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Abstract

Veterinary nursing, alongside other healthcare vocations, has been widely acknowledged as a high-stress occupation. Workplace stress, burnout and compassion fatigue have been described in veterinary nurses, but the prevalence of a bullying culture has not yet been formally identified in Aotearoa New Zealand. Research surrounding bullying in the human healthcare sector and amongst veterinarians exists, yet despite anecdotal evidence suggesting bullying is prevalent, Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nurses are under-represented in the literature.

This study aimed to determine the prevalence and possible implications of bullying within the Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nursing industry. An anonymous, self-selecting survey was adapted, with permission from the authors, from an existing questionnaire previously distributed in the United Kingdom. It was disseminated online through social media and to New Zealand Veterinary Nursing Association (NZVNA) members. A total of 396 respondents met the criteria for the survey: 70.2% (n = 278) of respondents identified that they had been bullied by at least one other staff member in their clinic; 29.86% (n = 83) of those reported being bullied by a veterinarian; and 80.92% (n = 320) of respondents reported they had observed a colleague subjected to bullying within their current clinic.

The high incidence of bullying identified in this study warrants further investigation, particularly as this survey was the first of its kind to be distributed in this country. Further research to understand the scope, nature and effect of bullying on Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nurses is recommended.

Keywords

Veterinary nursing, workplace bullying, mental health, workplace wellbeing

Introduction

Workplace bullying is a globally recognised phenomenon with potentially severe physical and emotional consequences for those affected. Bullying is broadly defined as behaviour that intentionally causes physical and/or psychological harm to another individual (Fox & Cowan, 2015) and may be categorised in the workplace as horizontal (between employees of a similar level) or vertical (between those of a different level) (Huntington et al., 2011; Norton et al., 2017; Bedford and Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018).

Bullying is pervasive in demanding, high-stress working environments, such as human healthcare, and is widely agreed to be detrimental to mental and physical wellbeing, alongside promoting career disillusionment and poor employee retention (MacCurtain et al., 2018; Bedford & Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018; Lever et al., 2019). Disillusionment can be a result of bullying and is thought to be instrumental in instigating dissatisfaction, reduced motivation and poor performance at work, as well as insecurity at work translating into one's personal life (Einarsen et al., 2018; Glambek et al., 2018). Disillusionment has been cited as a prevalent cause of individuals leaving their place of work to seek employment elsewhere (Glambek et al., 2014; Laschinger & Fida, 2014). In addition to the concept of disillusionment, chronic stress, lack of sleep and engaging in destructive habits are also documented manifestations of compromised wellbeing (Gardner & Rasmussen, 2018), associated with persistent workplace bullying.

There has been a great deal of research undertaken in the human healthcare sector, where it is now widely recognised that the prevalence of bullying is consistently higher among nursing staff in comparison to other healthcare roles (Norton et al., 2017). Combined with the knowledge that bullying occurs most frequently in high-pressure/high-stress environments, it is plausible

to hypothesise that the Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nursing industry could reflect a similar trend to its 'human' nursing counterpart (Bedford & Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018). Workplace stress, burnout and compassion fatigue have been described in veterinary nurses (Black et al., 2011; Lloyd & Campion, 2017; Harvey & Cameron, 2020), but the prevalence of bullying has not yet been formally recognised in Aotearoa New Zealand, although it is thought to be linked. Research surrounding bullying in the human healthcare sector and amongst veterinarians exists (Blackwood et al., 2017; Connolly et al., 2022), yet despite anecdotal evidence suggesting a bullying culture is prevalent, in Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nurses are notably under-represented in the literature. The Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary sector is currently experiencing a shortage of veterinary professionals (Careers NZ, 2022) and it is important to monitor the cascading effect this may have on our veterinary nurses and their social interactions within the workplace. It is reasonable to assume that individual workloads within a clinic will increase, prompting a rise in stress and fatigue of veterinary nursing staff, and possibly leading to an increase in negative social interaction and bullying between staff. Bullying behaviours in the workplace may also be associated with a higher incidence of suicide (Lever et al., 2019), indicating a duty to consider the prevalence of bullying associated with the poor mental health of veterinary nurses.

A study designed to gain insight into the presence of bullying within the Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nursing industry, to identify the most common negative behaviours exhibited between individuals within the profession, and possible implications of this behaviour, was undertaken. This research is understood to be the first of its kind in the Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nursing profession and, as such, will hold value for allied veterinary professionals nationwide and prompt further research in the field.

Materials and methods

An online survey was adapted, with permission from the authors, from an existing questionnaire previously distributed in the United Kingdom (Bedford & Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018).

The survey, created using the online, cloud-based software SurveyMonkey, was open to veterinary nurses employed in Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary clinical practice within the previous six months. Respondents

were self-selecting, remained anonymous, and a formal veterinary nursing qualification or professional registration was not required. The survey was disseminated online through social media (Facebook), via email directly to all veterinary clinics in Aotearoa New Zealand and to New Zealand Veterinary Nursing Association (NZVNA) members. The survey was open for 21 days. Ethics approval was obtained via the Unitec Human Research Ethics Committee (UREC #: 2019-1023).

Survey questions were multiple choice, multi-select or provided as a Likert scale. All questions were closed in nature, apart from the 'Other: please specify' options. Simple descriptive statistical analysis was performed. A notable feature of the survey adapted from Bedford and Anscombe-Skirrow (2018) was the inclusion of the 'Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised' (NAQ-R), a high-validity framework attributed to Einarsen et al. (2009). The NAQ-R consists of 22 negative statements pertaining to negative social behaviours within the workplace, designed to identify the presence of bullying in an objective way. As recommended by Bedford and Anscombe-Skirrow (2018), 11 of 22 statements were reversed to assess positive behaviours in this study. This aimed to mediate response bias, enable reliable quantification of bullying behaviours and allow direct comparison with similar studies investigating bullying (Einarsen et al., 2009). Respondents could select 'Daily', 'Weekly', 'Monthly', 'Occasionally', 'Never' or 'Strongly agree', 'Agree', 'Neutral', 'Disagree', 'Strongly disagree' in response to the statements listed, depending on the question.

Results

Of a total of 517 respondents, 396 met inclusion criteria for the study (from a population of 2145 veterinary nurses [Stats NZ, 2018]). The age bracket 25–34 years had the highest representation ($n = 164$, 41.4%), followed by 35–44 years ($n=107$, 27%), then 18–24-years ($n = 84$, 21.2%). The remaining 10.4% of respondents were aged 45–65+. Female-identifying veterinary nurses made up 98.5% ($n = 388$) of survey respondents. Of all respondents, 97.5% held a relevant industry qualification, ranging from certificate to degree level. Respondents who had been working in the veterinary nursing industry for 2–5 years were most represented in the study ($n = 112$, 28.3%) (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic data of the participants.

Gender		n (%)
Male		5 (1.25%)
Female		391 (98.5%)
Gender diverse		0
Prefer not to say		1 (0.25%)
Age		
18–24		84 (21.16%)
25–34		165 (41.56%)
35–44		107 (26.95%)
45–54		32 (8.06%)
55–64		8 (2%)
65+		1 (0.25%)
Tenure	In current role	In the profession
< 1 year	91 (22.92%)	31 (7.81%)
1–2 years	89 (22.42%)	53 (13.35%)
2–5 years	119 (29.97%)	113 (28.46%)
5–10 years	54 (13.6%)	84 (21.16%)
10–20 years	38 (9.57%)	90 (22.67%)
20+ years	6 (1.51%)	26 (6.55%)
Highest qualification level		
Certificate		150 (37.39%)
Diploma		207 (52.14%)
Degree		22 (5.54%)
No qualification		10 (2.52%)
Other		8 (2%)

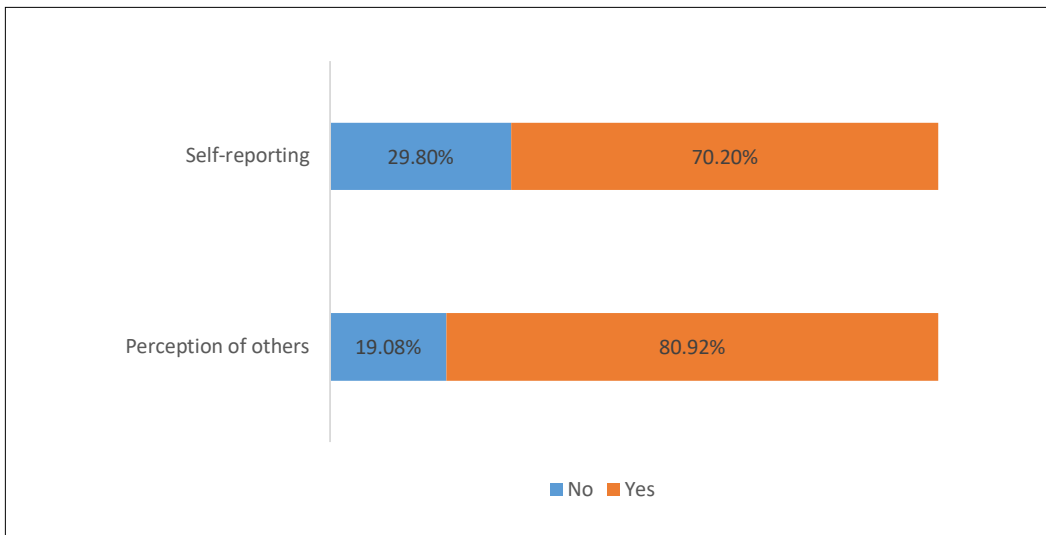


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents self-reporting bullying behaviours versus the perception of bullying reported to be occurring towards or amongst colleagues.

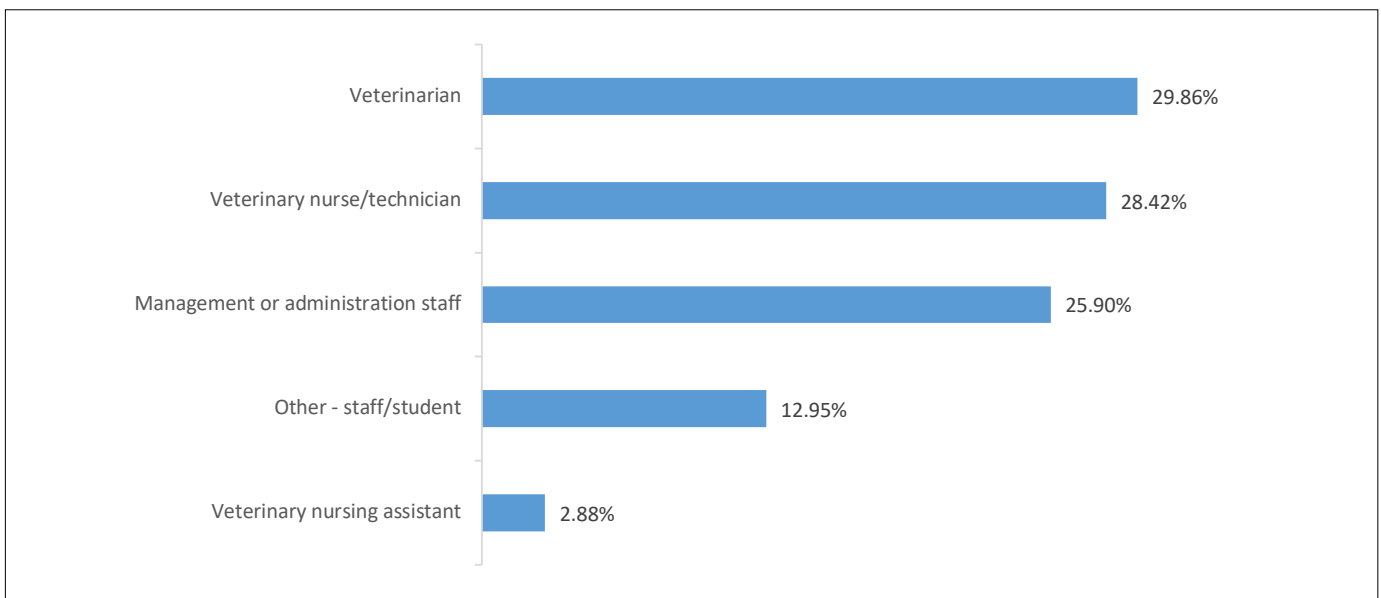


Figure 2. The source of bullying when self-reported by veterinary nursing respondents.

Incidence of bullying

Bullying by at least one other staff member in a veterinary clinic setting was self-reported by 70.2% (n = 278) of respondents, while 80.92% of respondents (n = 318) reported observing a colleague subjected to bullying, rather than themselves (Figure 1). Among those who self-reported bullying, the source varied, with 29.86% (n = 83) reporting being bullied by a veterinarian, 28.42% (n = 79) by another veterinary nurse or technician on the same level as them, and 25.9% (n = 72) by management (Figure 2). Among participants who reported a source when observing bullying of colleagues, 'Veterinarian' remained the most frequent response (Figure 3).

When asked to rate the occurrence of positive experiences in their workplace, 92.15% of respondents

indicated that they felt trusted by their colleagues and 73.92% agreed that colleagues were able to effectively communicate on at least a 'Weekly' basis. In response to the positive statements 'You receive constructive feedback about your work as a veterinary nurse', 'You are praised for your work as a veterinary nurse', and to 'Your clinic management identifies the need for a healthy work-life balance', these were scored as being received at least weekly by 35.95%, 47.34% and 48.86% of respondents respectively. Notably, this last statement was the highest scoring 'Never' response (16.2%) of the positive statement matrix (Figure 4).

When asked to rate the occurrence of negative experiences in their workplace, 87.82% of respondents indicated that they had felt guilty for claiming their sick

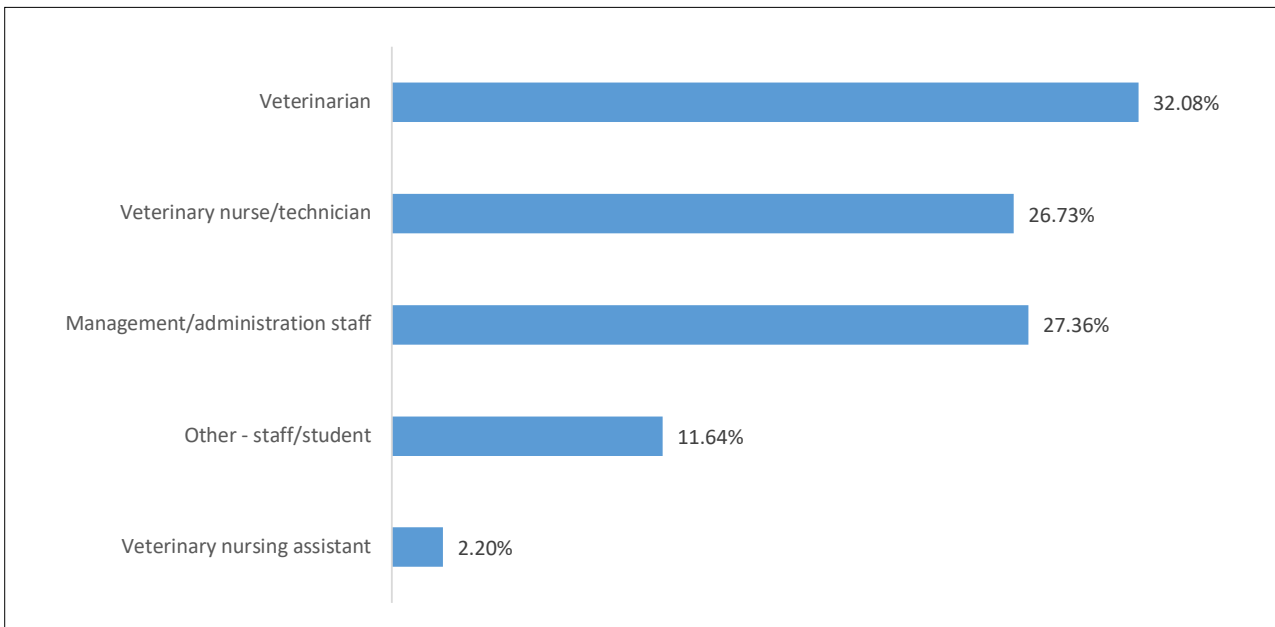


Figure 3. The source of bullying when reported towards or amongst colleagues.

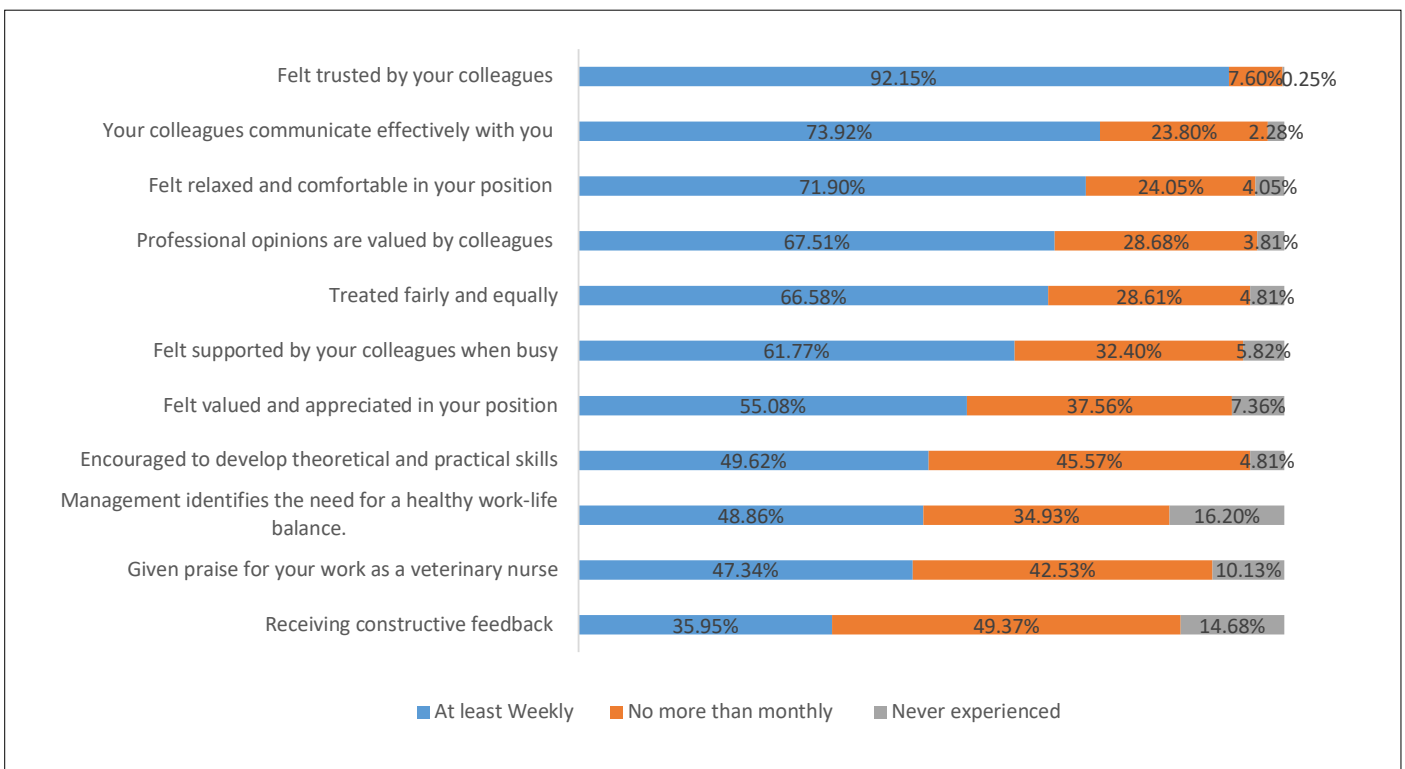


Figure 4. Respondents reporting their experience of positive statements occurring at least 'Weekly', no more than 'Monthly' or 'Never' in their current or most recent practice/clinic.

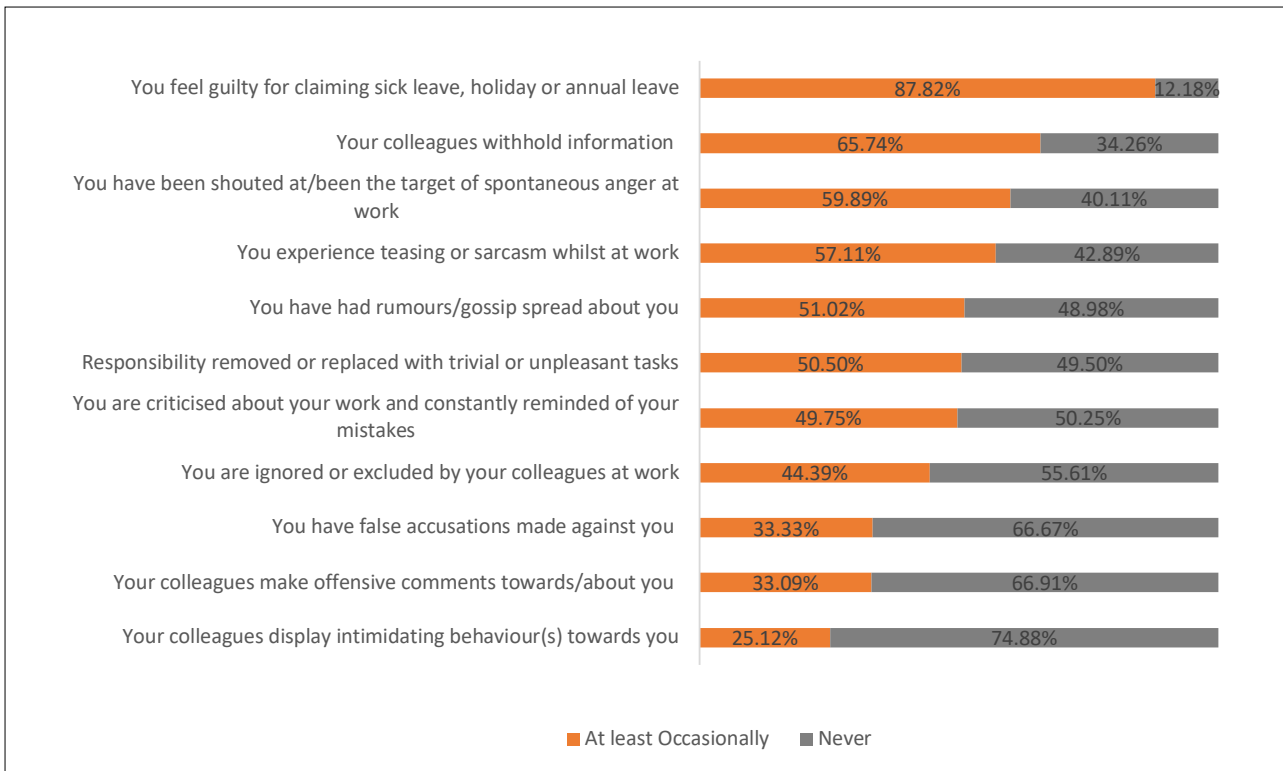


Figure 5. Respondents reporting their experience of the following negative statements occurring at least ‘Occasionally’ (daily, weekly, monthly and occasionally combined) or ‘Never’.

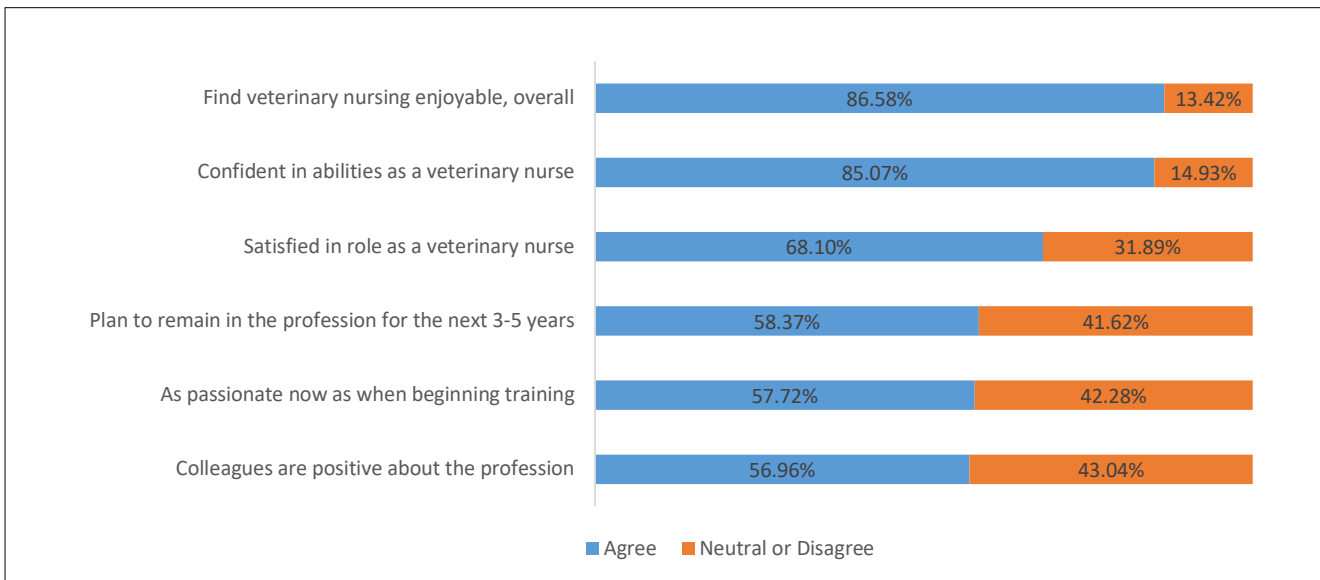


Figure 6. Percentage of respondents that selected ‘Agree’ (strongly agree and agree combined) or ‘Neutral/Disagree’ (neutral, disagree and strongly disagree combined) in response to statements on job outlook and satisfaction.

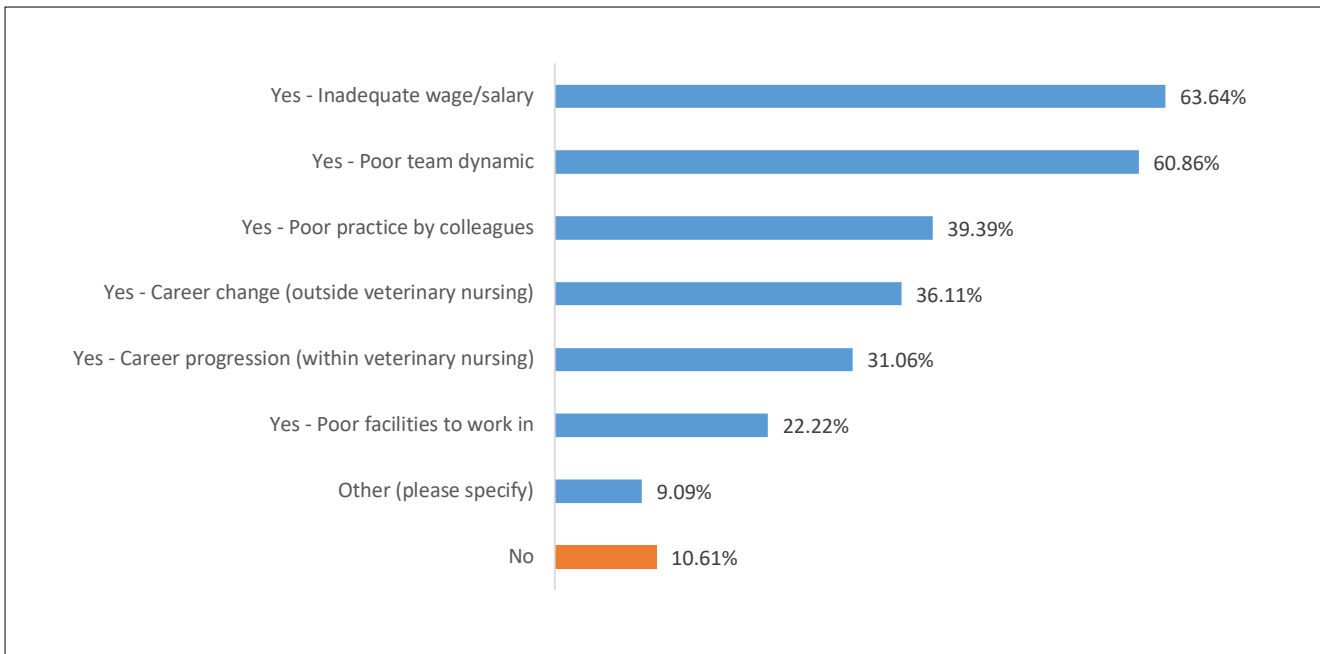


Figure 7. Reasons given for respondents having changed, or considered changing, their place of employment.

leave, holiday, or annual leave in their current or most recent clinic at least 'Occasionally', while 41.37% of these respondents felt this way at least 'Weekly'. In response to the negative statement 'Your colleagues display intimidating behaviour(s) (e.g., Finger pointing, invading personal space, shoving)', 25.12% of respondents selected that they are at least 'Occasionally' subject to this behaviour, indicating it has occurred before in their current or most recent clinic, with 7.36% reporting experiencing this behaviour at least 'Weekly'. More than 50% of respondents indicated that they were at least 'Occasionally' subjected to negative behaviours such as the withholding of information by colleagues (65.74%), being shouted at or the target of spontaneous abuse (59.89%), experiencing teasing or sarcasm (57.11%), having rumours and gossip spread about them (51.02%) and having their responsibilities removed or replaced with more trivial and unpleasant duties (50.05%) (Figure 5).

Considering statements on career outlook and job satisfaction (Figure 6), 86.58% of respondents agreed that they still found veterinary nursing enjoyable overall, and 85.07% agreed that they were confident in their own abilities as a veterinary nurse. Of respondents, 42.28% were neutral or disagreed when asked if they remained as passionate about veterinary nursing now as they did when they first started training, and 43.04% felt neutral or disagreed that their colleagues felt positive towards the veterinary nursing profession. When asked whether they were likely to remain in the veterinary nursing profession for the next 3–5 years, 58.37% agreed and

41.62% disagreed (Figure 6).

Regarding job retention, most respondents indicated that they had changed, or considered changing, their place of employment in the veterinary industry for a variety of reasons (multiple selections permitted) (Figure 7). Only 10.61% of survey respondents had never changed, or considered changing, their place of employment for any reason. Most respondents indicated that they have changed or considered changing their place of employment due to 'inadequate wage or salary' (63.64%) and 'poor team dynamic' (60.86%) (Figure 7).

Discussion

This study highlights the occurrence of bullying behaviours within the veterinary nursing industry in Aotearoa New Zealand. The majority of respondents were female and aged under 35, reflecting both industry trends, and previous studies in this area (Kongara et al., 2016; Harvey and Cameron, 2019). Tenure responses indicate a high turnover of veterinary nurses within the industry, with 45% of respondents having been in their current job less than two years; however, as approximately 20% of respondents are recent graduates, the level of turnover is likely to be slightly lower.

Results show a high level of self-reported bullying behaviour, either directly experienced by the respondent, or that respondents observed being directed toward colleagues. Most bullying behaviour was instigated by veterinarians, followed closely by veterinary nurses/

technicians. These findings align with a UK survey by Everitt (n.d.), in which respondents identified 'Veterinary Surgeons' as the most common perpetrators of bullying behaviour, indicating this isn't an issue unique to Aotearoa New Zealand.

The 'Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised' (NAQ-R) contains 11 positively framed statements and 11 negatively framed statements. The 'positive' statement results are encouraging, with the majority of respondents indicating they experience these on a daily or weekly bases, including over 90% of respondents stating they felt trusted by their colleagues (on a daily or weekly basis). Notably, 35% of respondents indicated receiving constructive feedback on a daily or weekly basis. Constructive feedback helps to promote ongoing learning, essential to providing high-level patient care. Learning how to give constructive feedback, however, is a skill, and these results may indicate a lack of skill in those wanting or needing to provide feedback, rather than a lack of desire to do so (Omer & Abdularhim, 2017). Also of note is the low number of respondents whose management recognises the need for a healthy work-life balance (with less than half experiencing this at least weekly), and that one in 10 (10.13%) respondents are never praised for their work. Numerous studies, spanning multiple professions, agree that positive feedback and praise contributes to higher job satisfaction (Anseel & Lievens, 2007; Morsiani et al., 2017) and improved performance, and validates staff perception of success (Pfister et al., 2020). A study concerning millennial nurses in the human sector shows that positive feedback and praise are highly valued and enhance job satisfaction (Tyndall et al., 2019), while, contrastingly, a lack of such feedback is identified as a predictor of burnout and ultimately professional disillusionment by Kelly et al. (2015). As most respondents in this study (approximately 70%) would be categorised as 'millennials', born between 1981 and 1997 (Frey, 2018), it is especially important for employers to provide authentic praise to veterinary nursing employees. Improved job satisfaction across the sector may contribute to a reduction in negative behaviours, but further research is required to support this.

Of the 'negative' statements, experience on a daily or weekly basis is fortunately low, which is encouraging; however, over 87% of respondents stated they felt guilty at some point for taking sick or paid annual leave, despite this being protected by Aotearoa New Zealand law (Holidays Act 2003). Existing research implies that inadequate uptake of annual leave represents significant

risk to mental and physical wellbeing, with one study reporting an increase in the occurrence of heart attack and coronary death in otherwise healthy women (Eaker et al., 1992; Skinner & Pocock, 2013). Promoting the uptake of paid annual leave encourages employees to accomplish a more sustainable work-life balance, spend time with friends and family, and participate in enjoyable extracurricular activities, all of which may lessen symptoms of depression, anxiety and burnout (Joudrey & Wallace, 2009).

Over half of respondents have been shouted at, experienced teasing and/or had gossip or rumours spread about them, with 65% having had key information withheld. The prominence of such direct bullying behaviour indicates a negative workplace culture that needs addressing to improve the mental and physical wellbeing of employees. The negative impacts of workplace bullying include job insecurity, absenteeism or low productivity, and physical health issues (including insomnia and mental health concerns) (Glambek et al., 2014; Magee et al., 2017). Previous studies have highlighted the trends of recording poorer mental health in female respondents compared to their male counterparts when participating in surveys addressing such topics (Heath, 2002; Fritschi et al., 2009). Although this study has not investigated the intricate details of the respondents' mental health, this is an important consideration to acknowledge when assessing the working environment of veterinary nurses – an industry that is predominantly female-driven. The implications of this are not limited to employee wellbeing but potentially impact patient care due to despondent or exhausted employees.

Disillusionment can be described as an individual realising job misconception (Bedford & Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018), resulting in becoming dissatisfied, unmotivated, performing poorly and ultimately causing individuals to leave their place of work (Glambek et al., 2014; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Glambek et al., 2018). The positive association between bullying and disillusionment, that is, that increased prevalence of bullying increases likelihood of an individual leaving their job (Huntington et al., 2011), has been repeatedly reported by various authors (Everitt, n.d.; Hogh et al., 2011; Glambek et al., 2014; Laschinger & Fida, 2014; Gardner & Rasmussen, 2018), although this has been investigated sparingly within the veterinary nursing profession (Bedford & Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018).

In an open letter presented by Clarke et al., it was surmised from the authors' previous studies that recent

graduates highlighted “insufficient pay and poor work/life balance together with a ‘lack of management and support by bosses’” as contributing to their disillusionment (Clarke et al., 2016, p. 603). This is an interesting finding when considering ‘inadequate wages/salary’ was a common reason for respondents to consider leaving their current job, indicating alignment with Clarke et al.’s (2016) results. Considering the economic need to retain veterinary nursing staff due to a veterinarian shortage within Aotearoa New Zealand (New Zealand Veterinary Association and Veterinary Council of New Zealand, 2021; Careers NZ, 2022), it is concerning that responses relating to a positive career outlook and remaining in the industry were responded to the least positively. If the sector is to retain veterinary nursing staff and to do so with effective support systems, it is essential that work is done to improve career outlook and maintain a passion for veterinary nursing work. Most respondents agreed that they enjoy veterinary nursing work and so it could be possible that the ‘Positive outlook’ statement reflects their current clinic of employment, which may not be an enjoyable environment.

Interestingly, more respondents reported observing a colleague subject to bullying within their current clinic, than those self-reporting being bullied. Identifying bullying in a workplace can be challenging due to the subjective nature and differing perceptions on definition (Nielsen et al., 2010; Bedford & Anscombe-Skirrow, 2018). The varying percentages of respondents self-reporting an experience of bullying versus those observing a colleague subject to the same issue raises an important limitation of identifying and reporting on bullying in the workplace. Respondents may not easily recognise their experiences as ‘bullying’ and may be concerned, consciously or subconsciously, about a perceived stigma if labelling themselves as being bullied. Furthermore, a misunderstanding of what these behaviours are may also contribute to a lack of forthcoming information about bullying. The Negative Acts Questionnaire (Revised) was used as an objective measure to combat this; however, it did not seem to entirely mitigate bias. In addition, an individual’s self-esteem, mental wellbeing, and personal values may also contribute to a lack of forthcoming information surrounding aspects of bullying within their own lives.

Based on the findings of this survey, it is apparent that bullying-type behaviour is present within the veterinary nursing industry of Aotearoa New Zealand. Respondents to the survey highlighted a negative career outlook among peers and uncertainty as to whether they would stay

in the profession. Of those respondents that indicated they were recipients of bullying, the majority reported veterinarians as the perpetrators of the issue, followed closely by veterinary nursing colleagues. Respondents identified they lacked the receipt of constructive feedback, receiving praise for their work and achieving a work–life balance. Additionally, respondents reported feelings of guilt for taking annual leave for which they are entitled, failing to achieve optimal outcomes in their work due to colleagues withholding information, and experiencing teasing and sarcasm at their place of work. A high turnover in staff between clinics (of the respondents) was apparent, with most respondents selecting ‘2–5 years’ regardless of their experience. This finding aligns with the high turnover of registered nurses in Aotearoa (Moloney et al., 2018).

The high incidence of bullying identified in the Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nursing industry by this study warrants further investigation, as current data supports the proposition that workplace culture and bullying is prevalent in Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary clinics. The negative responses on career outlook and job satisfaction may suggest that the incidence of bullying reported in this study could have a significant impact on employee retention rates and job satisfaction. Further research to understand the effects of bullying on physical and mental wellbeing, job satisfaction, disillusionment and job retention in Aotearoa New Zealand veterinary nurses is, therefore, recommended.

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