

## AUSTRALIAN VETERINARY ASSOCIATION'S GRADUATE MENTORING PROGRAM

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The Australian story of support for the mental health of graduate veterinarians began in 1996. In response to the tragic suicide of a new graduate veterinarian, the AVA (WA) Graduate Support Scheme was born, with significant contributions from AVA (WA) Committee members. The scheme was set up to provide additional support for new graduate veterinarians as they headed out into the wide wondrous world of practice as a qualified vet.

Family and friends can be a great source of support for new graduates but they are likely to have an inadequate understanding of the complexities of practice and workmates may not want to get involved in issues that could affect their own positions. Situations can arise where new graduates feel isolated, or simply unwilling to discuss the issues with those closest to them. This is where a mentor can help.

In short, the Graduate Support Scheme worked by assigning each graduate from Murdoch University Veterinary School to an experienced volunteering member of the profession to act as a mentor during their first year in the profession. During this early development Dr Paul Davey coordinated and enhanced the scheme, became its champion and had a major role in making the program what it is today. Later, we developed earlier assignment of mentors to graduates (In September at the AVA Trade Fair), efficient email communication systems, and more opportunities for graduates and mentors to socialise prior to leaving the university system.

Some basic support resources were supplied to the mentors, and the successful acquisition of the WA Government's Suicide Awareness Strategy funding through the OneLife program in 2011-13 dramatically enhanced our ability to provide further training and support to mentors. Dr Brian McErlean, another Western Australian veterinarian passionate about mental health, managed this project. Much cooperation and collaboration occurred between the Veterinary Surgeons Board (WA), Murdoch University, and the AVA to ensure the AVA (WA) Graduate Mentor Scheme intermeshed appropriately with other strategies and resources designed to improve career resilience and new graduate satisfaction in their career choice. A quote from the Taverner report, commissioned by the AVA to examine new graduate issues, emphasises the importance of this vertical integration:

"Transitioning to the workforce from university is a very challenging time for, most, if not all new graduates.

The nurturing of the veterinarians of tomorrow needs to start earlier in their career – while they are still being educated.

Most new graduates, once they find a job, feel thrown in at the deep end and while they recognise that support is available, sometimes it is too late”.

### **How does mentoring work?**

Mentoring is the pairing of two people – a mentor and a mentee - to facilitate the sharing of professional and personal skills and experiences, as well as enhancing career development. It provides a structured and trusting relationship by bringing less experienced veterinarians together with more experienced members of the profession, normally working in a similar field, who can offer guidance, support and encouragement. Mentoring is a powerful personal development and confidence building tool. It’s an effective way of helping people progress in their careers.

The Australian Veterinary Association’s mentoring program is a 12 month commitment between an established professional and someone who is new to the veterinary industry. Mentees also have the opportunity to request a mentor known to them.

### **Key Features of the AVA Program**

The AVA Graduate Mentoring Program engages experienced veterinary professionals to support new graduates in a smooth transition into the profession, to assist them to reach their full potential and to be happy in their jobs. The program aims to develop and sustain a satisfying professional career for veterinarians. Mentees join in their final year of veterinary study, before they commence work. In addition, the program now welcomes any AVA graduate members in their 2nd, 3rd or 4th year in the profession to apply as mentees. Mentors must have at least three years’ experience in the profession, and be an AVA member. Any non-member wishing to participate is reviewed on an individual basis.

Mentors and mentees are matched according to application details and are required to attend three events - Program Launch, Mid-Program Review and Program Close, some of which are face-to-face meetings while others are delivered via webinars. During the program, mentors and mentees are expected to be in contact at least monthly. Mentees and first-time mentors are expected to complete the Art of Mentoring online training to prepare them for their mentoring relationship. The training takes approximately one hour to complete. Acceptance into the program is conditional upon a commitment to completion of the training.

#### *Confidentiality*

During discussions between mentor and mentee it’s inevitable that matters of client confidentiality will be an issue when clinical material is presented. Both mentor and mentees must be aware of the likely confidential nature of their interactions. Breaches in confidentiality are only supported if the other party is at risk of harm; physical or mental wellbeing, and in the case of something unethical or illegal.

*What if the relationship isn’t working?*

As with all human relationships, some mentoring interaction will work well, some will be okay and others will not work at all to the satisfaction of both parties. When the mentoring relationship is not working for whatever reason, it's important that the issues are addressed promptly and a mutually agreeable solution found as soon as possible

*When should a mentor refer their mentee on to another professional?*

Mentors may be challenged by some questions or issues that they are unable to completely resolve for their mentee. One of the key skills of mentors in this program is to recognise the limitations of their skills and not to try to accomplish things that they are not qualified to do.

*The role of the Mentor*

A mentor can assist the mentee to develop trust in their own abilities and boosting confidence and self-esteem. A mentor asks questions and challenges their mentee, while providing guidance and encouragement. A mentor is a guide who can help the mentee refine the direction they might like to take in their career and who can help them to develop solutions to career issues.

A mentor may:

- support transition and help assimilation into veterinary life
- act as a source of information and insight
- suggest relevant options regarding career development or strategies for achieving professional goals
- recognise when a mentee may need professional help to address mental health or other personal or professional issues
- be able to recommend appropriate professional help to address these issues
- recommend resources to improve specific skills
- help the mentee problem solve professional challenges in their working life
- discuss issues of professional ethics
- discuss workplace related problems and options for how these may be addressed, for example pay and conditions, and interpersonal relationships
- provide advice on options for dealing with difficult client relationships.

Some of the skills required to be a mentor include:

- an understanding of different mentoring styles
- a genuine desire to assist mentees transition smoothly into professional life
- an ability to negotiate time commitments and accessibility
- being able to identify the mentee's needs and goals and how to facilitate, support and encourage them to achieve those goals
- being able to actively listen
- honesty and openness in providing non-judgemental feedback and advice
- knowledge of a range problem solving approaches
- ability to recognise when to refer a mentee to a health professional



## **Do mentor programs work?**

An interesting outcome from analysis of our national program is the high retention and satisfaction of mentors; perhaps this demonstrates that a mentoring program does work on a leadership development level.

Twenty-two years after the trauma and sadness of Dr Gavin Baraugh's suicide, we have certainly learnt a lot more about what influences veterinarian's mental health and we have moved from a focus on suicide prevention to more targeted support for mental health and personal development.

## **The Future**

When the Western Australia AVA was running its mentoring program prior to it going national, the numbers and resources available made assessments of the effectiveness of the program difficult. With the national program which has been running for three and a half years with significant sponsorship from Guild, Hills, Petsure, Royal Canin, Provet and Virbac, there will be better opportunities to assess the success of the program.

## **National program numbers**

Year	Uni	Graduates	Mentors
Cohort 1: Oct2015-Oct2016	ALL	249	247
Cohort 3: Oct2016-Oct2017	ALL	196	247
Cohort 5: Oct2017-Oct2018	ALL	216	261
Cohort 7: Oct2018-Oct2019	ALL	190	287
Total graduates through the program Oct 2015 – Oct 2019		<b>851</b>	

The AVA national graduate mentoring program is part of the AVA's Graduate and Student Program which is currently managed by Monika Cole who is a wonderful ambassador for the program.

## **References**

1. Tavener Research, (2012) New Graduate Research, Australian Veterinary Association, Project Reference Number 4338.
2. Davey P, (2013) Proceedings of the Australian Veterinary Association Annual Conference, Mentoring programs for new graduates: do they work? ISBN: 978-0-9807967-3-5