order to protect animal and human welfare, and improve transparency to clients over those responsible for providing care to their pets. Change at a practice level does not require legislative reform, and positive impact can be still be made by starting these conversations sooner.

BVNA will continue to campaign for the title, 'veterinary nurse' to be protected in law. We also feel that there needs to be overall reform of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 to maximise the veterinary nurse role, and to improve animal health and welfare by promoting a more effective team-based approach to patient care.

6   Next steps

These initial findings help us to start to build a picture of the veterinary nursing profession at the current time. The issues highlighted to us at this early stage of exploring the data include:

- There remains a significant issue with the inappropriate use of the title 'veterinary nurse', with 52% of respondents knowing someone who is referred to as such without being properly qualified or regulated
- Over a third of RVN respondents felt that their salary does not fairly reflect their responsibilities
- Veterinary nurses could be utilised further in practice, with over a quarter of respondents not using all the practical skills they are trained to carry out
- There may be a need for additional training in Schedule 3 tasks to improve confidence, given that 47% of respondents state that their confidence "depends on the task". Veterinary nurses must be competent, confident and experienced to accept delegation of Schedule 3 tasks.

Evaluation of the survey data in more depth will enable us to gain a better understanding of the issues surrounding these findings. The survey will also provide insight into:

- Feelings about the VN profession as a career, including future plans for those working in and out of clinical practice
- Work conditions, such as measures in place to support those with chronic illness or neurodivergence, and how the overall work environment could be improved
- Opinions surrounding potential tasks which could be added to an RVN's remit under current or new legislation

BVNA looks forward to publishing its full report later in 2024, which will include actions for the association, and recommendations to the wider profession, stakeholders and policymakers.

The British Veterinary Nursing Association

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If you have any questions about the content of this report, please contact bvna@bvna.co.uk