

## Canadian Veterinary Journal June 2020 ethical question of the month response from the National Farmed Animal Health and Welfare Council One Welfare Committee Part 2

The relationship many veterinarians have with their farming clients often extends beyond supporting solely animal health extending into the concept of One Health, where human, animal and environmental health interact. Given many farmers spend much of their days on-farm, veterinarians (and other agricultural industry representatives) are often one of a few subsets of people who interact with farmers face-to-face. As such, veterinarians may be uniquely positioned to recognize when farmers are under pressure and need mental health support. However, how do we go about supporting farmers in distress? How can we connect them with appropriate mental health resources? What about client confidentiality? These are just some of the questions raised by the June “Ethical Question of the Month” namely: what are my legal and ethical obligations if a client appears at risk? (1).

The legal and ethical questions highlight the role of the veterinarian in evaluating not only the risk to the animals, but also the people involved in animal care. That said, it is not always easy to determine level of risk, or to know what to say or do in these situations.

The National Farmed Animal Health and Welfare Council One Welfare Committee is sensitive to these concerns because experience has demonstrated the intimate relationship between the level of well-being of agricultural producers and the well-being of their animals, a concept known as *One Welfare*.

Although mental health issues are common in the general population, certain groups are at higher risk, including farmers and veterinarians. Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton and her team at the University of Guelph have studied mental health in Canadian farmers and veterinarians. Their research shows that farmers and veterinarians experience increased levels of adverse mental health outcomes, including stress, depression, anxiety, and burnout, compared to normative populations (1–3). Many veterinarians will feel a need to intervene that stems from their personal values and ethics.

The National Farmed Animal Health and Welfare Council One Welfare Committee explored this ethical question further with two of its members, Janet Smith, Clinic Community Health’s Community Outreach Manager (Farm, Rural & Northern) and Dr. Andria Jones-Bitton, Associate Professor of Epidemiology, Department of Population Medicine and Director of Well-Being Programming, Ontario Veterinary College, University of Guelph.

*Q: What are some of the signs of mental distress you saw in the scenario outlined in our June Ethical Question?*

**Janet Smith** — A: The first thing I noticed in this scenario was that the farmer was calling a veterinarian who lives some distance away. Farmers are often reluctant to reach out for help due to perceived stigma, as well as concerns about anonymity within their own communities. Looking further afield can sometimes feel safer for farmers.

The second thing I noticed was that he was calling about animal health *and* financial problems. We know that animal and human welfare as well as the environ-

ment are connected. Cases of animal neglect and environmental degradation are often linked to a producer’s mental health.

Thirdly, this farmer was showing obvious signs of mental distress and a deteriorating state of well-being. He was calling at odd hours and leaving “rambling, incoherent messages.” We call these warning signs or “risk factors.” The more risk factors one has the more likely they are to develop a mental health problem or even suicidal ideation.

More information on the One Welfare Concept can be found in the National Farmed Animal Health and Welfare Documents “Enhancing Agricultural Wellbeing Through a One Welfare Approach,” and “One Welfare Interim Report” (4–6).



Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP)  
[www.suicideprevention.ca](http://www.suicideprevention.ca)

*Q: Do these signs mean the farmer is at risk of harming himself or others?*

**Janet Smith** — A: Not necessarily, but it is important to take all signs seriously. I am assuming there is some level of trust between the farmer and this veterinarian, as the farmer has reached out on several occasions. That means the window is partly open to explore what might be going on under the surface.

If I were this veterinarian, I would definitely want to ask about the farmer’s situation, how he is dealing with the stress, who/what supports he has in his life, and if he is contemplating suicide or harming someone else (including animals). In assessing for suicide risk, the basic questions to ask are: Do you have a *plan* to die by suicide? If so, *when* and *how* are you planning on killing yourself? Do you have the *means* to carry out your plan?

If you feel the farmer is at imminent risk (i.e., answers yes to plan, means and timing within 24 hours), call 9-1-1 or accompany them

to the nearest hospital. If the risk is not immediate but you are still concerned, let them know you will help connect them to helping resources. Trust your gut!

We no longer use the phrase “committed suicide” as suicide is not a crime and can contribute to the stigma. Using words like: “dying by suicide” are better.

*Q: I'm not a trained counsellor, so I don't feel qualified to start a conversation like this!*

**Janet Smith** — A: Let's face it. Talking about mental health and suicide can be difficult. Many of us don't know what to say or do when faced with these situations. However, it is important to remember that asking questions about suicide will *not* plant a seed and cause someone to take their life. Rather, it is an invitation to talk about something that may (or may not) be on their mind, and to show that you care and are willing to connect them with help. You do NOT have to problem solve or feel like you have all the answers. Open-hearted listening is the best intervention.

**Andria Jones-Bitton** — A: Unquestionably, talking about mental health and suicide can feel difficult for some people, especially if it is an area that you are not frequently engaged in. It may be helpful to remember that, as a veterinarian, you have likely received training and have developed experiential skills in active listening, empathy, and communication. These skills that you have developed for veterinary practice will also be helpful in discussions of mental health.

*Q: What if the person is not at imminent risk but I'm still concerned?*

**Janet Smith** — A: If you're satisfied that the person is not going to die within the next 24 hours but aren't sure how to proceed, you can call a local crisis line or the Canada Suicide Prevention Service [www.crisisservicescanada.ca](http://www.crisisservicescanada.ca) (1-833-456-4566). These lines are open to people at risk *and* those who are concerned about them, as well as those who have lost someone to suicide. Counsellors trained in crisis intervention will explore your concerns. Many crisis lines will offer to do callouts to people

at risk, and/or will explore other options with you.

Crisis counsellors can also support *you*. We know that front-line workers (often called 'Gatekeepers') can experience distress when working with clients. We also know that veterinarians can have high levels of stress, burn-out, and compassion fatigue, all of which put them at higher risk of suicide. It is important to reach out for help if you need it as well.

Do More Ag [www.domoreag.ag](http://www.domoreag.ag) has a list of provincial mental health resources as well as specialized support services for farmers and farm professionals. These include the Manitoba Farm, Rural & Northern Support Service [www.supportline.ca](http://www.supportline.ca) (1-866-367-3276), Saskatchewan Farm Stress Line <http://www.mobilecrisis.ca/farm-stress-line-rural-sask> 1-800-667-4442, Quebec Farmer Assistance Program 1-888-687-9197, Association Québécoise de prévention du suicide: [www.aqps.info/se-former/sentinelle-agricole.html](http://www.aqps.info/se-former/sentinelle-agricole.html) and PEI's Farmer Assistance Program [www.farmerstalk.ca](http://www.farmerstalk.ca) 1-800-736-8006. This list is not intended to be all encompassing of the resources that are available; however, it is a snapshot of the programs that are available to be accessed across the country.

*Q: What if the client gets angry with me?*

**Janet Smith** — A: This is a very natural and common concern. However, it is better to have someone alive and angry than to not say anything at all. In our experience, most people welcome a chance to talk when they feel the person is willing to ask, listen, and connect them with help.

*Q: I'm still not feeling 100% comfortable. Where can I get more training on the subject?*

**Janet Smith** — A: It's always better to be prepared *before* a concern comes up. There are some great Gatekeeper courses available in most communities and online:

*Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?*

**Janet Smith** — A: I'd love to share another resource that I have found very helpful when doing Gatekeeper training. It is a short video called "Help at Hand" about a farm family experiencing stress on the farm in the UK. The Gatekeeper is — you guessed it — a veterinarian! <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fCrOeLLRADs>

**Andria Jones-Bitton** — A: It is important to recognize the impact that this situation (and veterinary practice in general) can have on our own mental health and well-being. The Ontario Veterinary Medical Association (OVMA)'s iMatter program is also a terrific resource for promotion of veterinarian mental health (<https://i-matter.ca/>). The American Veterinary Medical Association 9 Dimensions of Well-Being: Holistic Health for the Veterinarian is also a great tool for well-being promotion in veterinarians (<https://www.avma.org/blog/nine-dimensions-wellbeing-holistic-health-veterinarian>).

Mental Health First Aid [www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca](http://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.ca)  
Safetalk, Applied Suicide Intervention Skills (ASIST), and START (new online suicide prevention training) [www.livingworks.ca](http://www.livingworks.ca)

An evidence-based, agriculture-specific mental health literacy program for farmers and ag professionals called "In the Know" was developed with farmers and mental health professionals at the University of Guelph and will be available soon! Check with your provincial division of the Canadian Mental Health Association and/or your provincial farming associations in early 2021.

Free online suicide prevention training specifically for veterinary professionals. Please be careful watching this on your own because it is possible to have an adverse reaction to the content. Keep yourself safe by watching it with another person or members of your practice <https://www.vetfolio.com/courses/ask-suicide-prevention-training>

Mental health resources for veterinary staff (checklists with signs and symptoms of suicide, common mental health disorders and compassion fatigue) <https://www.canadianveterinarians.net/mental-health-awareness-week>

Le Travailleur de rang: <https://acfareseaux.qc.ca/fr/le-travailleur-de-rang>

## References

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