



# HHS Public Access

Author manuscript

*J Am Vet Med Assoc.* Author manuscript; available in PMC 2020 February 24.

Published in final edited form as:

*J Am Vet Med Assoc.* 2019 March 01; 254(5): 579–580. doi:10.2460/javma.254.5.579.

## Letters to the Editor

**Suzanne E. Tomasi, DVM, MPH,**

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, CDC, Morgantown, WV

**Ethan D. Fechter-Leggett, DVM, MPVM,**

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, CDC, Morgantown, WV

**Nicole T. Edwards, MS,**

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, CDC, Morgantown, WV

**Randall J. Nett, MD, MPH,**

National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, CDC, Morgantown, WV

**Anna D. Reddish, DVM,**

AVMA, Schaumburg, Ill

**Alex E. Crosby, MD, MPH**

National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC, Atlanta, Ga

---

The authors thank Dr. Parker for his letter regarding our recent study on suicide mortality among US veterinarians. Regarding Dr. Parker's comment about future studies to compare suicide among professional groups, previous studies have shown variability in suicide rates by occupation, especially in the health-care professions, and by sex. In some studies, suicide rates for veterinarians and select other health-care professionals, such as dentists, are high, but in other studies, they are not.<sup>1</sup>

As for Dr. Parker's comment about risk factors for suicide among veterinarians, the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide provides some ideas as to why certain groups may have high suicide rates. One aspect of the theory that is relevant to veterinarians is the "capacity to enact lethal self-injury." According to Thomas Joiner, who developed the theory, "those whose jobs entail exposure even to others' pain and injury will thereby develop the capacity for suicide and thus have higher suicide rates than others."<sup>2</sup>

Finally, we agree suicide prevention efforts need to be balanced between compassion and helping those in distress find appropriate assistance. We do not recommend that veterinarians try to become professional therapists, but there are actions they can take to help. Therefore, we would like to take this opportunity to remind veterinarians of national suicide prevention resources that provide free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. In addition, there are veterinarian-specific suicide prevention resources available through various foundations and social media. The AVMA offers peer and wellness resources to help veterinarians and veterinary students.<sup>3</sup> In addition, veterinarians and veterinary students who would like to take a proactive approach to identifying colleagues and friends at risk for suicide can voluntarily pursue online training through the AVMA.<sup>4</sup> This training helps veterinarians without professional mental health backgrounds recognize the signs that someone may be

considering suicide and guide the person to seek professional help. In addition to these national resources, many state and local veterinary medical associations have resources aimed at helping veterinarians who are struggling with anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation. As more information about suicide mortality among veterinarians becomes available and more attention is focused on this critical topic, these suicide interventions will help us meet the goal that every struggling veterinarian or veterinary student will be able to find the help they need.

## References

1. Roberts SE, Jaremin B, Lloyd K High-risk occupations for suicide. *Psychol Med* 2013;43:1231–1240. [PubMed: 23098158]
2. Joiner TE Jr, Van Orden KA. The interpersonal–psychological theory of suicidal behavior indicates specific and crucial psychotherapeutic targets. *Int J Cogn Ther* 2008;1:80–89.
3. AVMA. Wellbeing and peer assistance. Available at: [www.avma.org/professionaldevelopment/peerandwellness/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.avma.org/professionaldevelopment/peerandwellness/Pages/default.aspx) Accessed Jan 24, 2019.
4. AVMA. Wellbeing gatekeeper training for veterinarians. Available at: [www.avma.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/PeerAndWellness/Pages/Wellness-Gatekeeper-Training-for-Veterinarians.aspx](http://www.avma.org/ProfessionalDevelopment/PeerAndWellness/Pages/Wellness-Gatekeeper-Training-for-Veterinarians.aspx) Accessed Jan 24, 2019.