

Introduction

An impairment is defined in the *Veterinary Practice Act 2003* (s 4(3)) as any physical or mental impairment, disability, condition or disorder which detrimentally affects or is likely to detrimentally affect the person's physical or mental capacity to practise veterinary science.

The Board appreciates the difficulties faced by a veterinarian suffering from an impairment and is committed to assisting these veterinarians through the establishment of its Health Program for Veterinarians. The goal of this program is to enable veterinarians to work their way through their health issues with the support of suitably qualified professionals and the Board. The Board has adopted the procedures outlined in the [Doctors' Health Program](#) provided by the Medical Council of NSW to achieve this goal.

Importantly, it is the Board's preference that issues of impairment or possible impairment are addressed outside of the Board's complaints processes and disciplinary powers where possible.

Background

In addition to a range of physical conditions, the Board is aware of research regarding the incidence of stress and depression in the veterinary profession and specifically that the incidence of suicide among veterinarians in Australia is likely to be much greater than that of the general population.^{3,4,7}

Veterinarians are exposed to risk factors found in the general population, including conflict and personal relationship problems, risks similar to other health professionals, and may be exposed to more specific risks including:

1. Stressors associated with the performance of their professional duties
2. Ready access to prescription drugs
3. Temptation to self-medicate
4. Poor remuneration and long hours

The Board also appreciates that stressors associated with the performance of the professional duties of a veterinarian may also be increased during a complaint investigation process.²

Health Program

The Board may be notified of an impairment or possible impairment through submission of the Annual Return, a report from a health practitioner or as a result of a complaint investigation. Self-disclosure is a difficult step but the processes adopted by the Board have been developed with the aim of enabling veterinarians to continue to practise safely and assist with either managing their impairment or their recovery. The Board will treat all such disclosures confidentially.

Unless derived from a complaint investigation, notification will lead to adoption of the following process:

1. The Board will invite that veterinarian to attend an examination by a Board appointed health practitioner and to submit a response to this notification.
2. The Board will meet the costs of this examination (but not costs applied for a cancelled appointment).
3. The purpose of this examination is to determine, based on a report from a Board appointed health practitioner, whether the veterinarian is in need of the support provided by the Board's Health Program for Veterinarians.
4. The Board will consider the report from the health practitioner and if it is satisfied that the veterinarian is suffering from an impairment, the Board is required to enter that veterinarian's name on the register of impaired veterinarians and may impose conditions on the veterinarian's registration.
5. The Board will notify the veterinarian involved in writing of the imposition of any conditions and invite the veterinarian to discuss these conditions at an interview with members of the Board (Health Committee). The veterinarian may bring a support person to this interview.

6. The conditions imposed by the Board may include:
 - i. A requirement to submit to regular reports by a Board appointed health practitioner (again, the Board will meet the costs of these examinations)
 - ii. A requirement to regularly attend and to follow the advice of other relevant health practitioners for treatment
 - iii. A requirement to submit to regular drug testing (see [Monitoring](#) under the policies section of the Medical Council of NSW website)
7. Conditions on registration are reviewed at least annually and full compliance with conditions is required for the veterinarian to exit the program. Time in the program will be dependent upon many factors and a likely timeframe will be discussed during interviews.

Resources

Veterinarians with health problems or veterinarians and staff who are concerned about a veterinary colleague can call the **Doctors' Health Advisory Service (NSW) on (02) 9437 6552 (24 hours)**.

If you believe a colleague is behaving in a way that is of concern the Board has the following advice, again based on that provided by the Medical Council of NSW:

1. If you believe you can deal with the matter try to arrange a private meeting, tell the veterinarian what you have noticed and why you are concerned, and ask them to consult with an appropriate medical practitioner or call the Doctors' Health Advisory Service.
2. If you are not sure you are able to deal with this matter discuss your concerns with a senior colleague in the practice.

Additional resources are available from:

[Doctors' Health Advisor Service](#)
[Australian Veterinary Association Mental Health Resources](#)
[Black Dog Institute](#)
[Lifeline](#)

Further Reading

1. Bartram DJ, Baldwin DS 2010, 'Veterinary surgeons and suicide: a structured review of possible influences on increased risk', *Veterinary Record*, vol. 166, pp. 388-97.
2. Bartram DJ, Sinclair MA, Baldwin DS 2010, 'Interventions with potential to improve the mental health and wellbeing of UK veterinary surgeons', *Veterinary Record*, vol. 166, pp. 518-23.
3. Bartram DJ, Yadegarfar G, Baldwin DS 2009, 'A cross-sectional study of mental health and well-being and their associations in the UK veterinary profession', *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, vol. 44, pp. 1078-85.
4. Jones-Fairnie H, Perroni P, Silburn S, Lawrence D 2008, 'Suicide in Australian Veterinarians', *Australian Veterinary Journal*, vol. 86, no. 4, pp. 114-6.
5. Medical Council of NSW 2013, Health Program Participant's Handbook. Available: https://www.mcnsw.org.au/sites/default/files/health_program_handbook_updated_may_2018.pdf Accessed 24 Aug 2020.
6. Platt B, Hawton K, Simkin S, Mellanby RJ 2010, 'Systematic review of the prevalence of suicide in veterinary surgeons', *Occupational Medicine*, vol. 60, pp. 436-46.
7. Milner AJ, Niven H, Page K, LaMontagne AD 2015, 'Suicide in veterinarians and veterinary nurses in Australia: 2001-2012', *Australian Veterinary Journal*, vol. 93, no. 9, pp. 308-10.