



SAVMA Statement on Veterinary Student Duty Hours

From its inception in 1969, formerly known as the National Conference of Student Chapters of the AVMA (NCSCAVMA), the Student American Veterinary Medical Association (SAVMA) continues to work toward its single mission “to support, empower, and inspire all veterinary students in improving their lives, education and career, along with securing a better future for our profession through collaboration with our parent organization, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA).” Veterinary students’ wellbeing, at every stage of their veterinary training, and in all facet of their lives, is therefore at the heart of SAVMA’s mission. For this reason, SAVMA national finds it important to make a clear and unambiguous stance on the needs of veterinary students on their clinical rotations.

For over four decades, the correlation between the wellbeing of medical professionals and the quality of healthcare organizations has been documented and understood in the human profession.¹⁻² Burnout, defined as the emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduction in efficiency that results from the constant exposure due to stressors faced on the job³, has tremendous negative impact on the personal lives of our medical professionals.⁴ The Merck Animal Health’s Fourth Veterinary Wellbeing Study found that most veterinarians experience low to medium burnout with exhaustion being the principle type.⁵ In a direct correlation with the number of hours worked, the Medscape Physician Lifestyle Report shows that physicians who work 71 or more hours are 21% more likely to experience burnout than those who work 31-40 hours a week.⁶

The result of burnout in the medical profession can vary from difficulty in maintaining a healthy work-life balance and losing passion for one’s work, to serious detriments to the health of the healthcare provider themselves. According to the Merck Animal Health study veterinarians with lower burnout spend more time with friends and family, exercise more, and sleep eight hours or more per night.⁵ Coronary Heart Disease (CHD), shorter life expectancy, problematic alcohol use, depression, and suicide are only some of the reported negative consequences associated with burnout known today.⁶⁻⁷ In a comprehensive study evaluating the type and severity of medical errors in veterinary hospitals, found that medical errors have significant impact on our veterinary patients, from drug errors to poor communication, resulting in as much as 15% of these errors leading to the harm of a patient.⁸ In addition to safe and proper patient care, wellbeing of our veterinary professionals is of equal concern.⁸

To address some of these clear dangers of burnout and depression, the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) and the American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) have outlined guidelines regarding wellbeing and fatigue mitigation, encouraging host institutions to implement changes such as to limit duty hours, in order to safeguard against the negative effects of increased workload, and chronic sleep loss.¹⁰⁻¹²

As early career individuals in similar teaching environments, veterinary students are not immune to these challenges. Though veterinary medicine does not have the extensive research done in human medicine, parallels to human medicine as well as the specific challenges of

veterinary medicine warrant attention. Prior to completion of their DVM degrees, veterinary students also face various challenges that have led to the loss of several students to suicide over the last several years. Many confounding factors have been reported by students to affect their wellbeing in the clinic, from the inability to consume a decent meal or properly take care of bodily functions, the lack of appropriate rest periods between shifts, the inability to follow through with mental health or other medical appointments due to fear of repercussions. The University of Vienna utilized a rotation stress questionnaire to assess rotation specific stress among veterinary students. This assessment found that the number one cause of stress of veterinary students are a heavy workload and long working hours.¹³

To provide the best opportunity for veterinary students to thrive and successfully complete their veterinary education, SAVMA has provided a list of guidelines that aim to address the very issues veterinary student face on their clinical rotations. These guidelines were developed and updated with the knowledge that not all schools operate equally and are an attempt to balance the needs of a rigorous program with the wellbeing of students. Additionally, though SAVMA does not have jurisdiction over interns and residents, the organization strongly supports these views for both entities.

It is important to note that by virtue of being guidelines, these statements are not requirements and therefore not enforceable by SAVMA. Nevertheless, they represent the ideals and values of SAVMA and the various AVMA accredited veterinary institutions are strongly encouraged to follow them. Students recognize that they are integral to the success and daily function of their teaching hospital, but SAVMA believes their work must be balanced by appropriate levels of support staff and faculty to ensure student wellbeing. SAVMA aims for these guidelines to serve as a reliable backbone in particular for veterinary students on clinical rotations so they can be aware of the standards their national representation recommends with their health and wellbeing in mind.

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References

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