

# Ehrlichiosis: Staying well as a veterinary professional

## Vets supporting dogs and their owners affected by ehrlichiosis.

The tick-borne disease canine ehrlichiosis is spreading rapidly in northern Australia. The disease can be difficult to definitively diagnose and treat, especially in the chronic form, when the condition has a poor prognosis. Prevention, through stringent use of tick repellents in dogs that live in or travel through brown dog tick-infested areas of Australia, affords the best protection against tick attachment and development of ehrlichiosis. However, many dogs fail to receive preventative care or treatment due to limited access to veterinary services and/or limited resources to pay for this care. The dogs of people experiencing vulnerabilities may be over-represented in the disease numbers.

It is challenging for veterinarians to repeatedly see and hear of the suffering of infected dogs and their owners. The challenge lies both within their own emotional responses to the suffering they are witnessing and feeling powerless to change, and in interacting with dog owners feeling similarly emotional and powerless.

### How can we stay well as veterinarians on the front-line of ehrlichiosis?

As trained problem finders and solvers, the knowledge of the negative impact of ehrlichiosis on the welfare of dogs in our community, can be hard to sit with. We will feel a range of emotions - maybe frustration and despair at our inability to change the

course of the disease and outbreak, sadness for the dogs and their owners and/or emotional exhaustion given the burden of frequent conversations about ehrlichiosis.

These emotions can build up over time and affect the way we think, feel and act. We may withdraw from our relationships (personal or work-related) and/or activities, feeling that we don't have the energy

or motivation to engage. We may become irritable and reactive to things that would not normally be problematic.

Processing our emotions helps to prevent their build-up and the impact they have on our physical and mental health. The following suggestions could help.

### Acknowledge and normalise your emotions:

- You may say to yourself – I feel distressed when I think about community dogs dying from ehrlichiosis. Be as specific as you can when you name what you are feeling – you have to name it to tame it.
- Knowing that you are not alone helps. You may say to yourself – It is normal to feel distressed when dogs and their owners suffer. Normalising your emotion helps your brain make sense of what you are feeling.
- This can seem like a small and perhaps inconsequential step. Its value is cumulative as you practise noticing and making space for your emotions.

### Talk about how you are feeling with a safe person.

This may be somebody within your workplace or the profession that has understanding of ehrlichiosis and its consequences. Our colleagues and peers are an important source of support.

Structuring this discussion using a technique called 'The 3 What's' is beneficial. The technique talks you from the problem, through the impact of the problem and towards a solution.





The '3 WHATS' are:

- **What happened?** What did you experience? In what context? Who what where when? Aim to spend the least time here summarising the facts.
- **So what?** Why is this important? Who cares? How does this make you feel? What thoughts went through your head? What beliefs or assumptions did it challenge?
- **What now?** What does this mean? What did you learn? What is one thing that would help you right now? What would you say to a friend that was in your situation?

We can work through the 3 What's in 10-15 mins, choosing only the questions that seem appropriate for the situation:

- Repeating the process in subsequent days can be useful.
- Writing our way through the 3 What's is another alternative.

### **Be more deliberate in looking after yourself.**

For example, eating healthily, maintaining exercise and sleep, spending time with important people, and doing activities you enjoy.

- It is very easy to stop doing the things that we know are good for us when our stress levels rise.
- Consult a professional – this may be your GP, counsellor, psychologist for example. You may utilise an Employee Assistance program in your workplace or as part of AVA services - AVA Counselling Service 1300 687 327.
- Access further information through Beyond Blue or Lifeline.

### **How do we respond to clients of dogs with ehrlichiosis?**

Clients whose dogs have suffered with ehrlichiosis may feel a similar range of emotions to the veterinary professional. They may be miserable, and lonely if their dog dies. They may be angry that you are unable to save their friend or that they cannot access or afford preventative care or treatment.

Emotions are infectious and in observing the client's pain, the veterinary professional may internalise these emotions too. Some clients may share their frustration and despair at the situation with you, in a way that feels personal and attacking.

What we can do to assist grieving clients is to notice, acknowledge and normalise the clients' emotions so that they feel heard and validated. Empathy statements are very helpful here. These might start with I can see/hear/feel.... For example, "I can hear how hard this is for you. Buster sounds like he was a good friend to you".

- The 'for you' part of the statement helps to keep the clients' emotions with them, rather than taking it on as yours.
- Pausing after an empathy statement allows them to provide more information which you may meet with another empathy statement.
- 'I wish' statements can also help. For example, "I wish we could save Buster" or "I wish we had better ways to prevent or treat this disease".

Grieving a lost pet and integrating their loss into your on-going life story can be a complex and lengthy process. Providing the pet owner with the 'Coping with losing your pet from ehrlichiosis' information sheet may assist them as they process and make sense of the loss.