

Human factors are main cause of errors in veterinary practice

October 22 2015, by Emma Thorne



Human error is the largest single cause of mistakes made by veterinary surgeons when treating patients, new research by The University of Nottingham has revealed.

The study, published in the [academic journal](#) *The Veterinary Record*, found that the majority of errors were caused by the limitations of memory and attention leading to slips, lapses and [mistakes](#) that can occur when distracted or under stress.

The research, led by academics in the University's School of Veterinary Medicine and Science and School of Psychology, supports the need for the development and implementation of interventions similar to those which protect patients in human medicine, such as the World Health Organisation's safe surgery checklist.

Lead researcher Catherine Oxtoby said: "I hope this paper will shine some light on a difficult and sensitive subject in the profession. The vast majority of veterinary surgeons and nurses are dedicated, compassionate people who care deeply about both their patients and their clients, but they are also human beings and occasionally make harmful mistakes.

"We have to understand that mistakes don't happen because someone was being careless – it's much more complicated than that, and blaming the clinician does nothing to prevent it happening again. What we need are simple tools to support clinicians and help reduce mistakes. This is an area of active policy and research in medicine but is relatively untouched and poorly understood in our profession."

Over the last 25 years, the medical profession has investigated the main causes and types of [medical error](#) to develop an evidence-based understanding of the factors which lead to mistakes and the types of the most common errors, followed by the development of interventions to reduce risks.

Vets also make mistakes but the profession has no tools to classify veterinary error and a limited understanding of the causes of mistakes and the associated contributing factors. This research starts the move towards such a system.

The Nottingham research identified causes or error from analysis of 678 claims to the profession's leading indemnity insurer. Nine focus groups with vets, nurses and support staff were undertaken and participants asked to anonymously recall some personal examples of errors they had made or witnessed.

Types of errors were taken from 2,978 claim records reported between 2009 and 2014. Mistakes involving surgery was the most common type of error while human error (cognitive limitation) topped the table of

causes of error. Other causes included failures of communication and clinical leadership, design of products and equipment and pressures such as staffing and covering out of hours care.

Significantly, inadequate care or negligence was found in less than one per cent of all the claims made.

Mrs Oxtoby added: "I would like to thank all the vets and nurses who participated in the research – I was often touched by how much they cared.

"I hope that this research has the potential to lead to changes in attitudes, increased trust and confidence between vets and their clients and ultimately more resilient systems to ensure consistent quality of care, through a better understanding of the true causes of veterinary medical error.

More information: C. Oxtoby et al. We need to talk about error: causes and types of error in veterinary practice, *Veterinary Record* (2015). [DOI: 10.1136/vr.103331](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.103331)

Provided by University of Nottingham

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