

# Impacts of responding to emergency animal rescue and disaster incidents on the wellbeing of veterinary professionals

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## Introduction

Emergency responders, including firefighters, ambulance and police officers, human search and rescue workers, are at a higher risk of developing psychological and post-traumatic distress disorders (Smith *et al.*, 2019). There is a paucity of similar research on the effects of animal rescue and disaster responses on veterinarians and other veterinary staff (Vroegindewey and Kurtis, 2020). We hypothesised that veterinary professionals attending these emergencies and disasters face risks to their mental and physical wellbeing.

## Materials and methods

Following Massey University Human Ethics Committee approval, veterinary and other emergency response professionals and volunteers who had participated in response during the last five years were invited to complete a voluntary online survey. Survey questions enquired about respondent demographics, emergency rescue or animals related disaster training, roles, and experiences. Questions on wellbeing and influential factors that might affect an animal rescue or disaster responders were grouped into four main domains: physical, financial, relationship and societal standing.

## Results

There were 260 surveys completed, including 47 (18%) by veterinary professionals (62% veterinarians; 38% veterinary nurses/technologists). Veterinary professionals had attended a median of two incidents (range 1–22). Most of these respondents were from New Zealand (32%), the USA (30%) or Australia (19%), less than 35-years-old (36%), and female (83%). Seventy percent of veterinary respondents reported an incident that negatively affected their mental wellbeing, compared to 47% for all other respondents. Twenty one percent, 32%, 51% and 21% had their physical wellbeing, personal relationships, societal standing, and financial wellbeing impacted, respectively. Recovery strategies reportedly most effective to improve post-event mental wellbeing included post-event debriefing and talking with friends, family, and team members.

## Conclusion

Veterinary professionals responding to emergency animal incidents are at risk of challenges to their wellbeing. Training to reduce these risks and strategies to enhance recovery and resilience are recommended.

## References

- Smith EC, Holmes L, Burkle FM.** The physical and mental health challenges experienced by 9/11 first responders and recovery workers: A review of the literature. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 34, 625–31, 2019
- Vroegindewey GA, Kertis K.** Veterinary services: health, safety and wellness for veterinary professionals in disaster preparedness and response. *Revue Scientifique et Technique - Office International des Epizooties* 39, 615–23, 2020

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