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Media Statement

**WA RESEARCH REVEALS VETS AT A HIGH HEALTH RISK**

West Australian researchers are urging veterinarians to prioritise their health on the back of fresh findings that reveal a high risk of physical and mental health issues among the profession.

Two studies at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) have shown veterinarians – especially younger professionals – face higher psychological risk through depression and distress, and those working with horses were at significant risk of serious injury.

WAIMR's Associate Professor Lin Fritschi said research published in the March edition of *Australian Veterinary Journal* showed one in three Australian veterinarians experienced high levels of stress, anxiety and depression.

"We surveyed over 2,000 veterinarians and found the average levels of distress were about the same as other professional groups such as doctors, but about a third of vets, especially new graduates, had quite high psychological health issues," she said.

"We discovered a veterinarian's role in dealing with sick animals, upset owners, and the challenges of managing a small business can be extremely stressful.

"The data also revealed women were more likely than men to have depression, and recent graduates and those who worked longer hours were also more prone to depression."

Study participants were asked a range of general and work-related questions concerning their wellbeing including "have you recently felt constantly under strain" and "thinking of the past few weeks, how much of the time has your job made you feel contented?"

The research was published on *Australian Veterinary Journal* online on February 22.

Research published in the February edition of the United Kingdom's *The Veterinary Record*, has also highlighted risks faced by veterinarians, in particular those working with horses.

Lead researcher, WAIMR's Dr Michael Lucas said among the 2,800 veterinarians who replied to the survey, 2,188 serious injuries were reported, involving hospitalisation or an inability to work for at least one day or at the usual level for five or more days.

"We found almost a third of all reported serious animal-related injuries were caused by horses," he said.

"Most frequently these injuries were sustained whilst performing medical or surgical procedures on the horses or with examining horses and the parts of the body most commonly injured by horses were the head and face and the lower extremities with fractures being the most common type of serious injury."

Dr Lucas said the latest study followed on from previous research in 2006, which found more than 50 per cent of Australian vets sustained serious injury during their career.

In 2008, A/Prof Fritschi also announced research findings which revealed female veterinarians who fail to safeguard themselves from x-rays and anaesthetic gases face double the risk of miscarriage.

A/Prof Fritschi said she hoped these discoveries would encourage veterinarians to place higher priority on avoiding unnecessary exposure to occupational hazards.

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“As well as the responsibility on individuals to look out for their own safety, it’s important veterinary schools and professional organisations provide increased support in dealing with work-related distress and anxiety, as well as training in the best possible procedures to reduce work-place injuries,” she said.

“It is essential that vets themselves take an active part in learning about how to avoid stress at work, as well as remaining vigilant and informed about how to best reduce injury risk when dealing with animals.”

Both studies used data from the *Health Risks of Australian Veterinarians* project – gathered by a team of researchers from WAIMR and The University of Western Australia (UWA) – funded by The Cancer Council of WA and UWA.

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