

I would like to take a moment and share this article written by Dr. Sarah Boston.

Media's emotional blackmail is killing veterinarians

Emotional blackmail is the new term being used to characterize the pressure that clients put on veterinarians to care for their pets, to feel guilty about charging, and for making money. It has catapulted our profession into a crisis of burnout, compassion fatigue and suicide.

Veterinarians are currently the profession with the highest rate of suicide. There are so many factors that contribute to making this profession the hardest job you will ever love.

One new aspect is media reaction. They are killing us. Literally. There have been several high-profile stories in the press recently where a pet owner takes a sick pet, often a puppy, to the emergency hospital for treatment. The owner is given a quote and cannot afford to pay. The puppy is sick enough that, without treatment, it will die. The veterinarian, who has likely been through this heartbreaking scenario countless times, tries to offer options to save the puppy. They are likely even a bit blinded by the fact that they just can't euthanize another puppy that could be treated and have a happy life. They will go over third-party payment plans (they exist), asking for help from family and friends, Go Fund Me campaigns, trying a less expensive treatment option that is not optimal or euthanasia. The last-resort option is to have the pet surrendered to the hospital to try to find a rescue group or owner (often someone who works at the hospital) who will assume financial and legal responsibility for the pet. Hopefully, the treatment will be successful and the pet can be re-homed. This is a monumental effort on the part of the veterinarians and staff that try to make this work, and likely costs the hospital money. Veterinarians are not looking for more homeless sick puppies to rescue. We don't want this.

The pet is surrendered to the hospital and no good deed goes unpunished. The pet owners, justifiably heartbroken by their loss, will sometimes go to the media, who jump on the bandwagon to try to get their puppy back. This scenario will invariably vilify the veterinarian and staff, who have gone to great lengths to save this puppy's life. Some of them have done far more than the previous owner was willing to do. The media are executing emotional blackmail here, and it is on a massive scale and generally brings in our friend, the Internet. The Internet will then be let loose on the veterinary hospital and staff with unrelenting trolling. When stories like these break, veterinary staff have had to endure no end of online abuse, terrible reviews and even threats to their personal safety. Some hospitals have had to close temporarily to weather the storm.

There is no effort on the part of the media to try to educate the public that veterinary care is expensive, especially the lifesaving emergency care at 24-hour hospitals. There is no effort to educate the public about the responsibilities that go along with pet ownership. There is no effort to educate the public about pet insurance, which exists. (And no, you can't get it after your dog is sick, which is an amazingly common question and also fraud.) There is no effort to discuss why veterinary care is expensive, or the resources that go into caring for your pet in this setting. Everyone is just angry that it costs money and they direct this anger at the people who are trying to help.

There are several results of this irresponsible reporting. The obvious one is the direct damage to the veterinary hospital and staff. There is also the widespread damage it does to all veterinary professionals

when they receive the message that what we do is not valuable and should not cost money, and that we are terrible people who are only in it for the money. Suggesting we are only in it for the money, or that if we cared for animals we would do this for free, is laughable to any veterinarian. We love animals more than anything. We have made caring for their health and welfare our life's work. We have given up so much to do this. How dare anyone suggest otherwise, just because we also have to charge for our services and, at some point, make a living and pay off our huge student loans?

The unintended consequence of "news" stories like these is that many veterinary hospitals are having to change their policies so that surrender and re-homing these pets is no longer an option. This brings us back to the previously stated options, which are third-party financing or euthanasia. So, along with killing veterinarians, these stories are also killing pets. Thanks media. I know that puppies and heart-wrenching stories like these make for great TV, but I am begging you to report on these issues more responsibly and to think about the destruction you're leaving in your wake as you move on to the next big thing. We are still here, trying to care for animals.

Dr. Sarah Boston is a veterinary surgical oncologist practicing in the Toronto area. She is also an author and her best-selling memoir, Lucky Dog: How Being a Veterinarian Saved my Life was published by the House of Anansi Press in 2014. She has published numerous scientific articles and book chapters, some of them good. She is the co-creator of the satirical online veterinary newspaper The Cageliner and an amateur stand up comedian.

Sarah Boston, DVM, DVSc, Diplomate ACVS

ACVS Founding Fellow of Surgical Oncology

ACVS Founding Fellow of Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery

@drsarahboston

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