Pay Attention to Job Retention

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"We have no issues in staffing veterinary nurses" is not a phrase you would hear uttered in veterinary practices these days. In fact, many veterinary professionals would refer to the current situation as a "crisis" in terms of the shortage in staffing, which is further complicated by a worldwide pandemic. When we contemplate the shortage of veterinary nurses there are 2 factors to consider: entry into the profession and retention in the profession. In terms of entry into the field, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) accredits veterinary technology programs through the Committee on Veterinary Technician Education and Activities (CVTEA), from which graduates qualify to take the Veterinary Technician National Examination (VTNE) to become credentialed as veterinary technicians in the U.S. There are currently 209 accredited programs[1] that graduate a total of 4500 to 5000 students each year.

While looking at bringing more individuals into the profession is an avenue worth exploring, the field's attention has turned to retention of veterinary nurses in the field. Among respondents in the NAVTA 2016 Demographic survey, 51% were satisfied with their jobs, 56% had changed jobs within the first 5 to 7 years, and of those who changed jobs, 45% had left the veterinary field altogether.[2] Recently, NAVTA, in partnership with Merck Animal Health, conducted the Attract, Retain & Motivate (ARM) survey July through September of 2020, gathering 1019 responses to explore the topic of retention in the profession.[3] This survey reported that only 39% of respondents were "highly satisfied" with their job. More alarmingly, 80% of the respondents saw at least one other veterinary nurse leaving the practice where they work, and 42% had seen more than 5. In addition, 54% felt veterinary nurses are more likely to look outside of traditional veterinary practice compared to 10 years ago. It is also worth noting the timing of these 2 surveys and pointing out the immense struggles veterinary nurses and professionals are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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To increase retention in veterinary nursing, it is important to recognize the positives in the profession and complaints that are driving these professionals away.

Factors Affecting Satisfaction

Respondents in the ARM survey chose the ability to care for animals, teaching and passing on knowledge and experience to others, and the variety of work opportunities as the top 3 best aspects of being a veterinary nurse. The top 3 most challenging aspects were low salary, high staff turnover, and staff management/interpersonal difficulties. Other key insights state 88% of respondents felt they should be paid more, 79% agreed they worked too hard, and 52% stated education loans are a source of stress.[3] These findings summarize how veterinary nurses

commonly feel: that they entered the field because of their care for animals but find it difficult to stay in the field due to receiving a low salary, feeling burnt out, and becoming frustrated with client or staff conflict.

What can practices looking to attract and retain veterinary nurses change? Most respondents shared they already received necessities beyond better pay, such as medical benefits (86%), CE opportunities and training (78%), and retirement benefits (78%). Less commonly offered benefits were assistance with student debt (5%), health benefits such as wellness programs and gym memberships (24%), bonuses (31%), and flexible work hours (36%).[3] Given that most of these are financial in nature, veterinary practices should look at the efficiency and elevated patient care that a veterinary nurse brings to the practice, which translate into profitability to justify allocating more funding toward pay and benefits.

Another aspect of working at a veterinary practice (and likely any company) that team members look for are related to career opportunity and growth. Significantly less than half the respondents stated that their workplace offers opportunities for career advancement (38%) and regular performance reviews (46%). In addition, respondents were undersatisfied with the practice's ability to provide regular reviews (66%), ability to provide feedback to the management (63%), and foster a collaborative team environment (59%). Also, 48% of respondents disagreed with the statement that the management in the practice does a good job rewarding strong performers. Providing opportunities to grow and fostering a collaborative team culture are critical factors in maintaining a happy team.

Other recent studies of interest include one by Liss et al. that evaluates factors associated with job satisfaction and engagement, noting the association between higher satisfaction and engagement being in a supervisory role, receiving higher wages, and working with 1 or 2 veterinarians (as opposed to >20 veterinarians).[4] Another study by Hayes et al. investigating burnout and job-related risk factors noted an association between quality of interpersonal relationships and "lack of an established professional identity with clear boundaries (as evidenced by the proportion of qualified veterinary technicians performing janitorial tasks)" with likelihood of burnout.[5] These studies support the need for veterinary nurses to be treated as professionals through pay, job role, and the weight of their voice.

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What Needs to Change?

These findings provide details in factors associated with job satisfaction and retention of good staff members, adding significant considerations. From the ARM study, NAVTA recommends that practices institute opportunities for pay raises and bonuses that are tied to performance or output goals, explore opportunities to minimize student debt, offer more flexible hours, establish clear opportunities for career advancement and growth, and develop a structured 2-way feedback process.

If you are reading this article as someone who has the influence to change your practice (e.g., practice manager or other leadership roles), consider taking this

content and looking at the aspects of your practice that can be changed for better retention of veterinary nurses. If you are an individual in a practice who feels like you have no avenue to voice your thoughts, start by sharing this article. The path to a happier team and practice is led by practice management willing to do more to support the team to keep them happy, as well as team members willing to give feedback and bring up new information. Both parties seeing their part in the puzzle and working collaboratively and professionally will lead to the positive changes we need. TVN

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