



The **VETERINARY SOCIAL WORK** Connection

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIN WASSON
DR MELISSA SMITH

While collaboration between social work and veterinary medicine has been going on for some time in the United States, it is a relatively new to Canada. We are extremely fortunate in Saskatchewan to have this collaboration within a Canadian context for the first time as a service offered through the WCVM.

As part of the professional wellness committee, I had the pleasure of attending the recent wellness “Night Out” at Boffins Public House in Saskatoon, where Erin Wasson (BSW, MSW) was the speaker. Erin has just completed a Masters of Social Work, which included a practicum placement at the WCVM. She is now working as a part-time veterinary social worker. A few days after the wellness “Night Out” I spoke with Erin about the surprising similarities between our fields.

Erin was born and grew up in Saskatoon having a great amount of contact with both small and large animals. It does not take long in conversation to realize she has a passion for helping others. For Erin, four years of undergraduate study that simultaneously included human service work was followed by five years of

employment as a registered social worker, and then finally, a Master's degree. During all of this, diverse and numerous practicums, employment and volunteer experiences prepared her for work in the wide field of social work.

I was interested to learn that social work, like veterinary medicine, is a regulated profession with national and provincial governing bodies. They are similarly guided by an established Code of Ethics and the requirement for lifelong learning. Social workers perform an astounding number of functions, all the while uniquely concerned for the context in which individuals live their lives.

Social workers can be found working in hospitals, in long-term care facilities, and providing addictions and clinical mental health support, in crisis centres, working in research and academia, amongst a number of other places. Most of the time, an individual seeking counselling is referred to a social worker. A social work degree, like a veterinary degree, opens up many different avenues. Just like us, they can be found assisting their clients from 'womb to tomb' and are often on the front lines of what is happening in families. Interestingly, the frontiers of our two professions have some new developments in store.

A united Veterinary- Social Work program was first professionalized at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville (UTK) by Dr. Elizabeth Strand PhD, LCSW. The professionalization of the VSW field by UTK has led to the identification of four subcategories of practice. These include: human/animal violence, grief and loss, animal assisted therapy, and compassion/empathy fatigue.

At the WCVM, Erin has been busy building relationships and lending support assistance in a way that complements the veterinary world of staff and students. There have been on-campus seminars, participation in the wellness rotation and a well-received talk at the Western Association of Bovine Practitioners. In a clinical context, Erin has given support around issues of farm stress, quality of life, end of life decision making, grief and support for staff and students, (all seeming indicators of a VSW program in development at the WCVM). Notably, Erin has also discovered a need for her services within the Large Animal community, something that has not been the focus of veterinary social work elsewhere.

Social workers are grounded in the community, do research quickly, and navigate systems and their own connections to find the best support for each situation. Erin says the most challenging part of her work also happens to be her favorite part. Not unlike our work in veterinary medicine, her day to day work is so varied and unpredictable she is constantly drawing on both prior experience and continued learning.

Another commonality between the veterinary and social work professions: it turns out that social workers are also prone to empathy fatigue and burnout.

"It's not a question of if, it's a question of when and how bad will it be" is one of Erin's go-to adages. In conversation, we touched on the suicides of some widely known veterinarians over the past year. Erin is sadly well acquainted with (in her words) the veterinary profession's "terrifyingly high suicide rate". She shared that she believes that contributing to the high suicide rates are feelings of isolation and a lack of emphasis on how to manage the emotionally taxing work of being a veterinarian.

An important cue to be taken by veterinarians, built into the study of social work, is an emphasis on self-care. It is not viewed as selfish, but a necessary investment if longevity in your career is desired. Erin believes that self-care should be viewed as a part of professionalism and each of us should develop our own individual self-care plan.

In her "Night Out" presentation, Erin revealed that veterinarians secretly do love people (perhaps even as much as they love animals!) In order to do

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good work and be good to others, be they two or four legged, we need to develop a life outside of work that brings us joy. This means getting back to basics and includes things like eating and sleeping well and setting healthy boundaries, both at home and at work. Erin's own self-care plan includes riding horses, because "you can't be anywhere else when you're on the back of a horse". A good place for anyone to start on the self-care journey is finding out about sleep hygiene, daily debriefing to disengage from work, and building awareness of how we balance the physical, mental, spiritual and emotional parts of our lives.

Veterinary medicine is a small profession and often physically and psychologically isolating. When asked what she hoped for in terms of the future of our field, she would like to see a cultural shift toward collegial support, so that we can continue to be responsive doctors, but in a way where we look after each other and ourselves. She would like the veterinarians of Saskatchewan to know we are smart and capable, that our work can be very emotionally taxing, and that we should acknowledge this to others and ourselves when we feel pressure to justify making our own health a priority. Self-care isn't just a crutch to put in place when our "doing it all for others" mindset kicks in. It is an essential part of maintaining healthy and functional boundaries in all things.

I would encourage anyone who gets a chance to hear Erin speak to grab the opportunity. As we ended our interview, Erin was off to do a talk about death and dying and I was back to practise for the day, with some interesting information to digest. The idea that social workers and veterinarians can learn a lot from each other about how to build better relationships really stuck out in my mind. After all, building relationships is what our businesses and lives are really about. 