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Exploring veterinary social work: Implications and pathways for Canadian practice and research

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ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

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Conflicts of interest - None declared.

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Amendments - This protocol was registered with the International Platform of Registered Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis Protocols (INPLASY) on 14 February 2025 and was last updated on 14 February 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Review question / Objective Examine the current knowledge surrounding veterinary social work practice. Review question: What are the current knowledge and knowledge deficits in the field of veterinary social work that can be used to inform practice and education in Canada?

Rationale Veterinary social work was developed primarily by Dr. Elizabeth Strand in 2002. Veterinary social work has four key pillars, including animal-related interactions & experiences, intentional well-being, animal-related grief, and harm to humans and animals. In the United States, with 32 veterinary colleges, many private animal hospitals and clinics, and large animal/human health care companies, veterinary social work is common in both lexicon and practice. However, while a novel field in Canada, veterinary social work has yet to gain significant traction, and most research and grey literature come from the United States. With a

Canadian veterinary shortage driving increasing care costs and the prevalence of veterinary diseases, this is a pressing challenge, considering 80% of Canadian households have pets. As veterinary team members experience high levels of suicidal ideation and suicide rates, both the health of workers and the care delivered to animals are at risk. Veterinary social workers are uniquely positioned to support animal owners with difficult decisions and the veterinary team with mental health and well-being. This review is being conducted to examine the current knowledge regarding veterinary social work and gaps in the literature to inform recommendations for future studies and practices in the field from a Canadian context.

Condition being studied N/A.

METHODS

Search strategy Search terms used:

Group 1: social work* OR social welfare* OR social service* OR casework* OR community service* OR supportive service*

Group 2: veterinary healthcare* OR veterinarian* OR veterinary services* OR animal health* OR animal welfare* OR One Health* OR One Welfare* OR human-animal interaction*

Databases: Scopus, PubMed (PubMed MEDLINE and PubMed Central), CAB Abstract, and Social Services Abstracts.

Participant or population The review will focus specifically on veterinary social work and veterinary social workers.

Intervention N/A.

Comparator N/A.

Study designs to be included Qualitative, quantitative and mixed-method studies were included.

Eligibility criteria Additional criteria for all databases: English language; articles.

Information sources The information will be based on electronic sources: Scopus, PubMed (PubMed MEDLINE and PubMed Central), CAB Abstract, and Social Services Abstracts.

Main outcome(s) Data were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed, and findings are being categorized into the four key pillars of veterinary social work: 1) Animal-related interactions & experiences, 2) intentional well-being, 3) animal-related grief, and 4) harm to humans and animals.

Data management All formal screening process will be done with the use of COVIDENCE. Covidence is a web-based systematic review management tool designed to streamline the process of conducting systematic reviews and meta-analyses. While Covidence primarily focuses on systematic reviews, its principles of data management can be broadly applicable to various research contexts. Here are the particulars of data management using Covidence:

1. Importing Studies: Covidence allows researchers to efficiently import search results from bibliographic databases such as PubMed, Embase, and Cochrane Library. After conducting a systematic search, researchers can upload search results directly into Covidence, where they can

screen and manage studies throughout the review process.

2. Screening and Selection: Covidence facilitates the screening and selection process by providing a user-friendly interface for reviewers to assess the eligibility of studies based on predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Reviewers can independently screen studies, with discrepancies resolved through discussion or arbitration. Data management in this phase involves tracking the status of each study (e.g., included, excluded, or pending) and documenting reasons for exclusion.

3. Data Extraction: Once studies are selected for inclusion, Covidence supports data extraction by providing customizable forms for capturing relevant study characteristics, outcomes, and findings. Researchers can collaboratively extract data from included studies, ensuring consistency and accuracy across reviewers. Data management involves organizing extracted data systematically, making it easier to analyze and synthesize findings later.

4. Synthesis and Analysis: After completing data extraction and risk of bias assessment, Covidence supports the synthesis and analysis of findings through features such as descriptive summaries, forest plots, and subgroup analyses. Researchers can visualize and interpret data within the platform, facilitating collaborative decision-making and hypothesis testing. Data management involves organizing synthesized findings and ensuring transparency in reporting methods and results. 5. Reporting and Exporting: Covidence allows researchers to generate reports and export data in various formats, including Microsoft Word, Excel, and RevMan. This enables researchers to prepare manuscripts, presentations, or supplementary materials using the compiled data and analysis. Data management in this phase involves analyzing the dataset, ensuring data integrity, and maintaining documentation for reproducibility and transparency.

Quality assessment / Risk of bias analysis

Quality assessment: there are two stages of the formal screening process. In the first stage, two reviewers use COVIDENCE to screen the title and abstract independently. In the second stage, two reviewers screen full text of the articles selected based on stage 1.

Risk of bias analysis: Covidence includes tools for assessing the risk of bias in individual studies, particularly in systematic reviews. Researchers can use predefined risk of bias domains or customize

assessment criteria based on the review's specific objectives. Data management in this phase involves documenting judgments about the risk of bias for each included study, which informs the interpretation of review findings. However, we will not apply a risk of bias assessment scale due to the fact that it is a social science based review that uses primarily qualitative methodology to report results.

Strategy of data synthesis The following stages will be applied for the thematic data analysis:

1. **Data Organization:** After completing the screening and data extraction phases in Covidence, we will export the extracted data, including relevant study characteristics, outcomes, and findings, into a format compatible with qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo) or spreadsheets (e.g., Microsoft Excel). This data export ensures that all relevant information from included studies is readily accessible for thematic analysis.

2. **Familiarization with Data:** We will begin thematic analysis by familiarizing ourselves with the data extracted from included studies. This involves reading through the extracted data to gain an understanding of the breadth and depth of the information collected.

3. **Generating Initial Codes:** Using qualitative analysis software, we will generate initial codes to systematically label and categorize segments of data relevant to the research question or objectives. Codes are typically descriptive labels assigned to specific concepts, themes, or patterns identified within the data. We will employ inductive coding approaches, allowing themes to emerge directly from the data.

4. **Organizing Codes into Themes:** we will organize the generated codes into broader thematic categories or themes based on similarities, differences, or relationships between codes. This process involves grouping related codes together to form overarching themes that capture key patterns or concepts present in the data. Themes should be coherent, internally consistent, and reflective of the content and context of the data.

5. **Reviewing and Refining Themes:** we will iteratively review and refine the identified themes through constant comparison and triangulation of data across included studies. This iterative process involves revisiting the coded data, comparing themes within and between studies, and refining

the definitions and boundaries of themes as necessary to ensure accuracy and consistency.

6. **Interpretation and Reporting:** Once the thematic analysis is complete, we will interpret the meaning and significance of the identified themes in relation to the research question or objectives. This involves synthesizing the findings across studies, providing explanations or interpretations for the patterns observed, and considering their implications for theory, practice, or policy. We will then report the results of the thematic analysis in the systematic review, integrating the identified themes into the narrative synthesis or discussion section to contextualize and enrich the overall findings.

Subgroup analysis N/A.

Sensitivity analysis N/A (it is not a health-focused systematic review).

Language restriction English.

Country(ies) involved Canada.

Keywords veterinary social work; social work; One Health; human-animal interaction.

Dissemination plans The study will result in a peer-reviewed publication.

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