Vetlife offering a lifeline

Tricia Colville has been a trustee of Vetlife for 2 years and here she talks to *Companion* about the charity, what it does and what it means to her.

WHAT DOES VETLIFE DO?

Vetlife supports the veterinary community through three services.

The Vetlife Helpline (probably the most well-known service) provides independent confidential and free help 24/7/365 via phone and email.

Everyone in the veterinary community is welcome to contact the Helpline for support, which is run by trained volunteers who are veterinary professionals.

As well as the Helpline, Vetlife funds and manages **Vetlife Health Support** and **Vetlife Financial Support** (the latter is currently only available to vet surgeons and their dependents).

You do not need to be a member of Vetlife or any other organization to access our support.

WHO RUNS VETLIFE?

Vetlife is a charity and is managed by a board of 12 Trustees appointed from the membership. Four of these Trustees are elected by the Board as officers and comprise the Charity Executive. All Trustees contribute their time and skills on a voluntary non-remunerated basis.

The Vetlife permanently employed staff are based in offices co-located in the building of the British Veterinary Association (BVA). Of these, only the Operations Manager and Financial Support Casework Officer are full time roles, while Communications Officer and Administrator provide part-time support. The Company Secretary is also engaged by the BVA. Although we are based in BVA offices, Vetlife is a totally separate organization and is not part of BVA.

Vetlife works with a few external partners:

- Dr Rosie Allister, Helpline Manager, is a researcher in veterinary mental health and well-being at the University of Edinburgh, she has volunteered

on Vetlife Helpline since 2007 and has led Vetlife Helpline since 2010.

- Health Support Service is delivered by March on Stress who provide the necessary counselling and support service to those identified by Vetlife as likely to benefit from this assistance. Referral to MoS is most common following contact to the Vetlife Helpline.

CAN YOU TELL US A BIT MORE ABOUT THE HELPLINE?

Helpline is available 24-hours a day to anyone in the veterinary community; this includes vets, vet nurses, students, practice managers, VCAs, support staff, and others. It can be accessed by telephone or email.

All phone calls are answered by the helper on duty; if they are busy, we may take a message and call back and that call back will be within an hour.

All emails are responded to within 24 hours.

Vetlife Helpline is completely confidential and non-judgemental; we listen, explore options, and where needed can signpost to other services.

Everything said to Vetlife Helpline is confidential; it is a safe place to talk.

DO MANY PEOPLE USE THE HELPLINE?

2018 was our busiest year yet, and 2019 is looking to be even busier. There were 2775 contacts made in 2018 compared with 312 five years earlier, which is almost an 800% increase! Emails are now the preferred means of communication.

WHO ANSWERS THE HELPLINE PHONES AND EMAILS?

As we have been getting busier and busier, we took on 20 new helpers in 2018 following selection and training. Vetlife Helpline currently has 77 volunteers, and is recruiting for its next initial training course for new applicants in 2020. After training

volunteers are mentored for 6 months, and all volunteers receive ongoing group and individual support and supervision.

If anyone is interested in volunteering, visit our website at www.vetlife.org and go to the 'support us' section for more details. As the awareness of Vetlife increases and we handle more calls, then we will need to continually increase the number of volunteers we train.

YOU MENTIONED VETLIFE HEALTH SUPPORT EARLIER, WHAT IS THAT?

This service is open to all in the veterinary community in need of mental health support. Our Health Support is provided by a team of mental health professionals from March on Stress, including psychiatrists; mental health nurses; and therapists who have years of experience working in mental health.

Referral to this service usually comes via the Helpline. To learn more about Vetlife Health Support, visit the 'how we help' section on our website.

AND WHAT IS VETLIFE FINANCIAL SUPPORT?

This is financial support that can be applied for through our website. It is only available to UK residents who are currently or previously registered veterinary surgeon or family dependents, who are unable to work because of ill health, or dependent on a deceased veterinary surgeon. The support we provide is tailored to each individual's situation and can either consist of long-term monthly assistance, or short-term as a one-off grant. Confidential checks are undertaken to review the individual's situation. A potential beneficiary will have exhausted their other options for example family, benefits, assets; they may be receiving financial aid from elsewhere but need more help.

Vetlife has regional volunteer representatives, find out more on our website in the 'volunteer' section.

HOW IS VETLIFE FUNDED?

Financial contributions come from membership, which account for about £15,000. We rely heavily on donations and fundraising events and we were very fortunate in 2018 to have our income boosted by donations totalling £137,000 from VDS membership, a number of corporates, BSAVA, and BVA Lancashire division. We also had some amazing individuals take on personal challenges and raise money for Vetlife. We are in the

process of changing our website so we can thank these supporters in a more public way (if they wish) as without them we would not be in the position we are.

The RCVS Mind Matters Initiative (MMI) supports us and we are lucky to receive income from investments, which we have managed to build up over the years.

We also receive money from legacies and if anyone wants to consider this type of donation please visit the 'donate' section on our website for more information.

As we continue to strive to raise awareness within the profession, this will put more pressure on our resources, and we are aware that over the next few years it is likely that our outgoings will exceed our income. We expect expenditure to grow by 10% over the next 3 years to exceed £800,000 by 2021.

The board is constantly reviewing how best to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the charity.

HOW DID YOU BECOME INVOLVED?

I was aware of Vetlife, probably more as Veterinary Benevolent Fund, as I was used to seeing it on the VDS membership form. In 2017, I noticed a call for volunteers to be Trustees. I didn't consider it at first but the more I researched it the more I knew this was something in which I wanted to be involved. I didn't think I could be a Helpline volunteer, but volunteering as a trustee was a way I felt I could contribute. I became a board member and in 2018 became Chair of the Communications Committee and part of the Executive Board.

I have been a vet for over 25 years and I am acutely aware of the hard work of individuals and the all-consuming passion many demonstrate, which in turn often leads to the emotional distress which can be all too evident within ourselves and colleagues. Vetlife has a hugely important role to play in the profession. I've become more aware of that over the last few years as we open up more about the struggles many people have; people are now talking and people are listening... as it should be.

WHAT CAN PEOPLE DO TO HELP VETLIFE?

We want more practices to display the Vetlife literature in their clinics. We provide leaflets, posters and helpline stickers.

I always suggest that stickers are placed on the back of toilet doors and on the Controlled Drugs cabinet.

In addition, if anyone wishes to donate or fundraise, then please get in touch.

IS THERE ANYTHING WE CAN DO TO HELP OUR OWN MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING?

Don't be afraid to ask for help. Talking about feelings can help you stay in good mental health and deal with challenging situations. Just being listened to can help you feel supported and less alone. Opening up about your feelings might also encourage others to do the same – remember to check in on friends and colleagues who you think might need support.

We also have information on our website on a variety of self-care topics including exercise, sleep, and nutrition.

www.vetlife.org.uk/self-care.

Lastly, remember that if you are struggling, Vetlife is here for you.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF VETLIFE?

2019 is a special year for Vetlife as it marks the centenary of our incorporation as a charity. However, the roots of our organization reach even further back than 100 years as we share much of our history with the Veterinary Defence Society.

In 1865, The Veterinary Mutual Defence Society was founded by a small group of veterinary surgeons, which later became The National Veterinary Benevolent and Mutual Defence Society (The National). A second fund, The Victoria Veterinary

Benevolent Fund began in 1897. These two funds worked alongside each other until merging in 1977.

In 1978 they became The Veterinary Benevolent Fund (VBF) and the mutual defence arm of The National was spun off as The Veterinary Defence Society (VDS) – although to this day VDS remains a generous supporter of Vetlife.

1992 saw the creation of a separate Veterinary Helpline. In 1998 The Veterinary Surgeons' Health Support Programme (VSHSP) was established as an RCVS initiative. Funding was provided mainly by RCVS, with additional generous annual contributions from VDS.

In 2005, Vet Helpline and VSHSP were taken under the wing of VBF when all three organizations merged as a single charity.

In 2015, VBF rebranded as Vetlife with its three integrated component functions now known as: Vetlife Helpline, Vetlife Health Support and Vetlife Financial Support.

If you'd like to talk you can call Vetlife Helpline on 0303 040 2551 or email via www.vetlife.org.uk.

Tricia Colville is Business Development Director at Vets Now and FECAVA UK Director.