

Report of the Student Veterinary Nursing Wellbeing Discussion Forum



3 November 2021

mindmatters

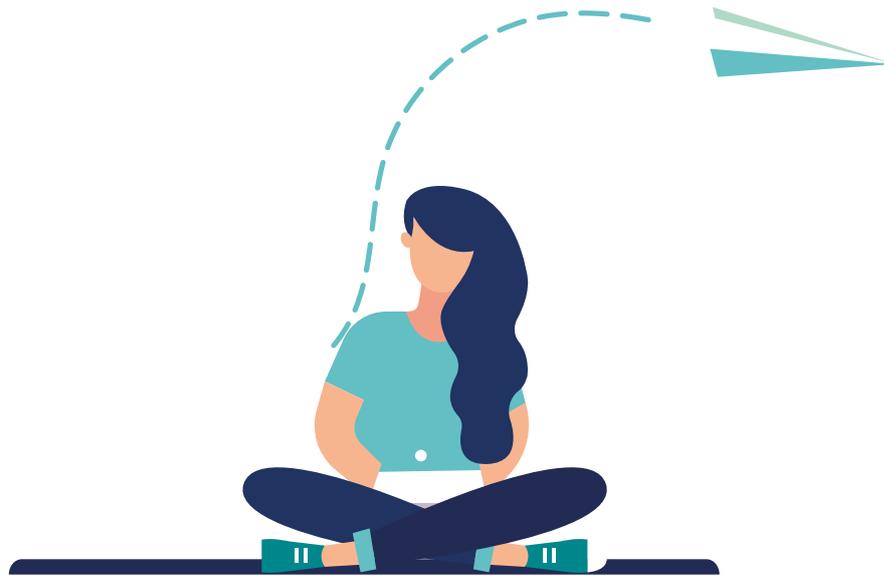


VNFUTURES



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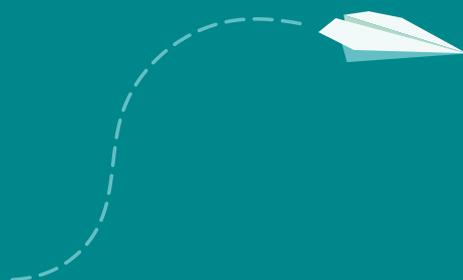
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Introduction

On 3 November 2021, the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Mind Matters Initiative (MMI) hosted a virtual Student Veterinary Nursing Wellbeing Discussion Forum in collaboration with the VN Futures project. This follows a similar event that was held for veterinary surgeon students, academics and university support staff in September 2019.

The event was convened following the publication of the results of a wellbeing survey for student veterinary nurses (SVNs), recently qualified veterinary nurses, and clinical coaches responsible for training SVNs at RCVS-recognised Training Practices (TPs). Some 650 individuals from across these three groups responded to the survey, which asked questions about preferred sources of mental health support, levels of support available in education and work settings, levels of stress encountered, discrimination and bullying in educational and work settings, confidence, the impact of the RCVS, and coping strategies for stress and mental ill-health.

The results of the survey (which will be described in more detail on page 6 of the report) indicated that there were four key areas impacting the mental health and wellbeing of this particular group. The day consisted of five short talks covering each of these areas, as well as a general introduction to the Mind Matters Initiative, recordings of which can be accessed at www.vetmindmatters.org. Delegates were then split into breakout rooms to discuss the content of each of the talks and to explore the ways in which these issues could be addressed in the professions.



About the Mind Matters Initiative

The Mind Matters Initiative (MMI) aims to improve the mental health and wellbeing of those in the veterinary team, including students, veterinary nurses, veterinary surgeons and practice managers. MMI was launched in 2015 and is funded and run by the RCVS, the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses in the UK.

The RCVS takes the mental health and welfare of members of the veterinary profession seriously, and commitment to Mind Matters reflects this. Mind Matters is chaired by Susan Dawson. It is run day-to-day by its Director, Angharad Belcher, who is also RCVS Director for Advancement of the Professions, and Mind Matters Initiative Manager, Lisa Quigley.

About the VN Futures project

VN Futures is an ongoing project that aims to ensure that veterinary nursing is a vibrant, rewarding and sustainable profession – both now and into the future. Driven by passionate members of the profession, the project seeks to visualise and address the challenges veterinary nursing is likely to face over the coming years – tackling how best to respond to these issues whilst looking forward to a dynamic VN profession.

The project is guided by the VN Futures Action Plan which was launched at the Vet Futures Summit in July 2016. VN Futures is a joint initiative from the RCVS and the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) and runs in parallel to the Vet Futures. VN Futures has recently published an interim report giving an overview of its work so far and looking ahead to phase two of the project. This can be found at www.vnfutures.org.uk

Presentations and talks

Presentation of MMI Student Veterinary Nurse Wellbeing Survey results

This was delivered by Mind Matters Manager Lisa Quigley who highlighted four key themes that came out of the information provided in the survey results and which formed the basis for the content and structure of the day.

These were:

- 1. Incivility and bullying:** the findings in this respect were quite saddening as 96% of those surveyed strongly believed bullying and incivility was a problem in the professions – 3% were unsure and just 1% disagreed. A worrying trend in the data showed that these incidents often related to

protected characteristics such as disability, sex and pregnancy, but respondents spoke about this as being bullying rather than harassment and discrimination linked to a protected characteristic. One common feature identified in many of the stories about bullying was a power imbalance, with more senior people acting poorly towards those with lower status and less security and protection. The severity and seriousness of the poor behaviour varied from low level incivility and rudeness, all the way into behaviour that crossed the line into unlawful. As to who was exhibiting these behaviours, based on the qualitative data it seemed like it was other students, vets, nursing peers and education staff,

96%
believed
bullying and
incivility was a
problem in the
professions

81%
found their
work stressful

75%
found the
demands of work
and studying
were affecting
their wellbeing

51%
felt well-
supported
by the
profession

70%
of newly-
qualified nurses
were confident
they had chosen
the right career

but not so much clients. However, when respondents spoke about stressful situations, that's where tricky conversations with clients came up in their responses. There was a general sense in the responses that things have been exacerbated by Covid-19 and the associated additional workplace stresses.

2. Juggling demands: the survey found that 81% of respondents found their work stressful and 75% found the demands of work and studying were affecting their wellbeing. Delegates commented that factors that affected wellbeing included trying to fit in all their responsibilities while still attending to self-care. Respondents commented that self-care was often the first thing that fell by the wayside when they lacked time, with many saying they often didn't even have time to eat or use the toilet. Qualitative data found that some respondents were at breaking point. In more positive news, 51% of respondents felt they were well-supported, and there was a sense that clinical coaches were very supportive and that, overall, the in-practice training was good.

3. Disability and chronic illness: around a third of survey respondents identified as having a disability and/or chronic illness, and one in five identified as neurodiverse. There was a sense that respondents were unaware that these were protected characteristics under equality legislation. In the results there were disappointing stories of harassment,

discrimination and failing to make reasonable adjustments. One common theme emerging from the responses of those with disabilities and/or chronic illnesses, was a feeling of letting people down and being made to feel like a burden, particularly in the context of Covid and shielding when demands were so high. The survey also found that, for people living with chronic illness and disability, having support at work made the difference between thriving and surviving.

4. Awareness, recognition and pride: the survey showed that some 70% of newly-qualified nurses were confident had chosen the right career and also had enormous pride in their role in caring for animals. However, there was an overwhelming feeling that nurses received insufficient respect from the public, clients and veterinary surgeons. Low pay was cited as an issue as it meant VNs could not afford an acceptable quality of life, as well as what it signified in terms of professional respect for the role they performed. Many respondents also commented on the way SVNs are used as unpaid labour in many practices and how this needs to change. There were also some comments in the survey results on gender and the fact that low pay may also be due to the fact that VNs are predominantly female. There was also a feeling that the public don't fully understand the VN role, nor the roles that they carry out/undertake within the practice.

Talk 1

The Mind Matters Initiative – where we've been, where we're going and what it means for the VN profession

In this talk Lisa gave an overview of the project, including current initiatives relevant for veterinary nurses, the project's plans for the next five years and how veterinary nurses and SVNs will be a key part of the upcoming new strategy for MMI.

After introducing the project and its three workstreams – prevent, protect and support – Lisa introduced some of the latest activities being undertaken by the project, including the MMI Campfire chats, the Mental Health Research Symposium, the Sarah Brown Mental Health Research Grants, the new MMI Kite wellbeing app and an upcoming programme of webinars and training being launched in early 2022.

During the talk Lisa said that one question she was often asked was whether Mind Matters was for the

veterinary nursing profession too. She confirmed that the project was for the entire veterinary community and that, within this, VNs were an important constituent having contributed personal stories and case studies, making up over 50% of those who have attended MMI training and webinars, and being crucial supporters and allies in helping to spread the word about the project.

To conclude, Lisa said the team was currently working on a 2022 – 2027 strategy for the project and that the mental health and wellbeing of VNs and SVNs would be a crucial component of this, with the results of the wellbeing survey already feeding into and informing future activities. Likewise, the discussions resulting from the event would also be crucial and that – in the future – the project would be doing more to proactively source VN input. MMI would be launching anti-bullying resources and training in partnership with BVNA in 2022.

Talk 2

Disability and chronic illness – creating inclusive environments

This talk was presented by Dr Claire Hodgson MRCVS, co-founder of the British Veterinary Chronic Illness Support (BVCIS) organisation, and Alexandra Taylor RVN, current President of the BVNA.

To start the talk Claire explained the origins of the BVCIS, a charity set up for individuals working in the veterinary sector living and working with chronic illness and disability. Its services are: support; education through the provision of resources and signposting to education and training; and advocacy, to give the community a voice and ensure that no decisions are made about the community, without the community.

After explaining how the BVCIS grew out of the 'Veterinary Spoonholders' Facebook group, where veterinary professionals went to seek peer-to-peer advice, support and companionship, Claire gave some of the key definitions around disability and chronic illness. These definitions encompassed the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 and how disability was a protected characteristic in law, and the medical definition of chronic illness. She mentioned that an estimated 15 million people – or 30% of the UK population – would be encompassed under these definitions, although many who qualify would not realise or recognise this fact.

Claire spoke about the challenges experienced by people with disabilities and chronic illnesses, and how this can impact their work – from merely getting a diagnosis, through to the various physical and mental health symptoms that can disrupt everyday life. Specific challenges she cited for working in the veterinary environment included physically demanding work, long hours with insufficient breaks and poor working environment, as well as relational issues with colleagues such as prejudice, negative stereotypes, isolation and exclusion.

As to what individuals within the veterinary professions could do to help their colleagues with disabilities and chronic illnesses, Claire said that the following actions were key:

- Listening to colleagues with chronic illnesses.

- Remembering that chronic illness was always present.
- Remembering that there are warning signs to look out for when someone's illness might be particularly affecting them.
- Making sure to ask colleagues with chronic illnesses how you can help.

Alexandra from BVNA then gave delegates an update on the organisation's recent chronic illness campaign, which she spearheaded based on her own experiences of working in practice as a veterinary nurse with chronic illness. The aim of the campaign was to use case studies, including her own, to help veterinary nurses with chronic illnesses feel they were believed and understood, as well as better supported in the workplace.

Prior to the campaign, BVNA launched a survey that had almost 1,000 responses. Survey responses were then used to identify the areas where nurses most needed support and for BVNA to choose how the information and support would be shared and distributed across various channels including articles, webinars and podcasts.

The key result of the campaign was the creation of a free, easy-to-access toolkit for nurses affected by a chronic illness and for those who work with or manage them.

Talk 3

Incivility and bullying – recognition and becoming an ally

This was delivered by Dr Simon Fleming, a Trauma and Orthopaedic Registrar in the NHS who has taken a particular interest in bullying and harassment in his career. Simon started by saying that there was no legal definition of bullying in the UK and that people tend to frame it within the context of harassment and discrimination under the Equality Act, where there are legal definitions. However, he said bullying was about power and silence, taking away people's voices and autonomy.

In terms of incivility he said people often talk about rudeness and a lack of kindness and said that it was not necessarily a totally different category to bullying – they are both symptomatic of a lack of respect. He said that 80% of those who experience incivility and bullying will spend time during their day worrying about it, and 40% of recipients will see a negative impact on the quality of their work and 50% will reduce their time at work. He said we also know 25% of recipients of incivility and bullying at work will take it out on their service users.

Furthermore, he said that if these behaviours have an impact on those who witness it, 20% of witnesses will do their jobs less well, 50% will be less willing to help others and 75% will be less enthusiastic about their job – incivility and bullying wasn't just a lack of niceness, these behaviours cause direct harm.

Focusing on what you can do about incivility and bullying in the working environment, Simon said the key was to be an active bystander. He clarified that this wasn't always about direct intervention, sometimes it was about asking someone else to intervene, or it was about making an approach about someone's behaviour at a later time. In terms of interventions, he said these shouldn't always be framed as being about blame, and sometimes using 'learning' language, about how someone could benefit themselves and their work by reflecting on and changing their behaviour, was more useful as it recognises that we are human and make mistakes.

Simon cited the 'Vanderbilt Cup of Coffee' model which says that in 90% of cases, informal, unstructured feedback delivered over a cup of coffee will cause people to reflect on and change their behaviours. Where this approach doesn't work, then there are more formal guided interventions and then, as the last option, disciplinary interventions where behaviours have persisted and interventions had been ignored. He said certain behaviours can bypass these steps and so the Vanderbilt model works well with the active bystander model. He concluded that ultimately poor behaviour harms us, our colleagues, our patients, and our professions and that by intervening we can change the culture for the better of everyone.

Talk 4

Juggling demands – balancing study, work, and personal life

This talk was delivered by Jane Davidson RVN, a member of the RCVS VN Council who has worked in clinical practice, veterinary nurse education and who has, latterly, been studying for a PhD in the history of veterinary legislation.

Jane introduced her session with a game based on the TV quiz 'Play Your Cards Right' in which delegates were asked to try and prioritise in order nine competing demands on time encompassing work, life and study. From there she spoke about the importance of boundary setting – and saying what things we should feel empowered to say no to, for example, when it comes to our protected time which might be for seeing family and friends.



In terms of practical aspects for managing time – particularly for SVNs – Jane spoke about how to make understandable and referrable lecture notes, how to become an active learner by producing a one-minute paper on what you have learned as a way of recalling and consolidating your learning, the importance of assessment notes and making sure you leave sufficient time for exam planning.

Jane then went through her top five tips for time management which were:

- Recognise that your most productive 20 minutes are better than an hour of wasting time and faffing – and it's often better not to measure yourself in terms of time out output. She cited the Pomodoro technique of having 20 minutes of productive time followed by a five-minute break and continuing this over the course of the day.
- Do the hardest tasks first.
- Identify your most productive times of the day and work to this.
- Take regular breaks.
- Try different means and formats for learning such as audio/visual, recall and repeat of information.

To conclude she reiterated the importance of boundary setting, looking after your mental and emotional wellbeing, and abiding by her top tips.

Talk 5

Raising awareness and encouraging pride in the veterinary nursing profession

This talk was delivered by Jill Macdonald RVN, who has worked in clinical practice and veterinary nurse education for over 20 years and latterly has managed the VN Futures project. Presenting alongside Jill was Dr Laura Woodward MRCVS, a veterinary surgeon and psychotherapeutic counsellor.

Jill started the talk with looking at the importance of recognition of the veterinary nursing role. She said veterinary nurses want to feel recognised and valued because they are an integral part of the vet-led team with enormous input into patient and client care, with commitment to continuous learning and their role.

In terms of recognition from the public, Jill said that VNs should work to highlight and promote their work. For example, by increasing the amount of client-facing and community work they do, insisting that clients are charged for veterinary nursing time to show their value, and using practice social media and websites to promote the role.

In terms of recognition within the veterinary professions, Jill said the survey results found that many VNs felt insufficiently recognised, particularly by veterinary surgeons. Ideas to improve recognition included delegation and enhanced responsibilities, more education and training for VNs including inter-professional education

so that vets and VNs better understood each others' roles. She also cited the development of the VN Advanced Practitioner role which would make it more parallel with human medical nursing and enhance the profile of the profession.

Laura then spoke about the importance of pride, starting by saying that the survey results gave a bit of a rude awakening on the lack of focus on veterinary nurse mental health but also provided an opportunity to rectify the situation.

In terms of pride she categorised its different manifestations starting with self-focused pride, which she said was a form of self-compassion and comes about through our self-oriented achievements such as passing exams but also all the small things we do everyday that make us feel bigger and stronger. She also noted other-focused pride which could be pride in a profession, or a team, or a practice, or a culture that fits in with our code of ethics and comes about through team-based achievements such as a well-executed veterinary procedure

Looking next at how we enhance self-focused pride, Laura said it's about noticing and congratulating ourselves on things that we have done well, no matter how routine these may be. In terms of enhancing other-focused pride, Laura said belongingness was important, making people feel welcome and activating their potential and not underestimating how much they matter.

Discussions on key themes

Throughout the course of the day there were breakout sessions where groups made up of delegates discussed the five main presentations and their associated themes.

The Mind Matters Initiative

Delegates in this breakout group were asked for their immediate thoughts on the talk from Lisa Quigley about the results of the SVN Wellbeing Survey and the update on the Mind Matters Initiative. There was general agreement that the results of the survey – especially as regards the prevalence of incivility and bullying – were shocking but that they did resonate with the audience in terms of their own experiences. Regarding MMI, many of those present in the breakout session said they were not previously aware of the project nor its work, and more efforts may need to be made to reach out to SVNs. It was also felt that many people were not aware that the RCVS funds MMI.

“The general consensus was that doing more to make MMI, its projects and its resources ‘known’ as early as possible into an individual’s veterinary nursing carer was important.”

Delegates then discussed what more MMI could do to address the wellbeing and mental health challenge faced by the veterinary nursing profession, including SVNs. The general consensus was that doing more to make MMI, its projects and its resources ‘known’ as

early as possible into an individual’s veterinary nursing carer was important. For example, it was suggested that MMI could be a crucial part of the induction process for SVNs at Training Practices, and that it could use events such as lunch & learns and other training resources to reach out.

Next delegates were asked if they were aware of MMI and its work prior to the event and, if not, how they felt MMI could improve its communication strategy to make veterinary nurses – and especially SVNs – more aware of its resources. The SVNs in the discussion group were largely not aware of MMI



and their first contact through the project came with taking part in the wellbeing survey. Other delegates were aware of the project but not necessarily everything that it did, while there was greater awareness of Vetlife and its services. Sources of knowledge about MMI included social media and being told about the project by tutors.

As to the communication strategy and increasing access and awareness of MMI resources, suggestions included signposting the project in enrolment letters and induction materials, issuing posters and postcards for practice staffrooms about the project, starting a network of practice-based MMI advocates, and holding online events including lunch and learns. It was, however, mentioned by several delegates that workloads were currently so high, including due to Covid, that veterinary nurses and other practice staff did struggle to find the spare time and headspace needed to read MMI emails and other communication methods.

Finally, delegates in the discussion group were asked what they were interested in learning more about and how MMI could help. Highlights included:

- Learning why incivility and bullying were so widespread and how people could be made more mindful of what they say, how they say it and the impact that it has.
- Understanding more about chronic illness.
- Ensuring that the survey results are disseminated across the sector.

Disability & chronic Illness

To open up the discussion, the delegates in this group were asked for their initial thoughts on the talk delivered by Dr Claire Hodgson, the co-founder of BCVIS, and Alexandra Taylor, current President of BVNA, on how we define disability and chronic illness, and the impact it can have on the veterinary professions.

One delegate commented that, under the definitions outlined by Claire and Alexandra, there were likely many veterinary professionals who were unaware that their condition counted as a disability or chronic illness and so were covered by the protections within the Equality Act.

.....
“It was suggested that there should be efforts to raise awareness amongst SVNs, including by the educational institutions themselves, that if they have a disability and chronic illness, they could and should seek support, including reasonable adjustments.”
.....

The talk prompted other delegates to share personal experiences, including of how VN education institutions are failing to meet the demand for the pastoral support that SVNs with disabilities and chronic illnesses may need – and how this has been exacerbated by the pandemic – as well as one delegate who felt that their support was inadequate and not really tailored to individual needs.

In terms of what could be done to ensure SVNs with disabilities and chronic illnesses were fully supported in their professional life, there was broadly a three-pronged approach cited by delegates involving the individual, the educational institution and the Training Practice. For the individual it was suggested that there should be efforts to raise awareness amongst SVNs, including by the educational institutions themselves, that if they have a disability and chronic illness, they could and should seek support, including reasonable adjustments.

For the educational institutions it was suggested that they should facilitate this process – eg by holding a similar talk to that of Claire’s and Alexandra’s– so that SVNs know the correct definitions, their rights and expectations in relation to them, and where they should go to seek support. Likewise, it was suggested that staff at colleges and universities should familiarise themselves with any particular disabilities and chronic illnesses they are made aware of so that they could better tailor interventions and adjustments to individual circumstances.

On the practice side, delegates felt there needed to be practice cultures where people could be open about their disabilities and/or chronic illnesses and the support they may need as a result, without fear of their being stigmatised or ostracised as a result.

The delegates then discussed what could be done to make sure SVNs with disabilities and chronic illnesses feel

more comfortable in seeking help. Suggestions for this included buddying and mentoring schemes, including those delivered by BVNA, that could be delivered by telephone, email or face-to-face so that they have someone they can talk to outside the practice setting. However, it was also thought important that practice teams were aware and understanding of disabilities and chronic illnesses and that these could be discussed openly by way of seeking support. There was also a general discussion of some of the issues surrounding the OSCE exams and how these could be difficult for neurodiverse individuals. There was agreement that the exam system could be improved



and made more inclusive, although no general agreement on how this would be done.

The final part of the discussion concerned what could be done to generate a greater understanding of the difficulties faced by SVNs with disabilities and chronic illnesses.

Key suggestions included:

- The introduction of informal ‘health passports’, in which SVNs on placement would have the key details of their disability and/or chronic illness – including how it might impact work and required adjustments – in a handy and accessible place for practice staff.
- ‘Wellbeing calls’ which would involve talking to students before they join a course to see what support and/or adjustments they might require. It was noted that many students might not detail their disabilities and chronic illnesses on formal application forms for fear it may negatively impact their chances of admission – these calls would be a way of ensuring they are supported after applications were accepted.
- Training staff to have knowledge of disability and chronic illness in both educational and practice settings. This would be for the benefit of all within the professions.

Bullying and incivility

This group first discussed the talk by Simon Fleming and what they

immediately thought and took away from it, in relation to the results of the research conducted by Mind Matters. The general consensus was that the results were sad but not surprising and delegates said they had observed bullying in practice settings, with student VNs often made to feel inferior or like they were a burden, and being afraid to raise concerns about their treatment. Delegates felt that the model outlined in Simon’s talk was useful, particularly as it was flexible and different strategies could be used depending on the circumstances and the personalities involved.

“Delegates felt that an overall improvement in workplace culture and professional respect was needed – including fostering better manners in the way colleagues communicated to each other.”

When asked what further steps could be taken to tackle bullying and incivility in the practice setting, delegates commented on the importance of having the tools to confront and root out such behaviour, including having other members of staff that they felt comfortable talking to about incidents. Delegates felt that an overall improvement in workplace culture and professional respect was needed – including fostering better manners in the way colleagues communicated to each other, improving the way the veterinary nurse role was explained to

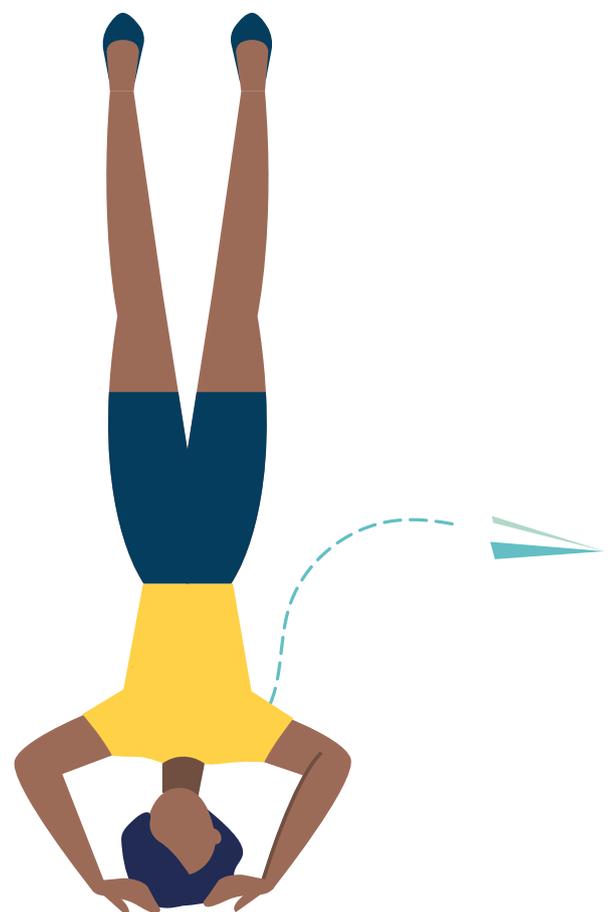
clients, educating staff, understanding what causes some colleagues to exhibit negative behaviours and making practices more inclusive of difference. Several delegates mentioned that union membership may help more marginalised staff gain a stronger voice when dealing with senior colleagues around workplace problems.

In Simon's talk, being an 'active bystander' was introduced as a concept, this meaning being someone who – when they see unfairness and injustice including bullying and incivility – make the effort to confront it, rather than ignore it or, worse, join in. Delegates discussed how being an active bystander would work in the veterinary world, with the majority of delegates agreeing that it was important to confront, report or challenge unreasonable behaviour where it occurred, and that this should be encouraged on a profession-wide basis because of the corrosive effect bullying and incivility have overall on staff morale and wellbeing. However, there was some discussion on the potential difficulties of being an active bystander, including senior staff denying the existence or seriousness of these behaviours, and potential repercussions for the individuals who raised concerns, including becoming victimised themselves for taking a stand.

The final part of the discussion amongst the group was about what various stakeholders – including the Mind Matters Initiative, the RCVS and the educational institutions – could do to tackle bullying and incivility. Several delegates

commented that the clinical coaches at the practice and the educational institutions responsible for assigning Training Practices to SVNs should be trained in how to look out for these behaviours, and how to deal with such situations. It was felt that Training Practices, because they have an accredited status and standards they are expected to meet, should have a clear duty of care to protect their SVNs from such behaviours.

It was suggested there could also be a stronger emphasis for Training Practice staff on areas such as incivility and bullying – perhaps delivered by MMI – as a precondition of gaining TP status.



In conclusion, some of the key themes were:

- Students didn't feel comfortable challenging incivility and bullying as they often felt like they were 'less important' in the practice hierarchy, but delegates agreed they made a massive contribution and needed to be treated with respect and empowered to call out being treated poorly.
- A respectful practice culture was needed where colleagues were treated with civility and respect regardless of their position within the practice hierarchy. Inclusive behaviours to help people feel valued to help people feel valued and supported, and knowledge – including of mistakes – would be freely shared so that all colleagues could learn from each other.

Juggling demands: balancing study, work and personal life

As with previous discussion groups, the delegates were asked for their immediate thoughts following Jane Davidson's talk which gave tips and tricks on how to achieve a better work-life balance. It was mentioned that Jane's talk focused on the positives, encompassing considerations of what we were doing right with our time and not just being negative about the fact we could always be doing more. Others said it made them realise how pressure and guilt impacted on work-life balance as well as the importance of rest.

The breakout group then spoke about the approaches and/or support mechanisms that could help to promote effective time management. Many delegates agreed that, as far as possible, planning and prioritisation were very important for time management. Techniques for this included making to-do lists for work, developing self-care plans and making sure planning and prioritisation also encompassed personal and family life and not just work.

“A healthier attitude towards breaks – especially for lunch – was cited by several delegates, with one delegate saying breaks should be longer – particularly for long shifts.”

Next delegates were asked what a healthy work-life balance meant to them and how important it was for them to maintain a clear distinction between personal and work life. Some delegates insisted that they needed very clear boundaries – such as not doing any work, including checking emails, on days off and holidays, and refusing extra shifts if they came at the expense of personal life. Other delegates were happier for the boundaries to be more blurred, for example, saying they were content to do additional hours to ensure the job was done, but saying that, when this happened, there should be some give from employers. Another delegate spoke about the importance of breaks in keeping the practice staff

at the 'top of their game' and said staff should be specifically asked if they can work beyond their hours, not just expected to as a matter of course.

The discussion group was then asked what changes they would like to see in veterinary settings to improve work-life balance. A healthier attitude towards breaks – especially for lunch – was cited by several delegates, with one delegate saying breaks should be longer – particularly for long shifts. Another delegate said staff should be encouraged to take breaks away from the practice to help put a bit of physical and mental distance from work, while another spoke of ensuring that tasks and pressure points were more evenly distributed so that lots of work – including exams and studying for SVNs – wasn't all 'bunched together' at certain times of the year.

Finally, the discussion group was asked what the next steps were in improving work-life balance and these were summarised as:

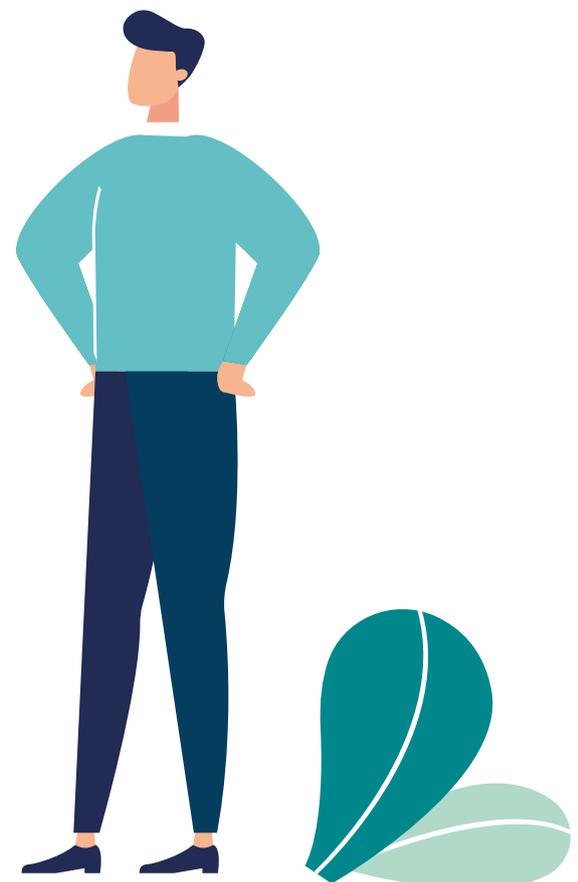
- Change in practice culture around taking breaks.
- Effective planning and prioritisation.
- Working smarter and not harder.

Raising awareness and encouraging pride in the veterinary nursing profession

This discussion group was asked for their thoughts on the talk from Jill Macdonald and Dr Laura Woodward. The reaction

was positive, particularly regarding the suggestion on charging clients for veterinary nurse time, or clearly itemising it on the invoice, in order to show the real value of their work. The suggestions on raising awareness of what veterinary nursing entails via practice websites and social media, and making sure that vet nurses, including SVNs, were celebrated – including by other vet nurses – were also positively received.

Members of the discussion group were asked to give examples of initiatives, activities or workplace cultures they'd seen or heard about that had helped raise the profile of VNs and SVNs and made them feel valued. Several delegates mentioned representation – citing, for example, veterinary businesses where



veterinary nurses had been promoted to senior positions, as well as better veterinary nurse representation in professional veterinary bodies such as the British Small Animal Veterinary Association. Another key strand of what was discussed was the importance of being recognised, thanked and/or celebrated, and how this was key to feeling value and pride. It was felt this could be achieved, for example, through thank-you boards.

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For the next discussion delegates were asked what they themselves should do to raise pride in the veterinary nursing profession. Examples cited included participation in the BVNA’s Veterinary Nursing Awareness Month campaign, charging for veterinary nursing consultation time and also raising the profile of some of the particular work undertaken by veterinary nurses, for example, weight clinics. Delegates also commented that, while making the public aware of what veterinary nurses do was important, work also needed to be carried out closer to home with greater recognition needed from the veterinary team – particularly veterinary surgeons – and the referral of more work and responsibilities to VNs.

In terms of feeling valued, the delegates were then asked what activities or initiatives would make them feel this. There was a general sense that this was improving as more career paths and professional options were opening up for veterinary nurses, though this still lagged behind veterinary surgeons and low pay was also cited as a continuous issue. Interactions with the public and doing more to make them aware of the fact they are a veterinary nurse and possess a particular set of skills was also cited as something that improves value and self-worth. One delegate suggested a scheme which encouraged veterinary nurses to introduce themselves, their role and what it entails to the public in order to raise awareness. Another delegate said that finally getting the title veterinary nurse protected would be important in terms of value as it would confer a sense of belonging and professional identity.

Finally, the group was asked about what next steps could be taken on raising awareness and encouraging pride. Key initiatives were:

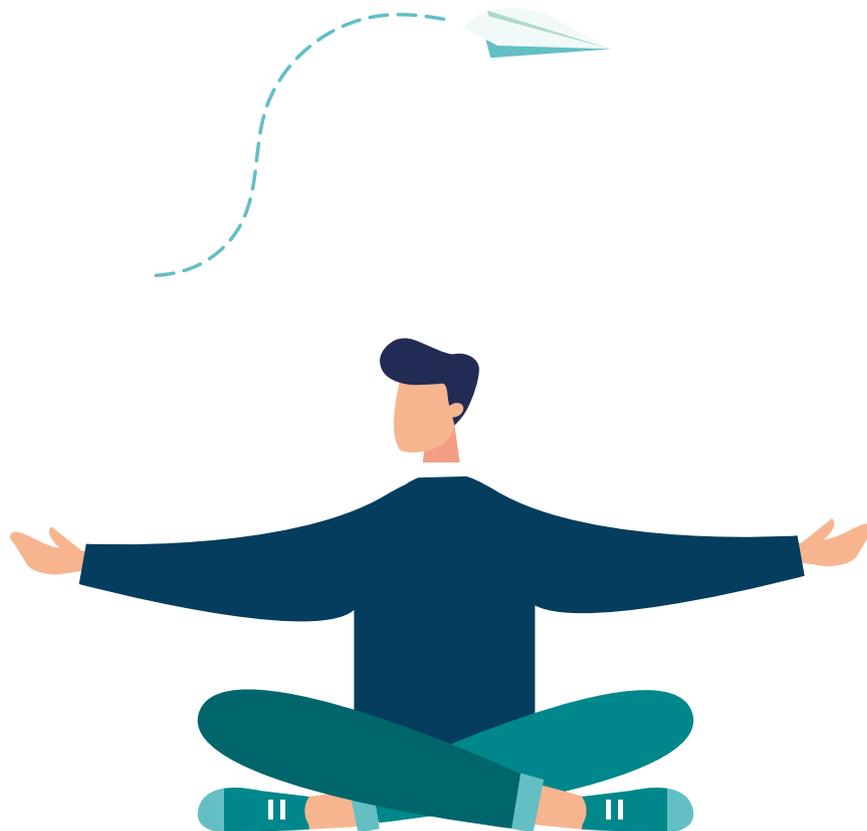
- Greater appreciation, gratitude and recognition for veterinary nurses, not just about remuneration.
- Publicly highlighting and celebrating veterinary nurse success and excellence.
- Professional identity through protecting the title, and delegating more work to veterinary nurses in accordance with current regulations.

Conclusion

The MMI, BVNA and the RCVS Veterinary Nursing Team are grateful to all those who participated in the survey, as well as all those who took part in the day, whether they were presenting or contributing to the discussion groups to talk over the key themes of the day.

As a project MMI is dedicated to listening to members of the professions and using their lived experience to inform its projects and how it operates.

The discussions on the day will help feed into the Mind Matters 2022 – 2027 Strategy. The Strategy is being published in the first quarter of 2022 and the mental health and wellbeing of veterinary nurses and student veterinary nurses will be a key strand of its work.



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