PROFESSIONAL CHAPLAINCY IN Veterinary Medicine

Veterinary professionals are tasked with assessing the emotional needs of clients, yet they often do not take care of themselves. This can lead to burnout and compassion fatigue and result in a variety of emotional and financial ramifications for patients, clients, and the veterinary team.

Carol Rowehl, LVT, STM, is on the cutting edge of a new way to address these issues—incorporating professional chaplaincy into veterinary medicine. Rowehl, an adjunct chaplain at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania, earned a master of sacred theology degree from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia and completed a thesis on adapting healthcare chaplaincy to the veterinary setting.1

What Is a Chaplain?
Chaplains come to their profession with a background of study in their faith tradition, but their vocation is practiced outside their particular faith community. Professional chaplains, who are certified by the Board of Chaplaincy Certification, Inc. (BCCI), are clinically trained to address unique psychological, social, and spiritual needs, have met the national standards for professional competence, and are held to a code of ethics that prohibits proselytizing or imposing their beliefs and practices on a person in their care.2-4

Carol Rowehl, Veterinary Chaplain

Carol Rowehl serves as an adjunct chaplain at the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. A licensed veterinary technician, she says she was inspired to develop a chaplaincy model for the veterinary profession following her experiences as a cancer survivor and end-of-life caregiver to her dogs.1

Rowehl grew up on Long Island, New York. She has an associate degree in animal health technology from the State University of New York at Delhi, a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in chemistry from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and a master’s degree in religion and sacred theology in pastoral care from Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. She wrote her thesis on “Adapting Healthcare Chaplaincy to the Veterinary Setting.”

“Evidence-based research into the efficacy and benefits of chaplaincy is ongoing in human healthcare and based on the results so far, I am confident that similar benefits will be found in veterinary practice,” said Rowehl.

“My goal is to educate veterinary professionals on the role a professional chaplain can play and advocate for evidence-based research to determine the benefits to clients, staff, and the overall practice from having professional chaplains as part of the veterinary care team.”

Reference
Chaplains in accredited institutions are required to care for those of any faith, as well as those with no faith tradition.5

In the veterinary world, a chaplain’s responsibilities include providing spiritual assistance to clients and team members who may be spiritually challenged by cases they see and interactions they have with difficult or grieving clients. Laurel Lagoni, co-founder of The Argus Institute at Colorado State University’s Veterinary Teaching Hospital, noted, “Our clients feel most vulnerable during a medical emergency, delivery of a diagnosis, process of decision making, failure of a promising treatment, and death of the animal. This is where the human–animal bond is most vulnerable and where the client–doctor relationship is most vulnerable.”6

Chaplains can provide a supportive, non-anxious presence during medical crises and euthanasia procedures, serving as a sacred witness in times of loss and helping people find meaning, hope, and purpose in their current situation. A chaplain can also assist clients and team members identify and draw upon their source of spiritual strength.

Chaplaincy is a natural fit for the growing area of animal hospice.

Lessons from Human Medicine

In human healthcare, incorporating chaplaincy has been shown to benefit the relationship of the patient and his or her family with the healthcare provider and improve patient compliance.7 Other benefits include increased return visits and referrals to particular institutions.8 Families of patients whose spiritual needs are met are less likely to seek financial retribution when problems occur.9 Employing the services of professional board-certified chaplains is one of the most cost-effective methods to improve communication and increase job satisfaction.10

Adding Chaplaincy to a Veterinary Practice

Including a professional chaplain in a veterinary practice can be financed through grants, donations, fundraisers, and other methods to enhance visibility and garner community support. To learn more about starting a chaplaincy service, visit the Association of Professional Chaplains website (professionalchaplains.org).11
More Research is Needed

The importance and value of professional chaplains to veterinary practice are still to be measured using evidence-based research. Their presence, however, could lead to improved client and team relationships; increased client satisfaction, retention, and referrals; increased team morale, job satisfaction, and rate of retention; and decreased burnout and compassion fatigue.

Editor’s note: Katherine Dobbs began her career in veterinary medicine as a technician and manager and uses her experience and human resources expertise to educate veterinary professionals through speaking, writing, teaching, and consulting. She is the founder of interFace Veterinary HR Systems, LLC and a certified compassion fatigue educator.

References

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