

Baby loss and infertility in the veterinary profession

Vet MINDS (miscarriage, infertility, neonatal death and stillbirth) was founded in 2019. It is a group developed to support all veterinary professionals affected by baby loss and infertility. Vet MINDS is also working to increase awareness and understanding of these sensitive issues, including producing guidelines for employees and employers in the veterinary workplace.

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In April 2018 we heard the words no couple ever wants to hear, 'I'm sorry, but there's no heartbeat'.

As a vet, I consider myself a scientist. Someone who understands the circle of life. But my miscarriage hit me like a ton of bricks. Not least because it is a loss that so many of us experience in silence.

Yet we are not alone. The statistics show that at least 1 in 8 couples will experience fertility problems, and that 1 in 4 pregnancies will end in loss.

I began to realise that baby loss is a lot like loneliness: you can be in a room full of people but feel totally alone — until one person shares how they feel, and suddenly everyone else does too. Before you know it, you realise that none of you is alone, and you have a huge support network sat right next to you. But it takes a few people to start.

So I began to share my story, anonymously at first. It took me a long time to feel comfortable speaking about it in the veterinary world. I guess showing vulnerability in front of our colleagues has not traditionally been a strong point for vets. But when I did the response was overwhelming.

In an increasingly female-dominated industry (of largely child-bearing age), it shouldn't come as such a surprise that so many of us are affected. We must also remember the huge impact of baby loss and infertility on our partners. Add to this the number of men affected by infertility too, and suddenly the topic does not seem so niche.

Sharing my story started a conversation that was too important not to continue. It was here that the idea for Vet MINDS was born. Vet MINDS stands for miscarriage, infertility, neonatal death and stillbirth. Starting off as a



The Vet MINDS pin badge.

closed Facebook group, we are here to support all veterinary professionals affected by baby loss or infertility. At the time of writing we have more than 500 members.

As well as offering a safe space for support and understanding, we are also working to raise awareness and reduce the silence around baby loss and infertility in the profession. In October we produced a Vet MINDS pin badge. It was originally created for Baby Loss Awareness Week, but has been widely adopted by veterinary professionals year-round as a gentle symbol that we are ready to talk about the tough stuff.

There are some uniquely difficult challenges to facing these issues in the veterinary world. We deal with reproduction work daily, from cattle fertility routines to pregnant cat spays. A routine ultrasound scan can bring back painful memories. Where do you find the emotional reserve to guide a family through euthanasia of a loved pet, when you are still processing your own grief?

Pregnancy following infertility or loss

will always bring heightened anxiety. But physical demands, contact with abortifacient substances, and long stressful hours can make the veterinary workplace a particularly difficult environment to face.

As a group, we hope to make a positive impact to how baby loss and infertility are experienced in the profession. Over the next year we will be working to produce guidelines for veterinary employers and employees, starting with returning to work after baby loss.

Baby loss and infertility have a huge impact on those directly affected. But it also affects their employer, and their colleagues. We hope these guidelines will be a source of support for the whole profession.

We have been overwhelmed by the support Vet MINDS has received. These are hugely personal issues, and it isn't right for everyone to talk about their experiences openly. But every time we do have a conversation, share a story, or wear a badge of support, it has little ripples. We will never know the breadth of these ripples, or the people they may be quietly helping.

We cannot do anything to reduce the number of our colleagues who will go through baby loss and infertility, but together, we can make a huge difference to how they experience it. **ICA**

To find out more about the work Vet MINDS is doing, go to the Vet MINDS website at www.vetminds.co.uk

If you have been affected by baby loss or infertility and would like to join the closed Facebook group, search 'Vet MINDS Group' in the search bar on your Facebook homepage.

If you need immediate support, consider phoning the Vetlife Helpline on 0303 040 2551.