

Support for COLLEAGUES

Dr Marilyn Sthamann

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Here I am, still working as a small animal Regina veterinarian 31 years after graduation. Although it was a long time ago I can still recall so much of those early years. All young graduates are faced with many stresses and I was no exception. I was left to work on my own at 23 years old, very young and naive – and I made many mistakes. I remember receiving my first letter from the SVMA's professional conduct committee with a complaint – I survived 3 of these in those earlier days of my career. I know how it feels to have a tightening in your chest, a feeling of panic, the questioning of one's abilities. I have often said that I have made just about every mistake possible. I have learned from each one.

When I tell my stories colleagues have asked how I survived and maintained a passion for the profession. I believe that because my desire to be a veterinarian had been my dream since a child, I never even considered quitting! I have survived these stresses and accepted them as part of my journey. One of the



positive outcomes from these years was the development of profound compassion for my colleagues. I vowed to support and mentor every colleague I worked with so that they wouldn't have to experience the stress that I had. My business partner, Dr Don Powers and I have maintained our goal to fulfill that vow.

In what ways have we attempted to support our colleagues? Here is our perspective...

1 We have chosen to pay our veterinarians with monthly salaries vs a percentage of their earnings. There are several reasons for this. First, this allows for each veterinarian to develop their strengths without pressure on volume of cases handled. Some spend more time educating clients, developing relationships, and some are more passionate about doing complex surgeries. We didn't want any competition when one colleague sees an anal sac infection and the next a complex expensive medical case. We want colleagues to spend time with the client during the education/communication – and not be concerned that another colleague was in the middle of an expensive surgical procedure. If there happens to be a little down time, our veterinarians offer to help make up handouts, and plan for improving services. In general, working as a team for the betterment of the whole practice, not worried about how each day will impact their salary at the end of the month.

2 My first year, I worked Monday through Saturday and then was on call on one day of the weekend. If I needed to take a day off with illness, I had to make that time up on my holidays. The next year, I changed positions and eventually became business partners

with Dr. Bill Preston. He taught me not to dedicate my whole life to my work. He taught me the importance of balancing work with family and free time in order to maintain a healthy interest in veterinary medicine. We finished taking appointments in time to leave at the end of our shifts. We took time for holidays. I am saddened to I hear that so many of our colleagues work routinely until 9:00 pm, and come in on their days off to care for hospitalized patients. I believe if I had faced those types of demands I would have had trouble maintaining my marriage and a reasonable family life. So, veterinarians who have worked with us have been mentored in the same way. We minimize work beyond scheduled hours and we pay for extra time worked.

3 We try to support each other by discussing cases throughout the day together. There are at least two of us involved in examining every set of radiographs, every internal medicine diagnostic challenge. We also enjoy monthly lunch meetings together to discuss cases, report on new things we've learned and discuss new strategies for treatment.

4 Perhaps the most satisfying way we've been able to support colleagues was to recognize when family emergencies, child care or health issues were causing extra stress. We have been able to offer extended paid leave, flexible hours and unpaid time off during these times.

5 Don and I have an open door policy. We enjoy friendly relationships with our associates and are happy to discuss and make changes

to situations as needed, such as wanting to get help with certain surgeries, wanting to pursue extra education for specialty of interest, or to adjust hours of work to accommodate changing family needs.

6 We do not ask for formal contracts. We make up a simple agreement re compensation, CE, benefits, and schedule and then all sign it. We do not ask for a non-compete clause. Our thought is that if we do so poorly in caring for an associate and they vindictively decide to open a practice down the street, we've done something wrong. We understand things change and support both the comings and the goings of colleagues as they need. None have left because of stress or concerns about work related issues.

7 If there is a particular case, incident or client who is causing extra stress, we talk about it and offer support. We do surgeries together if one is nervous about something they've never done. We have 'fired' clients who were unreasonable to deal with.

8 The pressures to be an expert in every area can be extremely difficult to bear. Years ago we could never perform a particular procedure and they would say to go ahead and do our best. Now the public expects only the very highest quality medicine. We encourage our colleagues to

ask to work together on cases, or to refer to others with more expertise in that area. There is no pressure to do something one doesn't feel confident or comfortable with.

9 We have fun together. We have a number of parties each year. Our latest was a fun golf tournament. We closed the clinic on a Friday afternoon, took everyone by party bus out to a local golf course and had a Texas scramble tournament. Then we had some drinks and supper, a few games and then back on the party bus back to the city. So

much fun and a way to relieve some of life's stresses.

At a time when very high stress levels (and even suicide) are reported to be common in our profession, Don and I believe that

we have a responsibility to care for the well-being of all our staff and veterinarians. They give of themselves every day to help our business succeed. In return they deserve our care. I hope that our experience will help to encourage others to adopt some of the philosophies and strategies we've found helpful. The saddest thing is when I hear a colleague has quit the profession after just a few years – not because they are unhappy with veterinary medicine but because they were unable to cope with the environment they were working in.

We all have a responsibility towards our colleagues and our profession. I have benefited greatly from a rewarding professional life. I believe all of us deserve that same reward. 🐾

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