

Time to unpack the emotional baggage: what are we carrying?

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Compassion fatigue is widely discussed within biomedical research and the effect it has on animal care staff. It is a term that describes the physical, emotional and psychological impact of helping others often through experiences of stress or trauma. Compassion fatigue is often mistaken for burnout which is a cumulative sense of fatigue or dissatisfaction.

The relationship between animal care staff and the research animals they work with can enhance Animal Welfare. However this does come at a cost to the animal care staff and exposes them to compassion fatigue.

Compassion fatigue amongst animal care staff was highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the restrictions imposed on research personnel leaving all aspects of the animal care to be carried out by animal care staff.

Establishments throughout the country had to rapidly modify normal working practices to ensure that high standards of animal care and welfare were maintained. For some establishments, this required culling whole colonies due to the uncertainty of when the lockdown would be lifted. There were reduced staffing levels to maintain minimum staffing requirements and we had to accommodate those that were required to go into isolation. These factors led to an increase in the risk of animal care staff experiencing compassion fatigue due to the increased stress, isolation and helplessness they felt during the pandemic and beyond.

Experiences

An anonymous survey was conducted and completed during October 2023. It comprised of 8 questions to gain a greater understanding of compassion fatigue amongst animal care staff in the United Kingdom (UK) currently.

An overwhelming number of respondents were noted to have experienced compassion fatigue during their career with many experiencing mental exhaustion and overwhelming sadness particularly when euthanising animals. Some responses explained how they had experienced increased levels of stress and dissatisfaction with their job.

Those responses highlighted how important it is to foster a good Culture of Care between animal care staff and for researchers to engender greater understanding of both the research being conducted and the high standards of Animal Welfare provided. Animal care staff actively take part in research studies, often carrying out procedures on the animals on behalf of the researchers.

Unfortunately many animal care staff experience challenging behaviour from researchers. Named animal care and welfare officers (NACWOs) and facility managers oversee the day-to-day care and welfare of animals within facilities. They possess good knowledge of those under their care, enabling them to recognise the indicators of poor welfare, pain and others forms of suffering as well as how these can be alleviated. Welfare decisions can cause conflict between researchers and NACWOs due to differing opinions on whether an animal has reached its humane endpoint or not. During the survey NACWOs were asked if they feel increased pressure when making welfare/health decisions, many responded that they do feel additional pressure which is made harder by needing to justify their reasoning to individuals who are looking at it from a scientific viewpoint.

Many respondents reported that their institutions provided training courses to help them navigate challenging behaviour but disappointingly some reported that this behaviour was accepted as something that had always been part of the culture.