The Veterinary Teams Mental Health Framework

A blueprint for veterinary teams in New Zealand

Contents

Glossary

Veterinary Teams Wellbeing Initiative (the Initiative)

The ongoing, whole of profession work to improve veterinary team wellbeing. It aims to better understand the complexities of psychological health in the veterinary professions and promote wellbeing to see better outcomes for veterinary teams, animals and the public.

Veterinary Teams Wellbeing Initiative Governance Group (the Governance Group)

The group responsible for providing governance, coordination and strategic oversight of the Initiative. Its make-up is discussed further in this document.

Veterinary Teams Mental Health Framework (the Framework)

This document lays the groundwork for the Initiative. It ncludes a provisional vision statement and purpose, a conceptual framework structure, and some initial recommendations and priorities.

Veterinary Teams Mental Health Framework Working Group (the Working Group)

The group that requested and coordinated input from stakeholders to produce this document between November 2020 and May 2021. It included senior VCNZ staff and the Directors of Connect Communications and Priority Communications.

Introduction

We are delighted to present this framework to Aotearoa's veterinary professions. Its purpose is to lay the groundwork for a collaborative, whole-of-profession initiative to improve veterinary team wellbeing. It is important to recognise that there is already a lot of useful work being done in this area for the veterinary professions. Our motivation for developing the Framework was the opportunity to enhance coordination and joined-up-thinking that could help make all of that existing work more effective, as well as identifying any gaps or duplication.

To produce this Framework, the Working Group used key findings from the literature and group members' expertise to engage with stakeholders. Consolidation of the feedback from stakeholders was used to inform framework development, initial recommendations and priorities. The Working Group would like to thank all stakeholders for their valuable input, without which this work would not have been possible.

This report is seen as the starting point for an ongoing wellbeing focus for veterinary teams in New Zealand. The work will be progressed by the Veterinary Teams Wellbeing Initiative.

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Purpose

The following is a provisional purpose for the Initiative, based on input from stakeholders during the development of this Framework. It will be up to the Governance Group to review it and decide whether it is to be adopted or amended.

Goal

To improve the health of people working as part of veterinary teams in New Zealand.

Purpose

To heighten the quality of life of team members and improve their relationships with clients and colleagues, leading to better health outcomes for animals, the public and themselves, as well as an enhanced public understanding of the importance of the wellbeing of veterinary teams.

Quality of life encompasses physical, psychological and spiritual aspects. For this Framework, the focus has been on psychological health only. This one aspect was selected as the first step towards enhancing the wellbeing of veterinary team members in New Zealand. However, we would like to acknowledge the importance of all aspects of health and wellbeing.
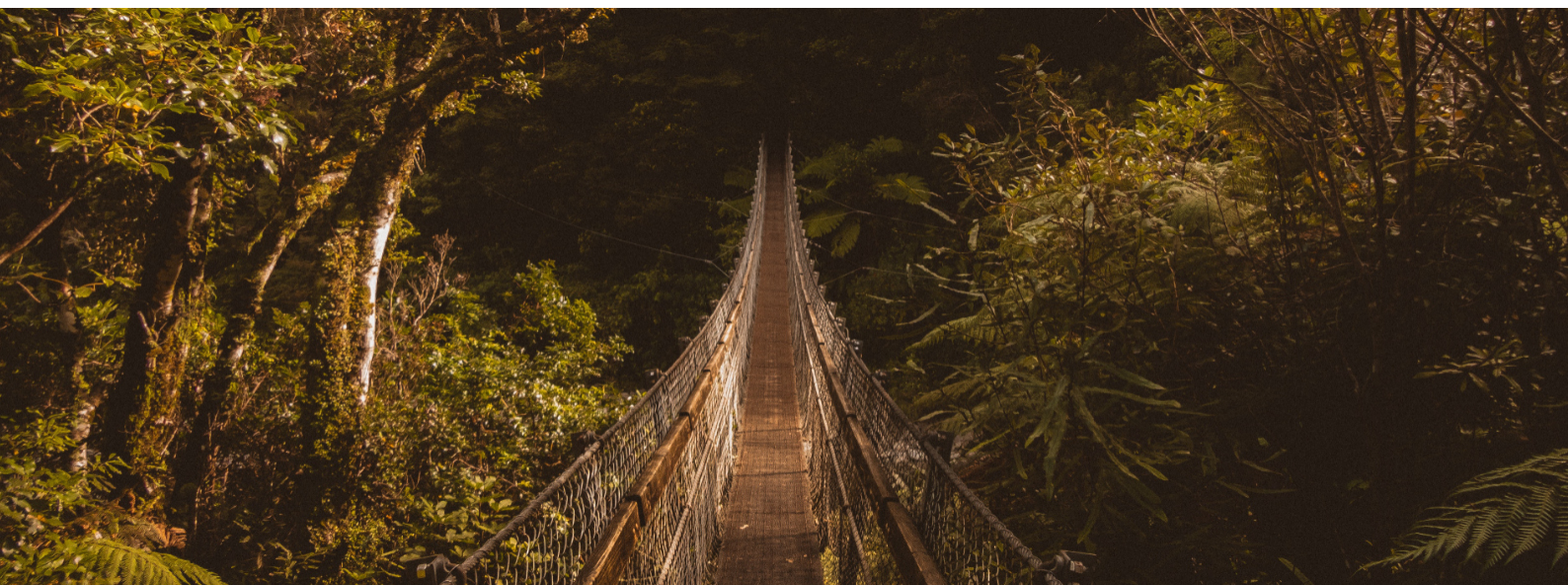
Background

The New Zealand Veterinary Journal article '*Current Insights in Veterinarians' Psychological Wellbeing*' (published online in October 2019) highlighted many of the key issues impacting members of the veterinary profession in New Zealand. By October 2019, there were many wellbeing initiatives underway as well as discussions across the professions about possible ways forward.

Shortly afterwards, New Zealand went into lockdown, and the profession was required to manage an additional set of stressors. By the time VCNZ ran a series of wellbeing webinars for veterinarians in September 2020, it was clear that addressing wellbeing issues was becoming a priority for many, and it was felt that a structural approach to this may prove beneficial.

As a result, VCNZ commissioned the Working Group to develop a wellbeing framework for the veterinary professions in New Zealand.

Table 1: Timeline for the development of the framework

Date	Activity	Relevant documents
October 2020-January 2021	Preliminary scoping and planning meetings and liaison	
11 February 2021	Stakeholder 'pre-reading' circulated	Pre-reading Document: Agenda and Preparation
26 February 2021	First stakeholder meeting	
4 March 2021	Stakeholder follow up post-meeting (capturing and building on the discussion points raised during the meeting)	Discussion Document 1 circulated to attending stakeholders (plus relevant close contacts)
4-11 March 2021	Stakeholder consultation (via Survey Monkey and E-mail). An opportunity to amend or add to the content in Discussion Document 1. 14 feedback responses were received	Summary of Issues, Solutions and Target Groups (from collated feedback)
11-18 March 2021	Development of Discussion Document 2	
18-28 March 2021	Wider consultation with the profession 38 responses were received	Discussion Document 2 circulated to the wider profession.
28 March-15 April 2021	Development of the framework report using feedback from the consultation	The Veterinary Teams Mental Health Framework Working Group Report, April 2021.
15 April 2021	Council consultation	The Veterinary Teams Mental Health Framework Working Group Report, April 2021 circulated to Veterinary Council members
21 April 2021	VCNZ council meeting	Council provided feedback
3 May 2021	Second stakeholder meeting	Feedback from stakeholders used to inform final amendments to the framework document
June 2021	Framework completed	This document

Governance

The consistent message from stakeholders throughout this process was that no single organisation should "own" the Initiative. There was strong support for the idea of a Governance Group made up of a variety of people, including representatives from key organisations involved with the professions, as well as practising professionals.

The Governance Group will provide coordination, governance and strategic oversight of the Initiative. It will ensure that any work done is in scope with the Initiative's goal and purpose.

Figure 1: Governance structure for the Initiative

Governance

Permanent, stable, long & short term focus

Governance Group

Set strategy

Evaluate outcomes

Coordinate projects

Engage agencies & experts

Identify opportunities & threats

Working groups

Topics may change. Groups generally short term. Membership to fit needs

Challenges Group

Solutions Group

Other groups

Reference groups

Temporary, formed to inform working groups and Governance Group.

Clinicians

Consumers

New grads

Industry

The Governance Group will have both a long term and a short term focus, and will be primarily concerned with asking: "Why?", "What?", "Where?", "When?" and "How Effective?". The specifics of what it does can be determined through its Terms of Reference (ToR). Establishing the ToR will likely be one of the Governance Group's first tasks. Some possible areas of focus feature in the diagram above. Setting strategy might include topics such as the development of policy, workforce needs, client/patient needs, use of technology, and funding/resources. Evaluating outcomes might focus on defining 'what success looks like' and determining how this should be measured, analysed and reported.

Working Groups will be tasked with operationalising initiatives. They will be primarily concerned with how to make it happen (achieving outputs) and how to make it happen well (aiming for quality and efficiency). One Working Group will focus on the topic 'Challenges' and another will focus on the topic 'Solutions'. It is envisaged that these topics will be revisited and revised as necessary. Working Groups will have three 'Primary Factors' to consider in an ongoing way. These primary factors could be incorporated into projects as key performance indicators or they could be standing agenda items at meetings. The three Primary Factors are: **Information Gathering**, **Actions,** and **Communication**.

'Information Gathering' might include a project such as a stocktake. It may also involve setting up a reference group to learn from a particular professional group (such as employees) or target group (such as newly graduated vets). Such information can be used to inform the development and delivery of projects.

Having Actions as a standing agenda item will help to ensure that the groups are moving ahead and achieving outcomes. With this in mind, it may be valuable to have a Working Group member who has project management expertise.

Working groups will need to communicate well. Communication channels and practices between the groups, and externally will need to be clarified. For instance, it will be important to ensure there is consistent messaging throughout, especially for any outgoing communications. The Working Groups will be asked to incorporate recommendations from the Governance Group into their planning and actions to ensure consistency and alignment with the strategic direction. The Working Groups will need to be responsive to any strategic change defined by the Governance Group and to adapt their operations accordingly. The Working Groups may also feed information back to the Governance Group, who may use this to inform a shift in strategy. This two-way approach will require open-minded and flexible mindsets from members.

For all three of these Primary Factors, it might also be helpful to consider a variety of 'sub-headings' such as "myself, my team and organisation, my profession and the public". This could ensure the inclusion of capabilities and connections for people at various stages of their career and optimise the stakeholder representation and expertise required to build solutions.

Membership

The Governance Group will have both a long and short-term focus and provide strategic direction and oversight. Suggestions have been that its size be restricted to seven or eight people; that group members may wear multiple hats; that diversity is important; that an uneven number of members is optimal; and that there should be an independent chair. Declaration and management of any (perceived or real) conflict of interest of GG members will be important. A range of expertise will be required. Suggestions for this have included organisational psychology, leadership and business skills, HR knowledge, and mental health expertise, amongst others. Specific agencies have been suggested, and this information is captured in the Discussion Documents. Whilst participation in the Governance Group will require ongoing commitment, it is envisaged that being a member of a Working Group or a Reference Group would be a short-term or even one-off commitment.

Review

The Framework needs to be flexible and responsive. As such, there will be built-in review periods, where the work that has been accomplished, is underway or planned, will be reviewed, along with the operation of the Initiative itself. It will also be important to review the role and performance of the Governance Group, any changes to the oversight of the Governance Group and membership of Governance and Working Groups. The Working Group topics (Challenges and Solutions) and three Primary Factors (Information-Gathering, Actions and Communication) can also be reviewed. It is envisaged that the governance skillset that is required for the first 12 months during development and implementation (primarily advisory) may differ from an ongoing strategic steering committee, and as such the membership may change.

Operations

While the Governance Group will set strategic direction, all work undertaken will need to be based on core foundational principles, and take into consideration wider contextual factors and specific needs. The Tiered Triangle (Figure 1) provides a visual representation of these concepts.

Figure 2: The Tiered Triangle of Mental Health for Veterinary Teams
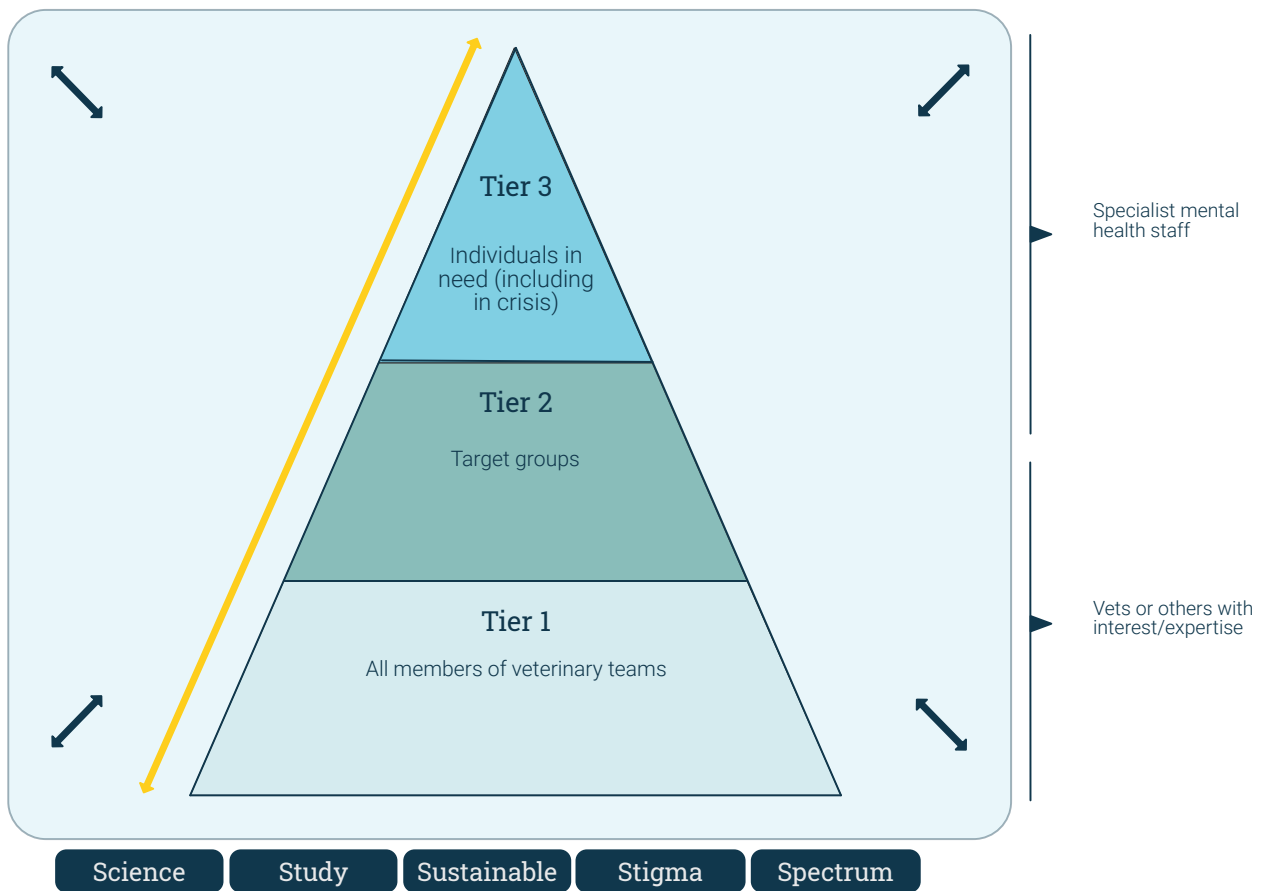
Foundational Principles

The five foundational principles at the base of the triangle (above) are the building blocks of the Framework. Any policies, goals or initiatives that are developed need to be based on science, and studied after they have been implemented, to evaluate their outcomes. They will need to be developed with an awareness of the stigma of mental ill health and may specifically aim to address this. Initiatives or policies will need to be sustainable and should focus on the whole spectrum of mental health to encompass flourishing health as well as illness.

Environment

The square surrounding the Tiered Triangle symbolizes the wider environmental factors that

can impact veterinary team members' wellbeing. The blue arrows show that this can be a two-way relationship, as the health of team members may also affect elements of the environment, for instance, client interactions and patient quality of care. Wider environmental factors may include COVID-19 Levels, seasonal fluctuations affecting workload, staffing levels, the influence of home life, economic issues, regulatory requirements, workforce issues, etc.

Providers

The boxes to the right of the Tiered Triangle show the likely providers of the services or initiatives. Mental health expertise will be required for those at the tip of the triangle (Tier 3), and a variety of types of expertise or interest will be required for Tiers 1 and 2.

Tiers

The three tiers symbolize the 'recipients' of wellbeing initiatives, with the yellow arrow being a reminder that tiers are not static, as individuals may move between tiers at different points in their professional lives.

The table below provides a structure for the Solutions Working Group. Some possible content for this table has already been developed.

Table 2: Target template for the Solutions Working Group

	Protection	Promotion	Intervention
	Protecting mental health by: reducing work-related risk factors for mental health conditions and/or increasing protective factors	Promoting mental health and wellbeing by developing/enhancing: the positive aspects of work and/or team members' strengths and capabilities	Addressing mental health difficulties and conditions amongst team members (regardless of whether the workplace was a contributing factor) Enhancing team capability by building resilience (in both individuals and teams)
Tier 1 - Individuals in need			
Currently underway			
Suggested			
Tier 2 - Target groups			
Currently underway			
Suggested			
Tier 3 - All members of veterinary teams			
Currently underway			
Suggested			

Definitions amended from *Blue B. Good practice framework for mental health and wellbeing in first responder organisations. Melbourne: Beyond Blue. 2016.*

Recommendations

The table below sets out our recommendations on work to be done by the Governance Group and working groups, based on our work and the stakeholder input received to date. Ultimately, it will be up to the Governance Group to decide on what work to progress and how to prioritise it. We use the following timeframes for prioritisation:

- High: Within the next three months (end of September 2021)
- Medium: Within the next six months (end of December 2021)
- Low: Within the next year (end of June 2022).

Table 3: Recommendations

Task	Group	Priority
Define the Terms of Reference and membership of Governance Group.	Governance	High
Appoint members to the Governance Group and schedule quarterly meetings.	Governance	High
Refine the Vision Statement of the Initiative. Outline what success looks like.	Governance	High
Outline how the strategic direction of the Initiative aligns with the strategic and business models of the agencies who are involved in this work. This includes consideration of any conflict of interest.	Governance	High
Māori Consultation Consultation may lead to a greater understanding of the possibilities of the Initiative.	Governance	High
Develop communications strategy. Outline communication channels and practices between the Governance and Working Groups and with all groups externally.	Governance	High
Identify the top 5-10 priorities and projects for the Working Groups, and invite initial Working Group members to join	Governance	High
Stocktake/benchmarking.	Challenges	Medium
Undertake a needs analysis to identify the main priorities. (What are the 'low hanging fruit' where changes could be made quickly? What are the most important issues for the different team member groups?) .	Challenges	Medium
Identify a business case for solutions proposed.	Solutions	Medium
Undertake a stocktake of mental health initiatives underway in New Zealand (including allocation of each of these initiatives to the Target Template (Table 1).	Solutions	Medium
Communication to all veterinary team members and other stakeholders (including sponsors) about the Initiative, with a summary of the Framework, the support available and an outline of the initial steps.	Solutions/ Governance	Medium
Collaboration with other existing and working projects.	Solutions	Medium-Low