

TECH-2-TECH

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This section offers readers the opportunity to submit informal contributions about any aspects of Animal Technology. Comments, observations, descriptions of new or refined techniques, new products or equipment, old products or equipment adapted to new use, any subject that may be useful to technicians in other institutions. Submissions can be presented as technical notes and do not need to be structured and can be as short or as long as is necessary. Accompanying illustrations and/or photos should be high resolution.

NB. Descriptions of new products or equipment submitted by manufacturers are welcome but should be a factual account of the product. However, the Editorial Board gives no warranty as to the accuracy or fitness for purpose of the product.

Culture of Care during COVID-19: Animal Technicians' perspectives

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Background

Over the last 18 months, COVID-19 has affected everyone, both at work and in their personal life. Within the space of a week, new work routines, home routines and general every day practices had to be altered or cancelled all together. The world of Biomedical Research and, in particular that of Animal Technologists was no exception to this. Staff in animal facilities were required to rapidly adapt, including having to reduce animal numbers, undergo changes in working patterns and work with restrictions on the number of people entering what used to be a busy and fast paced environment.

There have been many features and discussions reflecting on how the pandemic affected Culture of Care in animal facilities but very few have been from the perspective of the technologists themselves. As technologists, we have

undertaken a small survey at the University of Birmingham to investigate and reflect upon how individuals coped during this challenging period and how the Culture of Care for both staff and animals was affected. As part of our findings, we will present how the pandemic has taught us to be more aware of compassion fatigue and how we can use what we have learnt over the difficult period, in the future.

Introduction

Being an Animal Technologist has had more than usual challenges recently. It has most certainly tested our ability to work together, our mental health and adaptability to the changes with which we have had to work. We as Animal Technologists do this job because we love animals, including our own pets, leading to the human-animal bond existing in many forms.

Important characteristics of Animal Technologists include showing kindness and consideration towards animals in our care, however with this comes the challenge of having to perform regulated procedures and humanely kill animals as part of our work. This can be both emotionally challenging, yet hard to explain this apparent contradiction to those outside of the industry.

Due to the restrictions enforced during the pandemic lockdown, as with many animal facilities, the University of Birmingham had to change working practices and patterns at short notice, including the switch to maintaining lines as 'tick-over' colonies. Since gradually returning to a sense of normality, we have been able to reflect upon Culture of Care and the impact that COVID-19 has had on this.

Definitions

Culture Of Care

- Culture of Care is not a new term but has been used increasingly in animal units over the past 10 years.
- Hard to define in the context of an animal facility but broadly it means to work, physically and/or emotionally, to improve another's situation, whether that is an animal or a human.
- Having a good Culture of Care means that welfare is maximised and in turn this leads to better quality science.

This requires people with the right attitudes, who receive appropriate training to maintain skills and knowledge, ensuring that Animal Welfare is at the forefront and striving to promote new good practice.



Compassion Fatigue

- Also known as secondary trauma stress (STS), an emotional state first recognised in the early 1990s.
- Occurs due to providing ongoing care for individuals/ animals who are experiencing a form of suffering.
- Leads to the emotive state of feeling tired about the work we do.
- Animal Technologists are vulnerable to this because they love animals and form bonds which are inevitably broken.

Can lead to poor performance and difficulty completing tasks.

Reasons behind the survey

When the lockdown was first announced, the biggest risk to Animal Welfare was reduced staff numbers due to self-isolation, as this could lead to insufficient technicians being available to perform daily health checks.

To avoid the risk of one positive COVID-19 case leading to the whole team having to self-isolate, our technicians were divided into two teams, one working AM and the other a PM shift. There was to be a 15-minute window between the first team leaving and the second arriving and the two teams covered different areas in the facility where possible. This meant that in the worst case, we would lose half the total staff to self-isolation rather than everyone.

This led to the establishment of a 'BMSU WhatsApp group' which was used to maintain communication. It became an effective and instant way of getting messages to each other without physical contact between teams. This was a very useful tool and also became a safe space where staff could support each other when it seemed that no one outside of the 'technicians' world' would understand.

Following the return to 'normality', we wanted to establish how this pressurised period of time had affected staff in the short term during the lockdown and whether there have been longer term impacts. We also wanted to explore whether anything beneficial had come from such a stressful period, for example the WhatsApp group. This remains in place as not only has it proved to be an effective way of maintaining communication around the building, but it also provides somewhere for the team to share news about life outside of work (such as the antics of our pets!) all of which helps to re-enforce our Culture of Care.

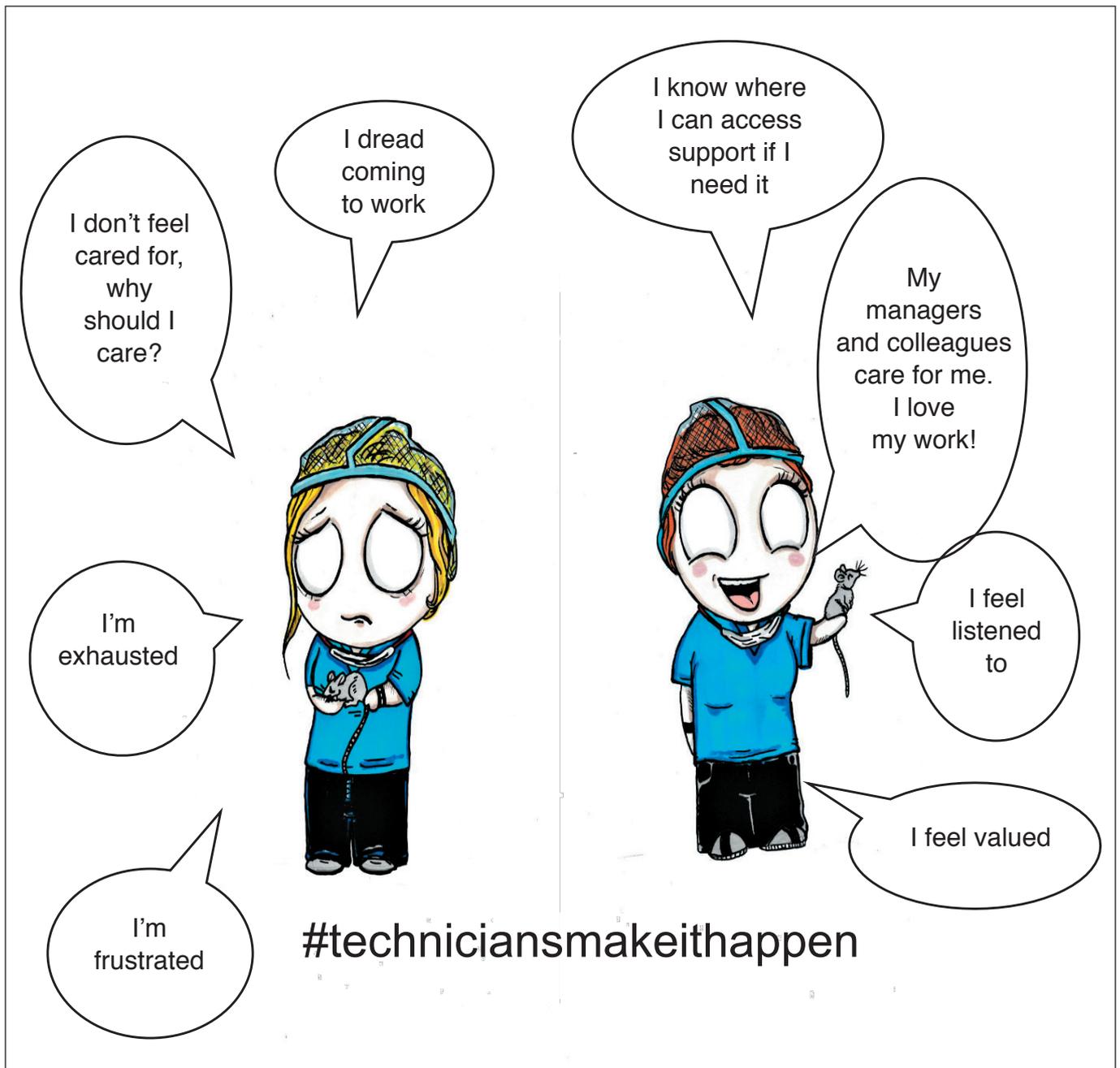


Figure 1. Difference in attitude of people suffering from compassion fatigue.

Approach

Significantly, whilst there has been a lot of reflection on the impact that COVID-19 has had on culture of care and welfare in animal facilities, the viewpoint has often been that of the senior facility management, rather than the Animal Technicians themselves who are working 'on the ground'. We therefore sought to obtain the viewpoint from the Animal Technician perspective.

In order to do this, we designed a survey that focussed on different aspects of Culture of Care and compassion fatigue, but also provided a free text opportunity because Culture of Care can mean different things to different people. Importantly, the survey was anonymous to

ensure that individuals felt able to provide both positive and negative opinions.

The survey was completed by Animal Technologists at the University of Birmingham, where we have a pool of 20 technologists, representing a broad range of career stages and experience.

Survey results

Below we present some of the key results from our survey that reflect the experience of our Animal Technologists with regard to a Culture of Care and compassion fatigue, alongside quotes from the free text boxes to provide additional insight.

Q1. Were you kept updated with changes to working procedures and requirements during lockdown

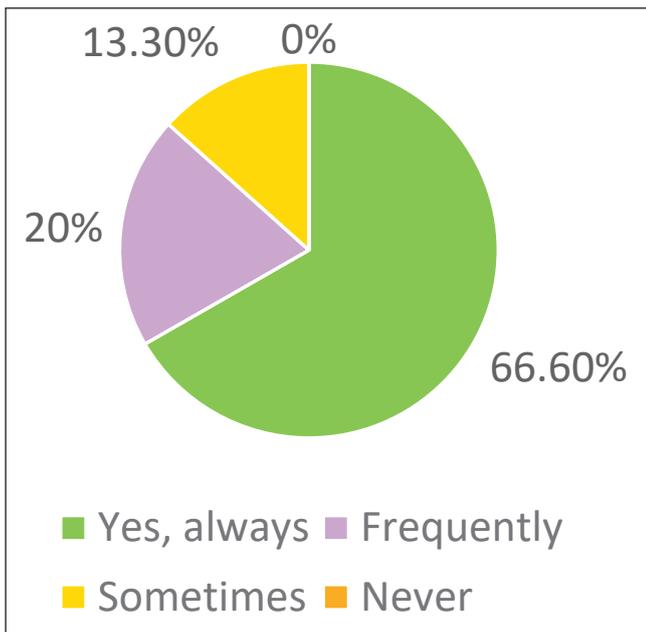


Chart 1. Responses from technologists to survey question 1.

Being aware of changes and the reasons behind them are important when trying to minimise worry during uncertain times.

The majority of Animal Technologists felt that they had been frequently or always kept informed of changes.

“Found it challenging when workload increased but work practices were not as quick to change.”

“Work WhatsApp group created positivity amongst staff.”

Was emotional support made available by your Establishment during the lockdown?

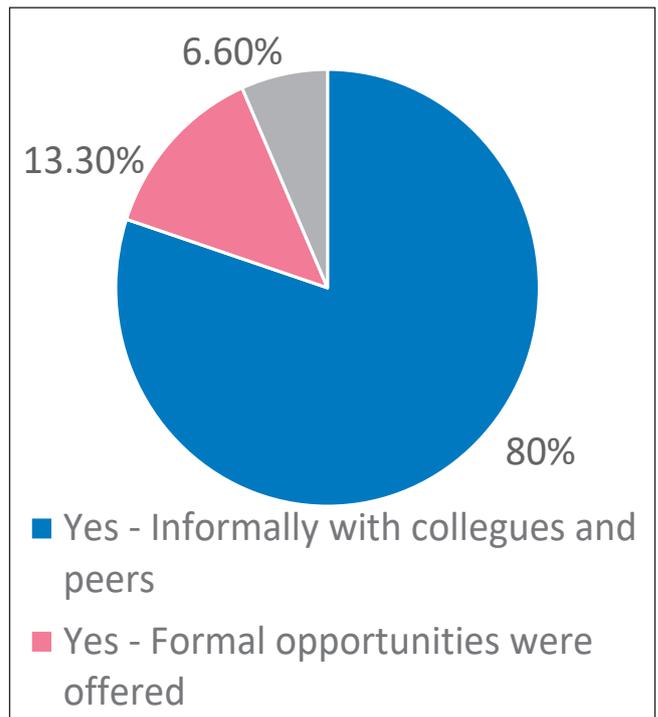
Emotional support can take many forms and is personal to the individual. Whilst not everyone may take up the support, it is important that it is made available to those who want it.

Almost all Animal Technicians had received an offer of emotional support, with the majority doing so informally with their colleagues.

“Not seeing certain colleagues for a nearly a year was upsetting.”

“We all became better team players. All supported each other.”

“Got to know people on my team better.”



Q.2 As restrictions ease are you feeling more or less positive than you did 6 months ago?

Gauging whether technologists feel positive about the future helps to determine whether we have a good Culture of Care in place and ensures that the risk of compassion fatigue is minimised.

The vast majority of Animal Technologists are feeling more positive now than they did 6 months ago.

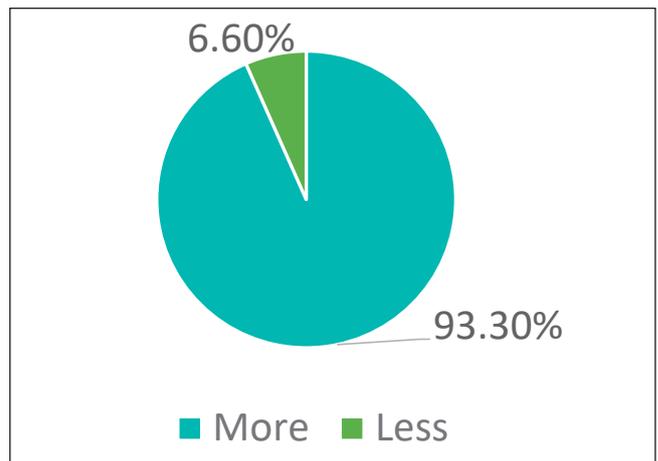


Chart 2. Technologists' responses to survey question 2.

“Given me the opportunity to learn procedures that would otherwise be done by researchers”

“It has created a better work and home life balance.”

“Hybrid model at work meant we as technicians got to progress personally by doing more procedural work.”

Culture of Care and the 3Rs

Overall, the survey revealed that most Animal Technologists have experienced a positive Culture of Care at the University of Birmingham and continue to do so. Staff are satisfied that they are surrounded by colleagues who care for one another and support each other through difficult times. There are also measures put in place to provide emotional support that they are aware of, and can use if they need more support than that of their peers.

When we probed further into why we as Animal Technicians felt so positively about the Culture of Care it became apparent how intertwined this was with the Culture of Care experienced by the animals and our 3Rs efforts.



Figure 2. Double decker rat play pen.

For example, we have introduced a double decker rat play pen full of enrichment. Whilst the driver for this was the 3Rs, we have found that not only do the rats clearly enjoy being able to explore this area, as shown by them expressing natural behaviours, but the staff also take pleasure in trialling different types of enrichment and watching the rats in this environment.



Figure 3. Rats at play.

To provide an opportunity for a research animal to experience something that previously was not available to them helps to offset the risk of compassion fatigue as it gives technicians some time to enjoy observing the playful behaviours of the animals we care for so greatly.

Summary

No technologist, manager or director could have predicted what was going to happen in the lead up to, and during the COVID-19 pandemic; it is certainly a period of time no one will ever forget or want to witness again.

However, within this, it is clear to see that staff felt looked after, and the efforts put in place helped them feel more positive as life began to return to the new 'normal'. We believe that the University of Birmingham had a significant focus on the Culture of Care provided for staff during these difficult times and that due to this, staff felt supported and looked after by their management.

Going forward, the facility continues to place an emphasis on the proactive implementation of the 3Rs with the additional benefit of knowing this also has a visible positive impact upon the Animal Technologists too.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all staff at the Biomedical Services Unit at the University of Birmingham for providing us with an insight in to their time in the industry.