

Veterinary Wellness Bien-être vétérinaire

The wellness bucket

Lisa Miller

The CVMA-ACMV has chosen to focus on wellness for their members. A portion of this journal has been allotted to discuss this important issue. I volunteered to initiate these discussions, but first would like to share with you a little bit about who I am and what I'm doing at the present time.

I was raised on a small farm in Montana and started working for veterinarians when I was 12 years old. I graduated from Washington State University a long time ago (1976) and was a practicing veterinarian for a short time. During this time I was particularly stressed with charging for my veterinary services and working with impaired veterinarians. It wasn't long before I realized that I needed to find another niche in veterinary medicine and chose to pursue anatomic pathology. I completed a residency and PhD at Washington State University followed by board certification. While a fourth year veterinary student I met and later married my husband, or more properly my life partner, Jim Miller. Jim practiced and taught small animal internal medicine for 40+ years and is recently retired, but still consulting. Both of us have been employed in 3 veterinary schools (2 in the USA and 1 in Canada). Anyone married to another veterinarian can appreciate the need to move to find the best positions for two professionals. I believe I have an understanding of the stresses of veterinary practice, marriage, and academic and student life. In 2000–2001 I took a sabbatical and studied counselling at the University of New Brunswick — Fredericton, received a MEd in the subject of human development and counseling, and became a member of the Canadian Professional Counsellors Association until becoming Associate Dean of Academic and Student Affairs in 2006. The 6-year term as Associate Dean has ended and I am currently on a 1-year leave to prepare myself to return to a faculty position. This leave has provided me with the freedom to reflect on my career and to look at personal growth. I have realized how close I was to complete burnout from my administrative job in Academic and Student Affairs.

I am **passionate** about the subject of veterinary wellness. I have served as a member of the AVMA Committee on Veterinary Wellness and have been active at the Atlantic Veterinary College in providing wellness information to our students and staff. I have been directly associated with mental illness and addiction both personally and directly with students and veterinarians. Two of

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my DVM classmates committed suicide after graduation. Both of these men were good friends of mine. A few years ago AVC lost a fourth-year student to suicide — I was very close to her and her struggles. It is my sincere hope that through this column veterinarians will evaluate their own mental health, become aware of their role in veterinary wellness, and participate in this column.

Veterinarians and student veterinarians understand wellness for their patients. We understand that preventing disease in animals is key to a healthy population and to individual animals. However, do we understand that maintaining healthy veterinarians is also key to providing wellness in animals? First and foremost we must take care of ourselves and provide a healthy environment for our staff and other veterinarians. Most of us are trying to do this; can we do more? Veterinarians and student veterinarians are faced with difficult decisions regarding animal care and often deal with difficult people and situations. This can affect our wellness. Someone once explained it to me as the “wellness bucket.” Each of us has a certain amount of empathy and compassion that we have to share. Each time we interact with someone in an empathic or compassionate manner we drain the contents of our empathy bucket. At the end of a busy working day our bucket may need to be refilled. How full is your bucket? Did you empty your bucket when dealing with that last euthanasia? What steps are you taking to fill your bucket to give yet again in the next instance when empathy is required? What works for you? Do you participate in any of the following; meditation, exercise, vacation, yoga, mindfulness, support groups, or cognitive therapy? Or do you take excessive amounts of alcohol, prescribed or illicit medications, participate in self-harm, or consider retiring, quitting your job, or leaving veterinary medicine? Obviously the first choices are the healthy choices, but in the CVMA National Survey results all of these were identified as coping skills. I encourage all of you to review the survey and if you didn't respond, think of what your responses would have been. The survey can be found in Volume 53 of the Canadian Veterinary Medical Journal, pages 1159–1160, November 2012. The complete survey can be viewed by logging onto the CVMA Web site and clicking on the relevant homepage News and Events article (dated July 19, 2–120).

Yes — I believe our profession needs to start talking about wellness and this can be done by participating in this column. All you need to do is e-mail me (lmiller@upe.ca) with your ideas and comments and I will anonymously reply either in this column or via e-mail.

The next column will deal with Compassion Fatigue in Veterinary Medicine.

I wish you all wellness now and in the future.