

**The war on pugs**

British veterinary group decries buying, breeding of brachycephalic dogs

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**Culture of perfectionism hurts DVMs, experts say**

International gathering of students and professionals tackles problems with veterinary well-being from every perspective.

By Tad B. Coles, DVM, MRSS-P, CCFP

The mood was upbeat among participants during the fourth annual American Association of Veterinary Medical Colleges (AAVMC) Veterinary Health and Wellness Summit held in Fort Collins, Colorado, at Colorado State University (CSU) Nov. 4-6.

"The presentations were thought-provoking, clarified the issues we're facing, provided solutions, and showed us where the profession needs to move in the future," says Laurie Fonken, DVM, LPC, who provides counseling services for CSU DVM students and helped organize the event.

There were more than 270 participants, 30 presenters, 65 presentations (six keynote), 80 students from 22 schools, 115 administrators and student-support or mental-health staff, and 75 industry partners and veterinary practitioners. This was the first summit to include practitioners.

Juan Samper, DVM, MSc, PhD, an associate

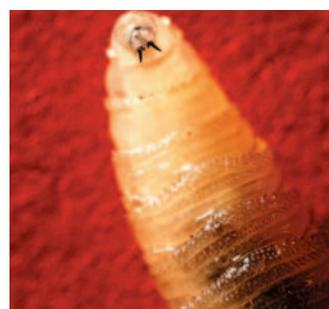
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**Unplug**  
*your* digital life

Veterinary IT and digital marketing consultant Eric Garcia is on a mission to spread the word about the benefits of digital sabbaticals, why veterinarians need them and tips to make them smooth and safe. This self-professed tech addict shares how he finally unplugged (and learned to like it). *By Sarah Mouton Dowdy*

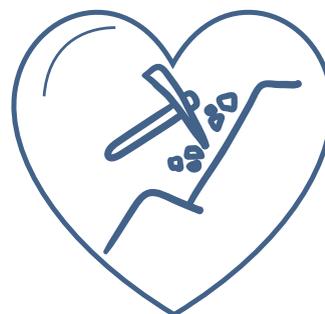
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## Wellness summit

> Continued from cover

dean at Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine, says his impression is that the profession is finally asking, “What got us into this mess?”

Answering that question was part of the keynote address by Michele Gaspar, DVM, DABVP, MA, LPC, a feline veterinarian, licensed counselor and former chaplain. She challenged school administrators to consider how they may have been unwittingly selecting for those who are at risk for being unable to withstand the rigors of practice.

Gaspar explained that certain early maladaptive schemas—broad, pervasive themes of self and relationship with others—are often developed in childhood. Those most pertinent to veterinarians include an essential defectiveness and disconnectedness associated with failure and shame resulting in perfectionism and self-sacrifice to seek approval and validation of oneself.

Gaspar said the profession should seek applicants with a healthy self-esteem and an attitude of being “good enough”—not so perfectionistic that they’re hypercritical of themselves and others.

“I was in the dark regarding how much pain was behind the off-handed statement ‘I became a veterinarian because I like animals more than I like people,’” says Heather Loenser, DVM, a veterinary advisor with the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA). “Many have suffered from interactions with fellow human beings, starting as early as childhood, leading to a preference for the company of pets to people. Now that I know there could be significant trauma behind that statement, I am even more driven to help our colleagues care for themselves and learn to connect and communicate, in a healthy way, with clients, staff and colleagues.”

Gene Crumley, director of leadership development at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine, in his keynote presentation

addressed the importance of leaders having a strong ethical compass, a sense of stewardship, a need to attend to the culture of their organization, a healthy sense of curiosity and, finally, “courageous vulnerability.”

Thomas Meyer, DVM, president of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA), agrees. “What needs to be woven into organizations is a culture that allows people to admit their mistakes without fear of punishment,” Meyer says. The only way that will happen is if leaders are courageous and vulnerable enough to speak up and admit when they make mistakes and praise their teams for doing the same.

Janet Donlin, DVM, CEO of the AVMA, is a member of the Veterinary Wellness Steering Committee. She says she was impressed with the keynote presentation by Lizzie Lockett, strategic communications director for the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). Lockett explained new graduates must abide by the RCVS Code of Professional Conduct, including “professional competence, honesty and integrity, independence and impartiality, client confidentiality and trust, and professional accountability.” And they must understand the economic and emotional context in which veterinarians work—they need to be resilient and confident of their judgment to withstand stresses and conflicting demands at work.

Lockett also discussed the RCVS’s Mind Matters Initiative, which addresses mental health and well-being issues in the profession. She reviewed the 24/7 Vetlife Helpline and a number of other collaborative efforts that bring about a sense of purpose, improve confidence and resilience, and reduce stigma associated with mental issues.

JoAnne Roesner, DVM, DABVP, described the stigma she faced when confronted with her own addiction and mental illness in her pre-



>>> Dr. Mark Stetter, dean of CSU’s College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, welcomes all in attendance.

## Primary summit sponsors

The two primary industry sponsors were VCA and Zoetis.

VCA made a significant financial contribution and also committed the time of Chief Medical Officer Todd Tams, DVM, DACVIM; Vice President of Recruiting Suzanne Russo, DVM, MS; and Maria Druse, VP of human resources. VCA offers its employees free counseling through a life assistance program.

Zoetis has supported the AAVMC wellness summit since its beginning four years ago and watched the attendance climb from about 60 at the first summit to 200 last year and almost 300 this year.

sentation. She reviewed a Centers for Disease Control study that correlated adverse childhood experiences (ACE) with increased risk for a wide variety of illnesses—including a 460 percent increase in the risk of depression and a 1,220 percent increase in the risk of suicide. She described in detail the childhood trauma she experienced.

“Dr. JoAnne Roesner drove home the point that perfectionism can hide incredible pain and pathology,” says AAHA’s Loenser. “Behind the brilliant glare of a shining superstar could be immense suffering and insecurity.”

Roesner says today she is a happy person. She reviewed the well-being initiatives she’s implemented as medical director of Loving Hands Animal Clinic, such as discouraging overtime, scheduling wellness activities such as yoga, walking and meditation for team members, and encouraging collaboration.

She also described the importance of absolute confidentiality and listening without judgment when staff open up about themselves or a coworker. Roesner emphasized the need to make resources readily available such as lists of low-cost or free mental healthcare providers, professionals covered by group insurance, and 12-step programs.

Whitney Miller, DVM, MBA, Petco’s director of veterinary medicine and a CSU admissions committee member, was impressed with the vulnerability the presenters displayed. “The most powerful keynote for me was Betsy Charles,”

Miller says. “She not only tied together everything that had been discussed at the summit but also showed a certain level of vulnerability that we need to feel comfortable demonstrating.”

Charles, a veterinarian with a master’s degree in organizational leadership, works as an assistant professor at Western University of Health Sciences

and executive director of the Veterinary Leadership Institute. Her presentation modeled courageous vulnerability—what she thinks veterinarians need to do to make a dent in the well-being issues they face. She spoke the words her father said when she was growing up, words that pushed her toward perfectionism.

Many of us left the summit with a

to-do list to work on, collaborations to foster and an expectation that we can improve our profession’s well-being. I’ve never been more proud of the veterinary profession. [dvm360](#)

*Tad B. Coles, DVM, MRSS-P, CCFP, is a medical writer and founder of Compassion Fatigue Coach in Overland Park, Kansas.*

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