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## Surveying veterinarians on ethical dilemmas and moral distress within veterinary practice

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### Abstract

Growing apprehensions regarding ethical dilemmas, moral distress, and burnout within veterinary practice are on the rise. Despite this, the fundamental origins of these issues have not been thoroughly investigated. There is a lack of research examining the prevalence of moral distress among Indian veterinarians or its implications for career longevity and overall well-being. The majority of participants expressed conflict regarding determining appropriate care to administer. Over 88% of respondents indicated that the challenges hindering them from delivering suitable care caused either moderate or severe distress to themselves or their staff. Seventy-three percent of participants reported being requested to administer care they deemed futile. Ethical discord leading to moral distress could serve as a significant contributor to stress and diminished well-being, a factor that may not be widely acknowledged or clearly defined.

**Keywords:** Veterinary practice, ethical dilemmas, moral distress, burnout

### Introduction

The concept of ethics originates from the Greek word *ethos*, which refers to customs or character. It is described as the field concerned with distinguishing between right and wrong, and with moral duties and responsibilities (Vettical, 2018) [9]. The increase in intensive livestock farming, advancements in technology, innovations in genetic engineering, expansion of laboratory animal research, rise in the status and economic importance of companion animals, and greater recognition of the bond between humans and animals all contribute to the evolving role of veterinarians in society (Rollin, 2006) [7]. The field of veterinary medicine operates within a complex ethical framework, encompassing professional responsibilities towards the animal patient, the animal owner, fellow veterinary professionals, and society at large (Batchelor *et al.*, 2015) [1]. At the core of veterinary practice lies ethical decision-making. Veterinary ethics entails combining ethical principles to apply morals, values, and judgments in the execution of veterinary practice (Vettical, 2018) [9]. A collaborative report by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) and the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education (EAEVE) advocated for a more consistent and thorough integration of animal welfare, ethics, and law education throughout veterinary schools. It emphasized that an understanding of ethical considerations in decision-making is integral to being an effective clinician (Hernandez *et al.*, 2018) [2]. Ethical dilemmas arise when conflicts occur between these obligations, either with each other, with the moral standards of veterinarians themselves, or with both (Morgan and McDonald, 2007) [5]. Prior studies have determined that moral distress significantly affects patient safety, compassion fatigue, mental well-being, and the overall quality of professional life (Kahler, 2015) [4]. The discussion on moral distress among healthcare professionals has been ongoing for more than three decades (Jameton, 2017) [3]. However, only limited-scale studies have documented instances of ethical and moral conflict in veterinary medicine. Our study aimed to explore the idea that veterinarians often face ethical conflicts during their practice, leading to moral distress. We aimed to ascertain the extent of formal training veterinarians have received, at any stage of their training, regarding the management of such situations.

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## Materials and Methods

A survey comprising of a anonymous questionnaire was disseminated to veterinary professionals situated in and nearby Haryana. This method was chosen to maximize cost-effectiveness and minimize interference with their professional obligations. While the majority of queries provided answer options, certain questions requested participants to give free-text responses, which were allowed. Questionnaires were sent out to veterinarians, and additional reminders were sent to those who had not replied to the initial or subsequent mailings. The collected data was anonymously entered into spreadsheet software and then analysed statistically.

## Results and Discussion

The results of our study reveal that veterinarians frequently encounter conflict and ethical distress as part of their routine practice. These findings suggest that moral distress can lead to feelings of burnout and compassion fatigue, highlighting concerns that it may contribute to the onset of mental health issues among veterinarians. Questionnaires were sent out to 100 individuals, with 65 being male. Seventy percent of the participants had been practicing for 0-10 years, while 30% had practiced for over 10 years (Table 1). Approximately 85% of the respondents were generalist veterinarians, and 37% were currently practicing veterinary medicine independently.

**Table 1:** Demographics of respondents

Participant characteristics and Demographics Question	Option	%
Gender	Male	65
	Female	35
Age	Less than 40	68
	More than 40	32
Experience of veterinary practice	up to 10 years	70
	More than 10 years	30
Specialty within vet medicine	Yes	15
	No	85
Solo practitioner	Yes	37
	No	73

When inquired about the frequency of conflicts with pet owners regarding the treatment of their animals, 35% responded "Often" while 50% responded "Sometimes". When asked, "Have you ever been requested to perform a task during your clinical practice that seems morally or ethically inappropriate?" 85% responded "Sometimes" and 10% responded "Often" (Table 2). Although roughly 35% of participants indicated that they never complied with such requests, 50% reported sometimes complied, 15% often complied. Forty percent of respondents expressed that they felt unable to act in accordance with their ethical beliefs. Many respondents, in their free-text responses, identified financial constraints as the primary barrier to acting in accordance with their moral compass, although some also cited external pressures from employers or organizational policies. Regarding euthanasia, 27% indicated that they sometimes receive requests for the procedure that they deem inappropriate, and around 10% stated that they often comply with these requests. Nearly 59% reported that it caused either themselves or their staff a moderate amount of distress, while 38% reported severe distress. Seventy-three percent of respondents noted that they sometimes or often receive requests for treatment that they perceive as futile, with approximately half of them refusing such requests. In total, 88% of participants expressed that their inability to act in the best interest of a patient resulted in moderate to severe stress to them.

Seventy-six percent of participants expressed experiencing moderate to severe distress due to their inability to deliver what they considered appropriate care. Regarding feelings of distress or anxiety about their work, 42% responded "sometimes" while 48% responded "often". Twenty percent of participants noted a decline in their empathy towards

their patients over time, while 35% reported a similar decrease in empathy towards pet owners. Additionally, 62% of respondents indicated feeling that they had placed the needs of animal owners above those of their patients. When inquired about their coping strategies in situations where they felt unable to act in accordance with their principles, only 2% mentioned seeking unspecified professional assistance. Similarly, when dealing with clients who disagreed with their recommendations for their pet's well-being, 1% sought professional support. In both scenarios, over 60% of participants discussed the situation with a partner, friend, or colleague, while around 18% reported taking no action.

While our findings may not be universally applicable, they remain deeply troubling. They indicate that numerous veterinarians experience dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their profession, encountering discomfort and distress related to various aspects of their work, and lacking sufficient avenues to address their distress. These results underscore existing worries regarding the mental health and overall welfare of veterinarians, as they contend with numerous workplace conflicts and have limited resources for seeking support and assistance (Moses *et al.*, 2018)<sup>[6]</sup>. Identifying, acknowledging, and categorizing conflict and distress as ethical issues represent crucial initial measures in addressing moral distress. Drawing insights from studies on nurses, we can enhance moral agency, which involves the capacity or liberty to make moral judgments and be held responsible. Additionally, fostering moral imagination, which entails examining conflicts and scenarios from an ethical perspective, and cultivating a morally supportive community can help diminish moral distress within our profession (Traudt *et al.*, 2016)<sup>[8]</sup>.

**Table 2:** Responses to survey questions regarding ethical dilemmas and moral distress.

<b>Professional Question</b>	<b>Option</b>	<b>%</b>
Have you ever been requested to perform a task during your clinical practice that seems morally or ethically inappropriate?	Never	5
	Sometimes	85
	Often	10
How frequently have you adhered to these requests?	Never	35
	Sometimes	50
	Often	15
Did you believe you had the authority to decline?	Yes	60
	No	40
How frequently have you experienced disagreements with pet owners regarding their desired course of action for their pets' treatment?	Never	15
	Sometimes	50
	Often	35
How frequently have you encountered cases where you felt unable to act in accordance with what you perceived as the morally correct course of action?	Never	5
	Sometimes	70
	Often	25
In situations like these, how much distress have you experienced at its worst?	None	12
	Moderate distress	52
	Severe distress	36
What actions, if any, have you taken to manage or cope with these situations?	Done nothing	18
	Talk with friend	62
	Discussed with colleague	18
	Sought professional help	2
How frequently have you encountered what you perceive to be inappropriate requests for euthanasia?	Never	7
	Rarely	62
	Sometimes	27
	Often	4
How frequently have you acceded to these requests?	Never	48
	Sometimes	42
	Often	10
	None	3
In instances like these, how much distress has it caused you or your staff at its peak?	Moderate distress	59
	Severe distress	38
	None	3
How frequently have you handled cases where you believe a pet owner is seeking treatment that you consider to be futile?	Never	6
	Rarely	21
	Sometimes	54
	Often	19
What approaches did you employ to handle this circumstance?	Done nothing	32
	Discussed with colleague	68
Have you ever declined to administer a treatment that you deem futile?	Yes	52
	No	48
How frequently do you experience conflict or distress when a pet owner rejects what you believe is optimal for your patient's well-being?	Never	2
	Rarely	19
	Sometimes	52
	Often	27
How have you chosen to address these emotions?	Done nothing	12
	Talked with partner/friend	58
	Discussed with colleague	29
	Sought professional help	1
How frequently do you propose euthanasia to pet owners if they have not initiated the discussion?	Never	3
	Rarely	11
	Sometimes	60
	Often	26
Do you advise euthanasia to pet owners even after they have expressed reluctance?	Yes	87
	No	13
How frequently have pet owners' perspectives or beliefs about treatment hindered your ability to administer what you consider appropriate care?	Rarely	24
	Sometimes	60
	Often	16
How much distress has this induced in you, at its peak?	None	4
	Moderate distress	74
	Severe distress	22
How frequently have you experienced distress or anxiety regarding your profession?	Never	10
	Sometimes	42
	Often	48
How often have you encountered disagreements with other veterinarians regarding the optimal management of a shared case?	Never	4
	Rarely	48
	Sometimes	42
	Often	6

How have you addressed and resolved such circumstances?	Done nothing	21
	Discussed with colleague	79
Do conflicts with other veterinarians evoke more or less distress compared to disagreements with pet owners?	More distressing	62
	Less distressing	38
How frequently do you encounter disagreements with other staff members (i.e., non-veterinarians) regarding the optimal approach to a clinical case?	Never	12
	Rarely	50
	Sometimes	35
	Often	3
Do you perceive any decline in your compassion or ability to empathize with your patients throughout your career?	Yes	20
	Sometimes	37
	No	43
Do you sense a diminishment in your empathy towards pet owners throughout your career?	Yes	35
	Sometimes	45
	No	20
Do you ever find yourself placing the needs of animal owners above those of your patients?	Yes	62
	No	38
Do you experience conflict regarding this?	Never	3
	Rarely	20
	Sometimes	47
	Often	30

### Conclusion

Veterinarians consistently highlight the prevalence of ethical conflicts and moral distress across various practice settings and among diverse demographic groups. However, most veterinarians lack adequate training to mitigate the effects of these issues. Ethical conflicts and subsequent moral distress may significantly contribute to stress and diminished well-being, yet they are often overlooked or poorly defined. Leveraging well-researched and effective strategies employed to mitigate moral distress in human healthcare could be adapted to address this challenge within veterinary practice.

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