

Feeling inferior to other vets is fueling sector's mental health crisis, new study shows

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Dr Elizabeth Armitage-Chan. Credit: Royal Veterinary College

The feeling that they are not as good as their peers when it comes to diagnosing and solving a case is contributing to mental health issues in vets, new research has found. Conducted by Dr. Elizabeth Armitage-Chan, Reader in Veterinary Education at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC), the study also suggests that encouraging a mindset that client-oriented behavior is an attribute of a 'good vet' will help many vets improve their mental wellbeing.

Armitage-Chan found examples of new graduates who value their client-oriented skills, such as being able to tailor clinical plans to individual clients' needs, but still couldn't shake the feeling that a 'better vet' would offer a more academic or specialist approach to cases. Even when they skilfully adapt a plan for an owner who is unable to afford advanced tests to find out what is causing their pet's illness, this jars with the vets' beliefs that by reaching a specific diagnosis they would be doing a better job. They thus chronically feel like a 'bad vet,' despite demonstrating high-level skills in communication and clinical problem-solving.

Armitage-Chan's paper argues that learning to form positive client relationships in difficult situations leads to vets who are more resilient and have greater mental wellbeing. However further analysis found a clear sentiment of 'the client is the enemy' in colleagues' discussions and social media. During a difficult case, with complex conflicting pet and pet owner needs, vets who choose to emphasize the client as difficult and unreasonable can receive temporary solace when talking to similarly-minded peers or by accessing social media. However, this thinking prevents them from developing client empathy, impacting their mental health negatively in the long-term. Armitage-Chan therefore believes everyone in the profession has a responsibility to frame the strengths of the 'good vet' as being as much about the pet owner as the pet.

Commenting on her findings, Dr. Elizabeth Armitage-Chan, said: "It's really important not to think of this as a message that we must all be 'nicer' to our clients. I have heard vets say clients' limited finances or not wanting to put their pet through treatment have forced them to go against their 'professional code.'" This simply isn't true: the RCVS Code of Conduct emphasizes a need to work alongside clients to problem-solve these complex situations. Animal welfare can be supported through palliative or symptomatic treatments, which may be offered after difficult negotiations with very upset pet owners. This should therefore be a skill that is celebrated, rather than being considered not 'gold

standard."

"Being able to work with a client who is highly troubled by their financial limitations or the impending loss of a pet is difficult, particularly when these anxieties manifest as anger and accusation. The [social media](#) message of the client as the enemy obstructs this skill, as it becomes easier to rant about the 'difficult client.'" Unfortunately, where this becomes embedded, it prevents the career satisfaction that comes from working with clients."

More information: Elizabeth Armitage-Chan. 'I wish I was someone else': complexities in identity formation and professional wellbeing in veterinary surgeons, *Veterinary Record* (2019). [DOI: 10.1136/vr.105482](https://doi.org/10.1136/vr.105482)

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