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# **Thriving in Clinical Veterinary Practice: A Strengths-Based, Qualitative Investigation of Thriving in Clinical Veterinarians in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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Charlotte Emily Louise Cantley

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# Abstract

Veterinarians play an important role in society, contributing to animal health, public health, and environmental sustainability. However, there is growing international concern about the well-being and workforce stability of veterinarians, particularly those working in clinical practice. Much of the existing research has focused on the negative impact of veterinary work on well-being, emphasising that veterinarians experience high levels of psychological distress and burnout. However, there is a lack of understanding of what enables veterinarians not only to cope in clinical practice but also to thrive and enjoy fulfilling careers.

This research employed a qualitative approach, grounded in positive psychology, to explore the factors that help veterinarians thrive in clinical practice. Using in-depth, semi-structured interviews, this research investigated the lived experiences of clinical veterinarians in Aotearoa New Zealand, to identify the factors that contribute to a fulfilling and sustainable career. Participants across the three studies represented veterinarians from a wide range of clinical practice types, including companion animal, production animal, equine, and mixed practice. They included late-career veterinarians ( $n = 19$ ), new and recent graduates ( $n = 22$ ), and mid-late career veterinarians who were not practice owners or senior managers ( $n = 29$ ). Reflexive thematic analysis was utilised to identify key themes from the data.

Three final key concepts emerged as critical to thriving in veterinary clinical practice: positive leadership, a psychologically safe clinic culture, and a strong sense of purpose and meaning in work, referred to as the “3Ps” of thriving. For early-career veterinarians, positive mentorship in a psychologically safe environment was crucial for developing confidence, self-efficacy, and a professional identity suitable for general practice. Mid- and late-career veterinarians who experienced positive leadership and a healthy, safe workplace culture reported an evolving sense of purpose that included providing care to patients and expanded to encompass mentoring and supporting others in the profession, as well as philanthropic work and community commitment. These veterinarians expressed high levels of engagement and were often motivated by fostering thriving in others. The attitudes and behaviours of clinic managers were noted as particularly important.

Thus, a thriving veterinary career can be considered an odyssey — a long, transformative journey shaped by challenges, growth, and continuous learning. It reflects an evolving sense of purpose, making the role of a clinical veterinarian far more than just a job. Based on these findings, a

practical framework of evidence-based recommendations was designed to foster thriving throughout a veterinarian’s career. These recommendations target three levels of influence: the individual, the clinic, and the broader veterinary profession, and may help address the ongoing issues of recruitment and retention in veterinary practice.

This research provides valuable insights into the benefits of pursuing a clinical career, contributing to the growing body of literature on positive well-being in the veterinary field. It highlights the importance of leadership and psychological safety — topics that have received relatively little attention in veterinary contexts — and shows how they enable veterinarians to find purpose and meaning in their work. Importantly, the research highlights that fostering thriving is a collective responsibility, shared between veterinary businesses, individual veterinarians, and the profession as a whole.



Like a young kōru, a new veterinary graduate begins their journey tightly furled — full of potential yet shaped by their environment.

Illustration by Zeta Hittmann. Drawn at the Teahouse, Lake Agnes, Alberta, Canada, 31st July 2025.

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*“Always remember you matter, you’re important and you are loved, and you bring to this world things no one else can” — Charlie Mackesy, *The Boy, The Mole, The Fox and the Horse**

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my father, Maurice Cantley, who always believed in me even when I struggled at primary school. Although he passed away before I began this PhD journey, his words—*“If you care about something enough, work hard and stick at it, you can do amazing things”* have been a constant source of strength and inspiration. I know he would have been immensely proud.

I also dedicate this thesis to all veterinarians in Aotearoa New Zealand, and around the world, whose passion and curiosity drive them to work tirelessly caring for all creatures, great and small.

*“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing”*

– Albert Einstein

I begin my thesis with a karakia, acknowledging the veterinary profession and those who have supported and guided me on this journey.

***Kia hora te marino, kia whakapapa pounamu te moana,***

***kia tere te kārohirohi i mua i tō huarahi***

*May calm spread all around you.*

*May the sea glisten like greenstone, and the*

*Shimmer of summer dance across your path.*



Kia Hora te Marino

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## List of Abbreviations

AAHA	American Animal Hospital Association
APC	Annual Practising Certificate
AVA	Australian Veterinary Association
AVMA	American Veterinary Medical Association
BVA	British Veterinary Association
CPD	Continuing professional development
CVMA	Canadian Veterinary Association
EAP	Employee assistance programmes
EI	Emotional intelligence, also known as emotional quotient (EQ)
JDC	Job demands-control
JD-R	Job demands-resources model
LAVT	Large animal veterinary technician
NZVA	New Zealand Veterinary Association
RCVS	Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
RTA	Reflexive thematic analysis
SDT	Self-determination theory
STS	Secondary traumatic stress
SoC	Spectrum of care
TA	Thematic analysis
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
VBS	Voluntary Bonding Scheme
VCNZ	Veterinary Council of New Zealand
VetGDP	Veterinary Graduate Development Programme
Vet-SQ	Veterinary Stressor Questionnaire
WHO	World Health Organization

## Glossary

The following is a glossary of definitions used in this thesis.

Concept	Definition	Source
Burnout	A work-related condition characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation or cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.	Maslach et al. (2001)
Compassion fatigue	A state of emotional exhaustion and tension caused by prolonged exposure to the trauma of others, resulting in a diminished ability to empathise and care for those who are suffering.	Figley and Roop (2006)
Challenge-focused identity	A broad type of veterinary professional identity that prioritises client engagement. These veterinarians derive satisfaction from overcoming challenges, such as clients with financial constraints and interpersonal conflict.	Armitage-Chan and May (2018)
Diagnostic-focused identity	An academic type of veterinary professional identity that prioritises definitive diagnosis and gold-standard treatment.	Armitage-Chan and May (2018)
Emotional intelligence	An individual's ability to recognise, understand and manage their own emotions as well as those of others.	Salovey and Mayer (1990)
Eudaimonic well-being	Well-being centred on meaning, purpose, and personal growth.	Ryan and Deci (2001)
Flourishing	A state of complete mental health, which includes emotional, psychological and social well-being.	Keyes (2002)
Gold standard care	A term commonly used to describe the highest level of veterinary care, typically involving advanced diagnostics, up-to-date technology, and intensive treatment. It reflects ideal clinical practice but may not always be feasible or appropriate.	Skipper et al. (2021)
Hedonic well-being	Well-being focused on pleasure, happiness, and life satisfaction.	Ryan and Deci (2001)

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Source</b>
Ill-being	A state of poor psychological health, including negative emotions, anger and symptoms of depression and anxiety.	Ryff and Singer (2006)
Mental health	A state of mental well-being enabling individuals to cope with life's stresses, make use of their abilities, work productively, and contribute to their community.	World Health Organization (2022)
Moral distress	The psychological distress of being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting on what one knows to be right.	Jameton (2017)
Positive psychology	The scientific study of strengths and factors that enable individuals and communities to thrive.	Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000)
Professional identity	A complex construct of an individual's ethical opinions, values, and clinical priorities, and the way these factors influence actions, behaviours, and decisions.	Armitage-Chan and May (2018)
Resilience	The capacity to positively adapt to and recover from adversity, stress, or trauma.	Luthar et al. (2000)
Secondary traumatic stress	The behavioural symptoms, such as anxiety or intrusive thoughts, that an individual experiences after witnessing or listening to others' trauma (similar to post-traumatic stress disorder).	Newell and MacNeil (2010)
Spectrum of care (or contextualised care)	A continuum of diagnostic and treatment options that veterinarians can offer, ranging from high-cost, advanced interventions to more affordable, basic alternatives, tailored to the needs of the patient and the circumstances of the client.	Stull et al. (2018) Warman et al. (2023)
Thriving	The joint experience of development and success, which can be realised through effective holistic functioning and observed through the experience of a high level of well-being and a perceived high level of performance.	Brown et al. (2017)
Thriving at work	A positive psychological state in which people experience both vitality and learning at work.	Spreitzer et al. (2005)

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<b>Concept</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Source</b>
Vicarious trauma	The cognitive changes, such as altered beliefs about safety and trust caused by repeatedly hearing about or helping others through traumatic experiences.	Newell and MacNeil (2010)
Well-being	A positive state experienced by individuals and societies, encompassing physical, mental, and social dimensions.	World Health Organization (2022)

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## Motivation for my thesis

I am a female veterinarian living in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter referred to as New Zealand). I love being a veterinarian and am passionate about the profession. My PhD journey has been shaped by my experiences as a clinician, challenging life events, and a strong desire to help veterinarians thrive and find fulfilment in their clinical careers.

I have always admired the commitment, determination, and resilience that many veterinarians demonstrate throughout their careers. Like some others, I was not accepted into veterinary school immediately after high school and had to take the long route to achieving my childhood dream. After completing a four-year degree in natural science at Trinity College Dublin, I was grateful to gain a place as a mature veterinary student at the University of Cambridge in England. I eventually graduated as a veterinarian in 1992 and was excited to pursue my goal of working in equine clinical practice.

To further develop my veterinary career, I accepted a three-year equine residency position at Massey University, New Zealand, in 1994, accompanied by my incredibly supportive veterinarian husband, Adam. We decided to stay in New Zealand after my residency finished, to work in clinical practice and start a family.

My experience of navigating equine practice while bringing up our two girls was a period of mixed emotions. I loved being a clinical veterinarian, and I loved being a mother, but I felt constantly torn and guilty. I would often have to leave work early to pick up the children, for whom I was nearly always late. At times, I felt that I was a useless veterinarian and a useless mother. It was made more challenging as Adam worked full-time in a busy production animal practice, and we both worked on an after-hours emergency roster. We desynchronised our weekends and nights on-call so that one of us was always home to look after the children. We had no family support in New Zealand as both our families lived overseas.

I experienced the highs and lows of equine practice during my nearly 20 years as a clinical veterinarian. However, after 11 years of juggling family responsibilities and clinical work, I decided to leave clinical practice and took a flexible, non-clinical veterinary industry role for several years. This allowed me to spend more time with our girls before they started secondary school.

It was great having more time and less stress, but my professional identity was deeply tied to being an equine veterinarian, and I struggled immensely with this identity change. However, as one door closed, a new one opened, and I began a role with the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA)

in 2014 as Director of Continuing Education. This job gave me a wonderful, holistic perspective of the veterinary profession in New Zealand and, as I worked closely with veterinarians from all areas of clinical practice, including equine, dairy cattle, sheep and beef, and companion animals, I soon realised that I was not alone in the challenges I had experienced in my clinical career.

While working with the NZVA, I developed a strong interest in supporting veterinarians' well-being. I examined the existing veterinary literature and observed a predominant focus on the negative impacts of veterinary work: stress, burnout, and attrition. However, based on my clinical experience, I know that there are many enjoyable aspects of veterinary work, and many veterinarians genuinely love their jobs. This contrast sparked my curiosity about the positive impact of veterinary work. I became interested in understanding what helps veterinarians thrive and have meaningful, fulfilling careers.

I knew that to contribute meaningfully to the veterinary well-being space, my work needed to be evidence-based. In early 2021, I began planning for my PhD by applying for a doctoral scholarship. However, things did not quite work out as planned. In December 2021, I had a life-threatening accident, being thrown off my young horse, then trampled, and had to draw deeply on my reserves of personal resilience. I suffered a severe cervical spine fracture, a head injury, and many other broken bones, resulting in a long, slow recovery. This accident made me more determined than ever to undertake this research on a topic that means so much to me.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## The veterinary profession in New Zealand

Veterinarians, like most people, have an intrinsic desire for self-improvement and personal growth (Maslow, 1943, p. 5; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The research presented in this thesis was carried out to understand what enables veterinarians to achieve fulfilment and thrive in clinical practice rather than merely surviving or struggling. Thriving has been defined as the “joint experience of development and success” (Brown et al., 2017, p. 167) and “a positive psychological state where individuals experience both vitality and learning” (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p. 545). This important concept will be discussed further in Chapter 2.

The purpose of this qualitative research was to identify key personal and contextual enablers of thriving among clinical veterinarians working in New Zealand at various career stages. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, much previous research has focused on the negative impact of clinical veterinary work on veterinarians’ mental health and well-being. However, the reasons why some veterinarians have long, enjoyable careers and thrive in clinical practice have mainly remained unanswered both in the New Zealand context and globally. This chapter provides an overview of the veterinary profession in New Zealand, highlighting the critical importance of sustaining a viable clinical veterinary workforce. It explores the challenges of retention and attrition within the global veterinary profession, with a particular focus on the New Zealand context. While acknowledging the challenges, the chapter considers the positive aspects of clinical veterinary work. It then identifies a gap in the literature that informed the development of the research question. The chapter concludes with a brief outline and scope of the thesis.

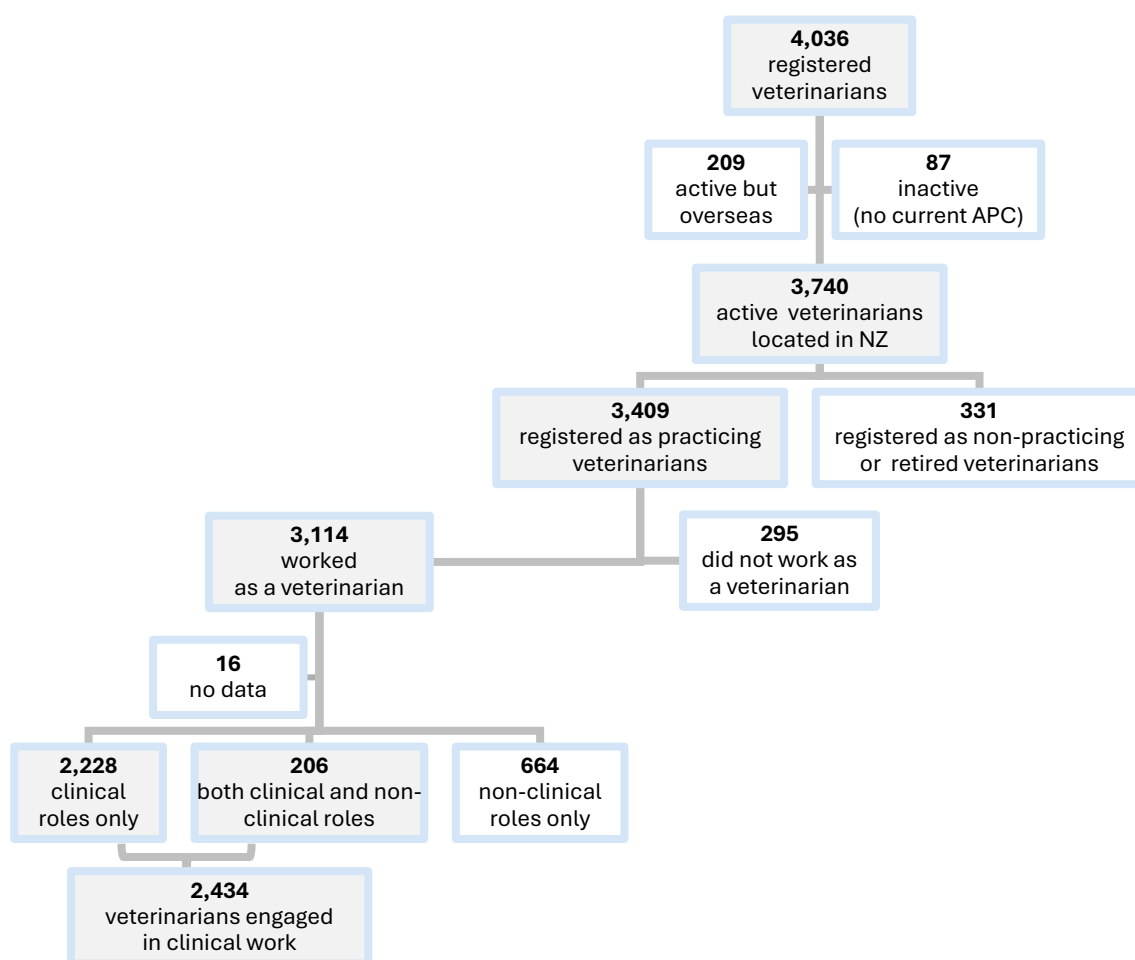
### 1.1 The veterinary workforce in New Zealand

In New Zealand, with its population of just over 5.3 million people (Stats NZ, 2024, p. 1), there are 3,740 practising veterinarians responsible for the care of more than 72 million owned animals (Veterinary Council of New Zealand [VCNZ], 2024a). Figure 1.1 illustrates the composition of the veterinary workforce in New Zealand in 2024. Of the 4,036 veterinarians registered with the Veterinary Council of New Zealand (VCNZ) in 2024, 3,740 held a current Annual Practising Certificate (APC). Some APC holders worked in non-veterinary roles, while 3,114 were employed in positions that require a veterinary degree. Of these, 2,228 worked solely in clinical roles and 206 worked across both clinical and non-clinical roles, resulting in a total of 2,434 veterinarians engaged in clinical practice (VCNZ, 2024a). Approximately 65% of all registered veterinarians work

in clinical roles. Of the remainder, about 10% of veterinarians are employed by the New Zealand Government, making it the largest single employer of veterinarians in New Zealand. A further 4% work in universities in teaching, research and clinical roles, and another 4% are employed by pharmaceutical companies or diagnostic laboratories. Thirteen per cent are self-employed, while approximately 5% work for non-veterinary employers.

**Figure 1.1**

*Categorisation of veterinarians listed on the Veterinary Council of New Zealand Register (2024 APC renewal), showing the total number engaged in clinical work in New Zealand*



*Note.* Adapted from the *New Zealand Veterinary Workforce Report 2023–2024* (VCNZ, 2024a, p. 5).

The distribution of full-time equivalent veterinarians across clinical roles, based on the primary species they work with, was as follows: 41.4% worked with companion animals, 17.9% with production animals, 14.7% in mixed animal practice, and 8.3% in equine practice. An additional 1.4% worked with other species, such as wildlife or zoo animals and 8.6% performed clinical duties as part of regulatory roles. The remaining 6.3% reported working in miscellaneous clinical

roles, and 1.4% did not report their clinical focus (VCNZ, 2024a). Furthermore, an increasing number of clinical veterinarians in New Zealand work part-time, often citing family care as a reason (VCNZ, 2019a).

In New Zealand, clinical veterinarians work across a variety of different practice types. These include privately owned practices, typically run by individual veterinarians or partnerships. There are also large, multi-clinic businesses, some of which are owned by New Zealand veterinarians, while others are owned by non-veterinarians from international corporations. In addition, club practices operate as farmer-owned co-operatives.

The club veterinary practice structure is unique to New Zealand and is predominantly rural, with a focus on production animals, but many also offer companion animal services. Veterinary clubs were defined by the 1954 President of the New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA), Alan Laing (1954) as “an association of clients organised to make use of the services of one or more veterinary surgeons” (p. 63). Club practices were developed in response to a veterinary shortage following World War II (Stewart, 2023). With no veterinary school at the time, the country relied on overseas-trained veterinarians. The Dairy, Meat, and Wool Boards offered bursaries for New Zealanders to train in Australian veterinary schools, aiming to increase the supply of veterinarians (Shortridge et al., 1998). Veterinary clubs, formed by local farmers and dairy co-operatives, became the foundation of rural veterinary care in New Zealand in the mid-1940s. By the mid-1950s, most farmers had access to veterinary services through the club system (NZVA, 2023). Today, in 2025, many of the club practices have combined, resulting in a smaller number of large, multi-clinic practices under club management. The trend towards larger multi-clinic veterinary businesses is also evident in the United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA), and Canada (Nicol, 2012; Osborne, 2023; Steinbach, 2023). These larger veterinary businesses can often offer employee benefits, such as flexibility, wider resources, and less professional isolation than some smaller practices (Nicol, 2012).

## 1.2 The importance of a sustainable veterinary profession

Clinical veterinarians are essential to society. They ensure the health and welfare of production animals, horses, companion animals, wildlife and zoo animals. Veterinarians support agricultural productivity, food safety, animal welfare, and disease prevention in livestock. They improve pet well-being, enhance the human-animal bond, play a key part in conservation, and are vital for the welfare of all animals. Additionally, clinical veterinarians play a crucial role in human health and environmental conservation through their involvement in antimicrobial stewardship, biosecurity,

and the control of zoonotic diseases (diseases that can be transmitted from animals directly to people).

In New Zealand, veterinarians play a vital role in the national economy, particularly through their contributions to the primary industry and horse racing sectors. The dairy industry alone contributes over NZ\$11.3 billion to the gross domestic product (Dairy New Zealand, 2023). The red meat industry generates nearly NZ\$12 billion (Beef + Lamb New Zealand, 2020), and the horse racing sector adds a further NZ\$1.9 billion to the economy (New Zealand Racing Industry, 2024). In addition, companion animal ownership in New Zealand has grown at a rate five times faster than the human population in the past five decades, from one million pets in 1975 to over 4.35 million in 2020 (Companion Animals New Zealand, 2020). Without sufficient clinical veterinarians in New Zealand, the health and welfare of animals would be compromised, potentially leading to serious economic consequences and negative impacts on society. The country would also be more vulnerable to biosecurity threats and public health risks. Therefore, maintaining an adequate clinical veterinary workforce is essential to meet societal needs (Brownlie, 2021).

A veterinary workforce shortage was identified in New Zealand over two decades ago (Jackson et al., 2004) and has since escalated, with the situation being described by the media as a “crisis” (Cook, 2022). The shortage impacts both clinical veterinarians and those in non-clinical roles. However, the lack of veterinarians in clinical practice remains the primary concern and appears to be due to a combination of increasing demand for veterinary services and attrition of veterinarians from clinical practice, rather than solely a shortage in the supply of new veterinarians (Hilton et al., 2023; Weston & King, 2020).

### 1.3 The supply of veterinarians in New Zealand

New Zealand has one veterinary school, located at Massey University in Palmerston North. The yearly graduating veterinary cohort currently consists of around 120 graduates, the majority of whom contribute to the national veterinary workforce. However, approximately 20 are international students who are unlikely to stay in New Zealand, and some domestic graduates may decide to work overseas in their first role (J. Weston, personal communication, 20 April, 2024). To address the rising demand for veterinary services, the New Zealand Government recently agreed to fund more places for domestic veterinary students, resulting in a current intake of 125 domestic and 50 international students annually.

Despite the steady increase in the supply of new domestic graduates, the national veterinary shortage remains unresolved. New Zealand still relies heavily on veterinarians trained overseas

to meet its workforce demands. Veterinarians are on the Long-Term Skills Shortage List (New Zealand Immigration, 2019) and the Government’s ‘Green List’ of roles eligible for a fast-track to residency (New Zealand Immigration, 2022). Furthermore, the NZVA supports employers in navigating immigration processes to facilitate the employment of overseas-trained veterinarians in New Zealand (NZVA, 2025c).

Table 1.1 provides an overview of the New Zealand veterinary workforce, highlighting the significant dependence on overseas-trained veterinarians, predominantly from the UK and Australia. The majority of new veterinarians registered annually with the VCNZ are overseas-trained, while the remainder are domestic graduates from Massey University. A notable exception occurred during the COVID-19 border closures in 2020–2021, when the proportion of overseas-trained veterinarians (40%) fell below that of New Zealand graduates for the first time since 2009 (VCNZ, 2021b). By 2024, the number of new VCNZ registrations had increased to 284, of which 185 (65%) were from overseas-trained individuals. However, most of these internationally qualified veterinarians had graduated more than a year prior and entered the workforce with greater experience (VCNZ, 2024a).

The total number of veterinarians registered with the VCNZ has steadily increased from 2,360 in 2009 to 4,036 in 2024, representing an annual increase of approximately 3%. Overseas-trained veterinarians consistently comprise around 30% of the total workforce (see Table 1.1). The gender composition has undergone significant shifts over time. In 2009, women comprised 43% of the veterinary workforce, and this percentage increased to 65% by 2024 (see Table 1.1). This trend mirrors international patterns, with women representing 69.7% of the veterinary workforce in Australia (Australian Veterinary Association [AVA], 2024b) and 69.8% women in the United Kingdom (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons [RCVS], 2024). Together, these data highlight two key trends in the New Zealand veterinary workforce—a sustained reliance on internationally trained veterinarians and a continuing shift toward a profession that is predominantly female.

**Table 1.1**

*Overview of the New Zealand veterinary workforce (2009–2024) – New and total registrations, and proportions of female and overseas-trained veterinarians registered with VCNZ*

		2009– 2010	2012– 2013	2016– 2017	2018– 2019	2020– 2021	2022– 2023	2023– 2024
Total new registrants with VCNZ		168	211	201	285	184	315	284
New VCNZ registrations by training origin	Domestic graduates	72 (43%)	81 (39%)	82 (41%)	94 (33%)	110 (60%)	113 (36%)	99 (35%)
	Overseas graduates	96 (57%)	130 (61%)	119 (59%)	191 (67%)	74 (40%)	202 (64%)	185 (65%)
Total VCNZ registrants holding APC		2360	2521	2813	3054	3129	3874	4036
Percentage of female veterinarians		43%	47%	52%	56%	COVID no data available	63.7%	64.2%
Percentage of overseas veterinarians		28%	28%	30%	30%	COVID no data available	32%	32.5%

Source. Respective VCNZ workforce and annual reports (VCNZ, 2010; 2012, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019b, 2021b, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b).

## 1.4 Retention and attrition of veterinarians

Veterinary retention can be considered at three levels: retention within the profession, retention in clinical practice, and retention in a specific job. In this thesis, the focus is on veterinarians continuing to work in clinical veterinary practice; however, broader issues of retention within the profession will be discussed first.

### 1.4.1 Retention and attrition in the broader veterinary profession

There has been a great deal of discussion over the last 5 years in the media, ministerial reports and academic literature about the shortage of veterinarians in many countries, including New Zealand (Fitzpatrick, 2024; Gates, McLachlan, et al., 2021; VCNZ, 2022), the UK (Doherty, 2019; RCVS, 2021b; Waters, 2018), Australia (AVA, 2021; Thio & Quain, 2025), the USA (American Animal Hospital Association [AAHA], 2024; Booth et al., 2021; Volk et al., 2022), Canada (Canadian Veterinary Medical Association, 2020), France (Truchet et al., 2017), and other European countries (Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, 2023). Despite an increase in the number of

domestic graduates and the recruitment of international veterinarians, it remains challenging to fill clinical veterinary positions across all areas of practice in New Zealand (VCNZ, 2019a). As a result, some New Zealand veterinary practices are understaffed, placing additional strain on the existing workforce. Efforts to improve the utilisation of allied veterinary professionals may alleviate some pressure on veterinarians, but do not solve the problem (Brown, 2023; Gates, Palleson-Putt, et al., 2021).

To work as a veterinarian and use the title “veterinarian” in most countries, individuals must be registered with a regulatory body that oversees the profession. In New Zealand, the VCNZ is the regulatory authority. The VCNZ requires that individuals hold a recognised university veterinary degree to register and a current APC to undertake any veterinary work. The VCNZ has reported the proportion of newly registered veterinarians continuing to hold an APC each year since 2009, which serves as a proxy for retention within the profession (VCNZ, 2013; 2019a, 2024a). Data from the 2019 workforce report indicated that the 10-year retention rate for domestic veterinary graduates in New Zealand remained relatively high, with approximately 75% continuing to hold an APC 10 years post-graduation. In contrast, the 10-year retention rates for dentistry graduates in New Zealand were lower at 67% (New Zealand Dental Council, 2019). This may indicate that veterinarians experience a higher-level of job satisfaction, resulting in higher retention levels than dentists. However, the 10-year retention rate for New Zealand medical graduates has recently shown improvement, increasing from 66% in 2016 to 82% in 2022. This rise is potentially due to initiatives such as the Ministry of Health’s Voluntary Bonding Scheme (Medical Council of New Zealand, 2022). A similar veterinary voluntary bonding initiative has been introduced and is discussed further below.

#### 1.4.2 Retention and attrition in clinical practice

Most new veterinary graduates begin their careers in clinical practice, providing preventive care, diagnosis, and treatment of sick and injured animals across a range of species. However, not all veterinarians remain in clinical practice for their entire career. A recent survey of companion animal veterinarians in the USA found that 42% of respondents under the age of 44 intended to reduce or stop clinical work within 5 years (Kogan & Rishniw, 2024). In New Zealand, the percentage of veterinarians employed in clinical veterinary work among the total number of veterinarians registered with the VCNZ has remained relatively constant, ranging from 60% to 70% (VCNZ, 2013; 2019a, 2024a). However, holding an APC is not synonymous with retention in clinical practice or even within the profession, as veterinary graduates have a wide range of career options available to them. Veterinarians require an APC to work in clinical and non-clinical veterinary

roles. Some domestic graduates decide to work in clinical practice overseas and do not retain their APC. In some cases, others retain their APC despite being employed in a non-veterinary role, so that they can treat and prescribe for their own animals. A New Zealand study of two veterinary graduate cohorts reported a decrease in the number of veterinarians working in clinical practice as the time after graduation increased. The study revealed that only 50% remained in clinical roles 10 years after graduation, and this figure dropped to 28% after 20 years (King, 2021).

Veterinarians may transition out of clinical practice for a variety of reasons. While some leave due to dissatisfaction or poor well-being (Arbe Montoya et al., 2021), others do so for more positive reasons. Career transitions are also influenced by personal circumstances and planned career breaks, such as pursuing new opportunities, starting a family or retirement (King, 2021; RCVS, 2021b). Some decide to work in non-clinical veterinary roles such as government, industry, practice management and education, while others may work in roles where a veterinary qualification is not required, such as farming or teaching. Regardless of the reasons, attrition and recruitment challenges contribute to clinical workforce shortages, thereby increasing pressure on those who remain due to higher workloads. Moreover, there is particular concern about the ongoing shortage of veterinarians in rural clinical practice in New Zealand (Weston & King, 2020) and Australia (Thio & Quain, 2025).

To help address the veterinary shortage in New Zealand's rural sector, the government introduced a voluntary Veterinary Bonding Scheme (VBS) in 2009, administered by the Ministry for Primary Industries. The scheme offers a grant of up to NZ\$55,000, paid over 3–5 years, to approximately 30 new veterinary graduates from Massey University each year. The goal of the scheme is to incentivise new veterinarians to work in rural practice and improve retention. Graduates accepted into the VBS must commit to working in rural practice, predominantly with production animals and working dogs, for a minimum of 3 years to receive the first payment (Ministry for Primary Industries, 2024). Between 2009 and 2019, a total of 318 veterinary graduates were accepted into the scheme. Of these, 31% completed the full five-year term, 26% withdrew before reaching the end of the term, and only 5% left the scheme before 3 years, thus not receiving any payment (MacIntyre, 2020). The New Zealand Government highlighted the success of the scheme in 2024, reporting that 35 new veterinary graduates joined rural communities through the VBS, the highest intake since the scheme's inception (McClay & Hoggard, 2024). Many new graduates from New Zealand face substantial student loans of upwards of NZ\$100,000, which drives some to seek work overseas to pay off the debt (Guesgen, 2025). However, recipients of the VBS report that it helps ease their financial burden, a known stressor during their early years in the workforce (McAvinue, 2024). Although the VBS fund has remained virtually unchanged since 2009, it is

comparable to similar international schemes (United States Department of Agriculture, 2025), which offer annual student loan repayments to new graduates who commit to working in designated veterinary shortage areas.

The pressures on veterinarians in clinical practice have increased in recent years. A surge in pet ownership during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the demand for companion animal veterinary care (Ho et al., 2021). Changing attitudes towards animals, advances in veterinary care, and a growing appreciation of the human-animal bond as a means of combating loneliness have increased client expectations about the level of veterinary services that should be available (Gates et al., 2019). Additionally, companion animals are living longer due to improvements in diagnostics, treatment, nutrition and preventative care, further increasing the demand for veterinary services. The demand for production animal veterinarians in New Zealand has also increased in recent years. This demand has been primarily driven by growth in the dairy and red meat sectors, as well as by the need for veterinary expertise in livestock health and productivity.

## 1.5 Exploring the positive aspects of veterinary work

Extensive research over many years has identified the challenges and stressors of clinical veterinary work (Bartram, Baldwin, et al., 2009; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Griek et al., 2018; Mudry et al., 2025; Spendelow et al., 2024). For example, poor management, poor work-life balance, low salaries, long hours and after-hours work, poor remuneration, negative clinical outcomes and feeling undervalued have been found to contribute to decisions to leave clinical work (Hagen et al., 2020). These issues will be expanded upon in Chapter 2. However, there has been minimal research about what enables veterinarians to thrive, and the positive factors that contribute to job satisfaction, engagement, and retention in clinical practice (Cake et al., 2017). Furthermore, many studies have been survey-based and focused on reporting the prevalence of issues, with limited exploration of underlying causes (Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al., 2009; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Volk et al., 2018).

Recently, there has been growing interest in understanding what enables veterinarians to have enjoyable, sustainable careers in clinical practice. For instance, a large British survey (Begeny et al., 2018) reported that feeling valued, having a role model, and a sense of “fitting in” were daily experiences that influenced veterinarians’ motivation, satisfaction and retention in clinical practice. While there has been a shift towards investigating positive job factors, the positive aspects of clinical veterinary work remains underexplored. Greater attention is needed to

understand what supports veterinarians to remain engaged, satisfied, and thriving in clinical practice.

## 1.6 Developing the research question

The aim of this research is twofold: to understand what enables veterinarians at different career stages to thrive in clinical practice; and to develop practical recommendations that can be implemented to support veterinarians to have sustainable, satisfying careers.

The primary question guiding this research aimed to contribute to the growing knowledge about the positive aspects of clinical veterinary work. My main research question, therefore, was:

What factors influence the job satisfaction, engagement and thriving of veterinarians working in clinical practice in Aotearoa New Zealand?

This thesis explores the perceptions of veterinarians at various career stages to identify key factors that contribute to job satisfaction, engagement, positive well-being and thriving. It also describes veterinarians' opinions on practice-level interventions that they perceive to be effective in supporting well-being and thriving in clinical practice.

Three specific research questions were developed to address the primary research question. These formed the basis of the three separate studies that comprise this thesis.

1. What are the perceptions of veterinarians with 8 or more years of clinical experience regarding factors contributing to job satisfaction, engagement and thriving in clinical practice? (Study 1 – Chapter 4).
2. How do new and recent veterinary graduates perceive their work experiences in clinical practice? (Study 2 – Chapter 5).
3. What well-being initiatives do veterinarians perceive clinics provide, and which of these initiatives are seen to support veterinarians' well-being? (Study 3 – Chapter 6).

The overarching objectives of this research guided the steps taken to address the research questions. These were:

1. To investigate the perceptions of clinical veterinarians who have been in practice for 8 or more years about factors that help them thrive in clinical practice (Study 1).

2. To explore the perceptions of new and recent graduate clinical veterinarians who have been in practice for less than 3 years about their transition into, and experiences of, clinical practice (Study 2).
3. To investigate the perceptions of employee veterinarians who have been in clinical practice for more than 3 years about the measures adopted by veterinary practices intended to support staff motivation and well-being, and the initiatives that supported their personal well-being (Study 3).
4. To develop recommendations that support the well-being and job satisfaction of veterinarians in clinical practice.

These research questions were not designed to test a hypothesis but aimed to explore the lived experiences of veterinarians in clinical practice using a social science approach. Therefore, a fully qualitative methodology, guided by a positive psychology lens, was chosen as the most appropriate approach to this research. All three studies used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to address the research questions.

In the context of the international literature on veterinary well-being and job satisfaction, this is possibly the first in-depth interview study to explore what enables veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice across different career stages. Taking a novel, strengths-based approach, this research shifts the focus from the longstanding issues of poor well-being and attrition to a deeper understanding of the factors that support thriving in clinical practice.

It is intended that the findings from this research will inform initiatives and strategies that enhance well-being, engagement, and thriving in clinical practice, which may, in turn, have a positive impact on the retention of veterinarians.

## 1.7 Thesis overview

This thesis consists of eight chapters.

**Chapter 1** introduces the research topic and provides background information on the New Zealand veterinary profession and the need to explore thriving veterinarians in clinical practice.

**Chapter 2** presents the literature review. It begins with a brief overview of research on the negative aspects of veterinary work, followed by a focus on the positive dimensions of a clinical veterinary career and comparisons with other helping professions. The chapter then examines key theories and models related to engagement and thriving, including leadership and psychological safety in

the veterinary context. The chapter concludes by identifying a gap in the literature that this research addresses.

**Chapter 3** outlines the methodology used in this research. It presents the theoretical underpinnings and the qualitative research methods employed. The data analysis methods are explained, and the role of researcher reflexivity and positioning in qualitative research is discussed. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the validity and reliability of the studies.

**Chapter 4** presents the results and a discussion of the findings from the first study, which sought to understand the factors that enable experienced veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice.

**Chapter 5** presents the results and a discussion of the findings from the second study, which examined the experiences of new and recent graduate veterinarians during their transition into, and early career in, clinical practice.

**Chapter 6** reports the results and provides a discussion of the findings from the third study, which examined the perceptions of mid to late-career veterinarian employees on the well-being initiatives implemented by veterinary practices.

**Chapter 7** provides a general discussion about the findings from all three studies and synthesises these to address the overarching research objectives. Strengths and limitations of the research are outlined, and some areas for future research are proposed.

**Chapter 8** presents the recommendations and conclusions of this research. After these final insights, a reference list and appendices are provided.

## Chapter 2: Literature review

### Stress and well-being in the veterinary profession

#### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the current knowledge about the thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice in New Zealand. Although this thesis focuses on the positive aspects of veterinary work, it is important to acknowledge the extensive existing research that explores the negative impact of veterinary work on well-being and mental health. This chapter, therefore, begins with a brief overview of workplace stressors and their negative influence on veterinarians' mental health. This background provides context for the growing attention on well-being in the veterinary profession. Next, the literature review introduces positive psychology, explores the positive aspects of veterinary work, and discusses key concepts related to mental health, well-being, and thriving. Theoretical perspectives on workplace well-being, psychological safety, and leadership are then discussed before considering interventions aimed at improving veterinary well-being. The chapter concludes by identifying underexplored areas in the existing literature that inform the research question guiding this research.

#### 2.2 Workplace stressors in clinical veterinary practice

Clinical veterinary practice is the most common career path for new veterinary graduates in New Zealand, and it can be a highly rewarding career. However, clinical practice is also demanding, with numerous workplace stressors that can impact mental health, well-being, and retention (Bartram & Turley, 2009, p. 93; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Hatch et al., 2011; Mudry et al., 2025; Platt, Hawton, Simkin, & Mellanby, 2012; Pohl et al., 2022). International research consistently shows that veterinarians in clinical practice face a complex mix of stressors that can be challenging to navigate. In a comprehensive systematic review of the literature across nine countries on stress in veterinarians, Pohl et al. (2022) reported that "the risks of burnout, anxiety and depressive disorders are higher among this occupational group than in the general population" (p. 1).

A cross-sectional British survey conducted by Bartram, Baldwin, et al. (2009) identified seven main psychosocial stressor categories related to working in clinical practice: job demands, lack of job control, lack of managerial support, lack of peer support, poor relationship quality, lack of role clarity, and organisational change. Within these categories, long hours, professional mistakes, and high client expectations were exacerbated when managerial support was

perceived to be low. More recently, Spendelow et al. (2024) grouped veterinary-specific workplace stressors into four main areas: high workload, challenging client interactions, unclear performance expectations, and patient care challenges.

Veterinary workplace stressors are well documented and appear consistent across countries, including New Zealand (Gardner & Hini, 2006). Commonly reported stressors include long working hours (Gardner & Hini, 2006; Whitaker et al., 2025), after-hours duties (Kogan et al., 2021), unclear job descriptions, work-related accidents, and fatigue (Reijula et al., 2003). Financial insecurity, high client expectations, interpersonal conflict (Griek et al., 2018), client incivility (Irwin et al., 2022) and co-worker incivility (Irwin et al., 2025) also contribute to workplace stress. Additional factors such as low pay, discrimination in the workplace (Whitaker et al., 2025), poor work-life balance (Meehan, 2019), and exposure to ethical dilemmas and moral distress (Arbe-Montoya et al., 2020; Doolan-Noble et al., 2023; Moses et al., 2018) add to veterinarians' stress levels. Emotional strain related to medical errors, unexpected outcomes, euthanasia and fear of making mistakes have also been widely reported (Bartram, Baldwin, et al., 2009; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Mellanby & Herrtage, 2004; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020; Platt, Hawton, Simkin, & Mellanby, 2012).

Together, these stressors highlight the complex and demanding nature of clinical veterinary work, and identifying the workplace stressors that impact veterinarians is important (Bartram et al., 2010). A recent French study by Mudry et al. (2025) developed and validated the Veterinary Stressor Questionnaire (Vet-SQ) survey to identify workplace stressors in veterinary practice. The authors created the survey based on the results of a preliminary qualitative study, which identified eight key stressor domains: excessive workload and poor work-life balance, animal abuse by clients, moral distress, financial concerns, interpersonal conflict, fear of mistakes, fear of injury, and fragmented work.

While many studies on veterinary workplace stressors have relied on quantitative surveys, some have incorporated free-text analysis to enrich findings with qualitative insights (Adam et al., 2019; Griek et al., 2018; Irwin et al., 2025). However, free-text responses are limited by the lack of follow-up and potential survey bias. In contrast, qualitative interviews allow for richer investigation of veterinarians' lived experiences and can reveal novel risk factors for poor psychological well-being. For example, Whitaker et al. (2025) used focus groups to explore burnout and job dissatisfaction among equine veterinarians. Their study identified discrimination based on age, race or gender as a primary cause of dissatisfaction, an issue not commonly highlighted in previous research. Similarly, Campbell et al. (2025) conducted interviews with Canadian clinical

veterinarians and identified personal traits such as perfectionism, type A personality, and a “superhero mindset” as contributing to stress and anxiety. These novel findings underscore the importance of qualitative methods in exploring the complex issues affecting veterinarians’ mental health. The qualitative interview phase of the study by Mudry et al. (2025) identified previously reported stressors as well as some novel ones, such as presenteeism and exposure to animals suffering.

### 2.2.1 Risk factors for poor psychological well-being in veterinarians

Several studies have identified an association between psychological well-being and years graduated, with younger, more recent, veterinary graduates reporting poorer mental health (AVA, 2021; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Volk et al., 2024). This is not surprising as graduates transition from university into clinical practice can be challenging (Heath, 1997; Rhind et al., 2011) and has been described as a ‘make or break period’ (Gilling & Parkinson, 2009, p. 209). Long work hours, lack of support, workplace conflict, and unrealistic client expectations can make an early clinical career even more challenging (Bell et al., 2019). This issue was highlighted by Gates et al. (2020) in a New Zealand study, which reported that 44% of recent veterinary graduates left their first clinical job within 2 years, and a further 16% were considering leaving. The primary reasons for leaving were a lack of suitable support and mentoring, as well as a toxic work environment.

Young female veterinarians are particularly vulnerable to workplace stressors and frequently report poor mental health outcomes (AVA, 2021; Fritschi et al., 2009; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Jansen et al., 2024; Platt, Hawton, Simkin, & Mellanby, 2012). This is especially concerning given the significant demographic shift over the past 30 years, with women now making up a growing majority of the veterinary profession globally (AVA, 2019; Berrada et al., 2022; Buchanan & Wallace, 2020; Federation of Veterinarians of Europe, 2019; Robinson et al., 2019; VCNZ, 2024a). Many veterinary schools worldwide have a student population that is at least 80% female (British Veterinary Association [BVA], 2019). In New Zealand, 64% of registered veterinarians identify as female, and half of these are under 40 years old (VCNZ, 2024a). Considering that young female veterinarians are most at risk of poor mental health (Jansen et al., 2024; Neubauer et al., 2024), there is a need to prioritise well-being and targeted support for this growing cohort.

Additional risk factors for poor mental health were identified in a recent Austrian study by Neubauer et al. (2024). The authors found that physical inactivity and high smartphone usage were linked to poor psychological well-being among veterinarians, factors that have not been widely reported.

For a comprehensive systematic review of the studies on work-related stress and risk factors associated with mental disorders among practising veterinarians, see Pohl et al. (2022).

## 2.2.2 Psychological impacts of workplace stressors

People in caring professions, whether working with animals or people, often face stress and emotional exhaustion at some point in their careers due to the demanding nature of their work. The mental health of veterinarians has become an increasing concern internationally, with research showing higher rates of work-related stress, depression, anxiety, burnout, compassion fatigue, suicidal ideation, and suicide compared to the general population (Bartram, Baldwin, et al., 2009; Best et al., 2020; Gardner & Hini, 2006; Hatch et al., 2011; Nett et al., 2015; Ouedraogo et al., 2021; Perret et al., 2020c; Platt, Hawton, Simkin, & Mellanby, 2012; Volk et al., 2024). The main types of psychological distress reported in the veterinary profession are summarised in Table 2.1 and are briefly discussed below.

**Table 2.1**

*Types of psychological distress reported in the veterinary profession*

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Burnout	A work-related condition characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment.	Maslach et al. (2001)
Compassion fatigue	A state of emotional exhaustion and tension caused by prolonged exposure to the trauma of others, resulting in a diminished ability to empathise and care for those suffering.	Figley and Roop (2006)
Secondary traumatic stress	The behavioural symptoms, such as anxiety or intrusive thoughts, experienced after witnessing or listening to others' trauma.	Newell and MacNeil (2010)
Moral distress	The psychological distress of being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting on what one knows to be right.	Jameton (2017)

There has been a particular focus on occupational burnout, a work-related condition that develops gradually in response to chronic stress. It is characterised by emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2001). While burnout can affect employees in any occupation, it is particularly common in emotionally demanding professions such as healthcare (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017), dentistry (FDI World Dental Federation, 2024), and veterinary work (Ashton-James & McNeilage, 2022; Blokland et al., 2024;

Jones-Bitton et al., 2022; Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Demerouti, et al., 2014; Steffey, Griffon, Risselada, Buote, et al., 2023; Wallace, 2017). Contributing factors for burnout include heavy workloads, poor work-life balance, and difficult workplace interactions (Ashton-James & McNeilage, 2022).

Studies consistently report high levels of burnout among veterinarians, with up to 50% of survey respondents in the USA experiencing symptoms of burnout, and nearly 60% reporting high secondary traumatic stress (STS) levels (Ouedraogo et al., 2021). A recent Australian study by Li et al. (2024) found that veterinarians across different clinical settings, such as general practice and emergency clinics, reported similar levels of burnout, with no significant differences in burnout scores between the groups. Additionally, Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Demerouti, et al. (2014) noted that poor work-life balance was a trigger for burnout in younger veterinarians; however, providing support and opportunities for professional development and clinical skill-building helped buffer these negative effects. Burnout not only affects individual well-being but also contributes to workforce attrition and organisational costs, making its management critical for improving retention in clinical veterinary practice (Arbe Montoya et al., 2021; Rohlf et al., 2022; Steffey, Griffon, Risselada, Scharf, et al., 2023). For recent comprehensive reviews of burnout in the veterinary profession, the reader is referred to Steffey, Griffon, Risselada, Buote, et al. (2023) and Steffey, Griffon, Risselada, Scharf, et al. (2023).

Although not the focus of this thesis, it is important to recognise that veterinarians face a higher risk of suicide, four times that of the general population (Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al., 2009; Jones-Fairnie et al., 2008). Bartram and Baldwin (2008) proposed a model suggesting that suicide risk may arise from a complex interplay of factors across a veterinarian's career. Platt, Hawton, Simkin, Dean, et al. (2012) found that contributors to suicidality included long working hours, heavy workloads, career dissatisfaction, patient-related stress, and poor workplace relationships, often compounded by difficult life events. However, evidence about the role of performing animal euthanasia on stress and suicidal ideation is mixed (Meehan & Bradley, 2007; Platt, Hawton, Simkin, Dean, et al., 2012). Other potential contributing factors to suicidal ideation include burnout, emotional strain from unrealistic client expectations (Wallace, 2017), mental health issues (Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al., 2009), stigma around help-seeking behaviours (Bartram et al., 2010), and access to means of suicide (Jones-Fairnie et al., 2008).

Individuals who work in helping professions, such as the veterinary and medical fields, are often motivated by compassion and a desire to make a difference in patients' lives. Compassion, closely related to empathy, is defined as the awareness of others' emotional experiences

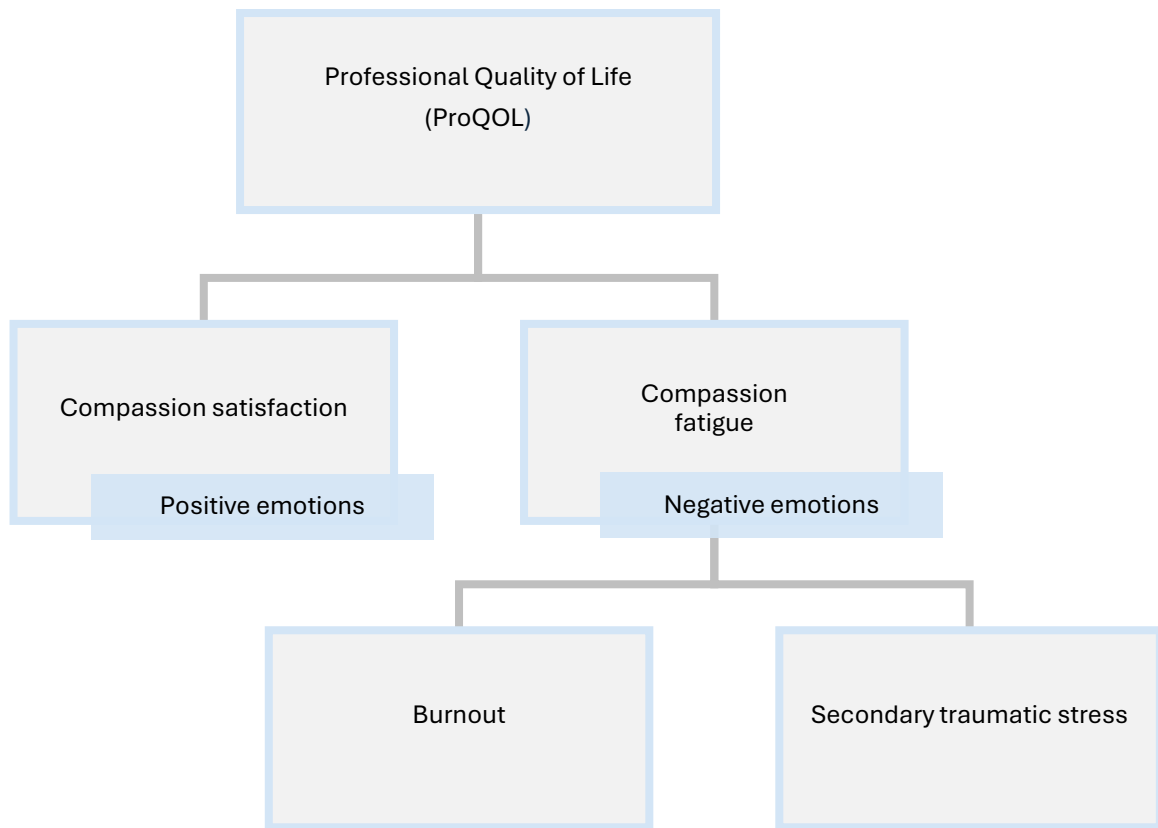
combined with the desire to help and relieve their suffering (Figley & Roop, 2006). Empathy and compassion are recognised as essential capabilities for veterinarians and doctors, contributing to their ability to provide effective care and derive meaning from their work (Martin Cake et al., 2019; Fernando, 2021). Many veterinary professionals find deep satisfaction in caring for patients and clients, which enhances their sense of purpose and professional quality of life (Rohlf et al., 2022). However, repeated exposure to secondary trauma in high-intensity caregiving roles can lead to compassion fatigue, a well-documented risk among medical practitioners, nurses (Newell & MacNeil, 2010; Peacock, 2023; Potter, 2010), and animal care professionals (Cohen, 2007; Harvey & Cameron, 2020; Rohlf, 2018; White et al., 2021).

Often referred to as the “cost of caring”, compassion fatigue arises from sustained empathic engagement, particularly when caregivers are unable to achieve positive outcomes (Figley & Roop, 2006; Stamm, 2010). This can lead to emotional exhaustion, a sense of helplessness and confusion (Figley & Roop, 2006). Polachek and Wallace (2018) reported that barriers to patient care, including financial constraints, ethical conflicts, and client grief, contributed to compassion fatigue among veterinary staff. The emotional impact of difficult interactions with distressed clients contributes to compassion fatigue through burden transfer (Spitznagel et al., 2019), a phenomenon linked to increased burnout in veterinarians (Blokland et al., 2024). The complexity of the human-animal bond, exposure to animal suffering, and the emotional strain of performing euthanasia, often referred to as the caring–killing paradox (Reeve et al., 2005), can reduce veterinarians’ professional quality of life (Rohlf et al., 2022).

The term Professional Quality of Life (ProQOL) describes the positive and negative emotional impact of helping others through one’s work (see Figure 2.1). It encompasses the adverse effects of compassion fatigue, which comprises both burnout and STS, as well as the emotional rewards of compassion satisfaction common among those in caregiving professions (Stamm, 2010). Rohlf et al. (2022) found that both personal factors and workplace stressors contribute to burnout and STS in veterinary professionals. This, in turn, increases the risk of compassion fatigue and lowers the ProQOL, potentially leading to an intent to leave one’s job or profession. Burnout and compassion fatigue, although distinct in definition, often arise from similar factors in clinical veterinary practice. Consequently, compassion fatigue can be considered a form of burnout among veterinary professionals (Figley & Roop, 2006).

**Figure 2.1**

*The components of professional quality of life*



*Note.* Adapted from *The Concise Manual for the Professional Quality of Life Scale (2nd ed.)* (Stamm, 2010, p. 8).

Moral distress has been another area of focus on the mental health and well-being of veterinarians. Moral distress is defined as “the psychological distress of being in a situation in which one is constrained from acting on what one knows to be right” (Jameton, 2017, p. 617). In veterinary clinical practice, professionals frequently face complex ethical dilemmas involving competing obligations to animals, clients, colleagues, and society (Quain, 2022). Moral distress has been reported as a significant contributor to compassion fatigue amongst veterinarians (Kahler, 2015), as well as contributing to feelings of guilt, anger, powerlessness, burnout, reduced psychological well-being, and thoughts of leaving a job or the profession (Arbe Montoya et al., 2019; Dürnberger, 2020; Kogan & Rishniw, 2023b; Moses et al., 2018). Common causes include ethically questionable euthanasia requests (Moses et al., 2018), compromised patient care, witnessing unethical behaviour (Arbe Montoya et al., 2023), and dealing with the consequences of adverse events (Gibson et al., 2023). Among production animal veterinarians in New Zealand,

moral distress has been documented in association with biosecurity measures such as mass culling during disease outbreaks (Doolan-Noble et al., 2023).

### 2.2.3 Stress and attrition

The above-mentioned occupational stressors and resulting poor health outcomes contribute to reduced career satisfaction and increased attrition of veterinarians from clinical practice across all career stages (Arbe-Montoya et al., 2020; Routly et al., 2002). The 2021 American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) survey identified that 44% of veterinarians had considered leaving the profession for reasons other than retirement, with poor mental health and work-life balance cited as key reasons (Bain et al., 2022). A recent British study by Rigby and Prutton (2025) found that both work and personal factors influenced equine veterinarians' decision to leave clinical practice. Key reasons included high workload, after-hours duties, and a lack of opportunity for personal development.

Veterinarians experiencing high stress and poor mental health report negative impacts on team dynamics, client interactions, decision-making, and overall quality of care (Campbell et al., 2023). Poor mental health is also linked to increased error rates (Oxtoby et al., 2015). While studies show a complex relationship between veterinarians' mental health and client satisfaction (Perret et al., 2020b), the overall impact on performance and care is concerning. In a recent Australian study, Santos et al. (2025) highlighted that patient safety and quality of care in veterinary practice are influenced by team dynamics, stress recognition, workplace well-being, and perception of a safety culture. Similarly, research from the USA demonstrated the role of good leadership, psychologically safe teams, and individual well-being in promoting patient safety (Kogan et al., 2025). A patient safety culture in this context is "the shared attitudes, beliefs, values and assumptions that underlie how people perceive and act upon safety issues within their organisations" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 2). Poor mental health can also carry significant financial implications, including absenteeism, reduced productivity, and high staff turnover, with the estimated annual cost of burnout to the veterinary industry in the USA reaching US\$1–2 billion (Neill et al., 2022; Steffey, Griffon, Risselada, Scharf, et al., 2023).

While there is substantial evidence for the harmful impact of veterinary work on well-being, Cake et al. (2017) argue that an overemphasis on the negative may overshadow the positive factors that support thriving and engagement. A negative focus risks promoting a fearful narrative around clinical practice for veterinary students and new graduates (Cake et al., 2015). Although it is essential to address the profession's challenges, it is equally important to explore the factors that contribute to a fulfilling veterinary career.

## 2.3 Positive psychology: The science of well-being

Similar to the traditional field of psychology, research into veterinary mental health and well-being in the 20th century has typically been deficit-focused and has identified the problems and negative outcomes of working in clinical practice, such as poor psychological well-being and burnout. Maintaining good mental health of veterinarians in clinical practice is essential, and the need for a new approach to well-being has been recognised (Coke et al., 2017; Fry & Mossman, 2021). Positive psychology provides an alternative theoretical framework for examining veterinary well-being, focusing on the positive aspects of life and veterinary work.

The discipline of positive psychology was founded in the late 1990s by Martin Seligman as a response to psychology's conventional focus on dysfunction and mental illness. This field marks a shift in mental health research to focus on improving happiness and flourishing (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In his 1998 presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Seligman proposed that "psychology be just as concerned with what is right with people as it is with what is wrong" (Seligman et al., 2004, p. 1379). He advocated for a change in the psychological lens to focus on scientifically understanding and promoting human strengths and positive functioning. This call to action sparked a growing interest in human potential and optimal well-being. As a result, positive psychology research expanded rapidly, focusing on what helps people flourish and lead meaningful lives (Rusk & Waters, 2013). Despite its popularity, positive psychology has faced some criticism. For example, McNulty and Fincham (2012) argued that it overlooks negative emotions, which are an inevitable part of the human condition and can be valuable in certain contexts. Additionally, in response to criticism that positive psychology ignores the social context of well-being, Lomas (2015) expanded the focus beyond individual psychology to explore the social and cultural factors that shape well-being. The reader is referred to van Zyl et al. (2024) for a comprehensive, recent systematic review of current critiques of positive psychology.

Positive psychology is grounded in humanistic psychology, which emphasises personal growth, meaning, and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). It also aligns with the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 1985), which identifies autonomy, competence, and relatedness as basic psychological needs essential for motivation and well-being. Both frameworks emphasise intrinsic motivation, meaningful relationships, and personal development as essential to human flourishing. Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) defined positive psychology as the scientific study of positive emotions, strengths, and community values that promote well-being. As

Peterson (2008) explained, positive psychology is fundamentally about understanding and supporting human thriving, the scientific study of what makes life most worth living.

An interest in positive psychology within the veterinary profession was introduced by Cake et al. (2015), who proposed switching the focus from exploring the negative aspects of veterinary work to emphasising the fulfilling and satisfying aspects of a veterinary career. Vaisman (2023b) recommended the practical application of a positive psychology approach to crafting a healthy veterinary workplace. A positive psychology lens has been used to explore student thriving in veterinary education (McDavid & San Miguel, 2024), and a recent review by Corrigan et al. (2025) suggested applying a systems-informed positive psychology method, referred to as positive education, to support well-being in veterinary education. Designing curricula and fostering institutional cultures that promote flourishing in universities and veterinary schools have the potential to enhance the individual and collective well-being of veterinarians. This, in turn, has likely positive implications for animal care and society in general. In a recently published doctoral thesis, Kittisiam (2025) highlighted the benefits of applying a positive psychology approach to enhance emotional intelligence and thriving in the transition of new graduate veterinarians from university to clinical practice in Canada.

## 2.4 Well-being and mental health

Mental health refers to a person's emotional and psychological functioning and is defined as “a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022, p. 8). Mental health focuses specifically on an individual's cognitive and emotional capacity to function and manage life's demands. In comparison, well-being is a broader, multidimensional concept encompassing overall life satisfaction and quality of life. Well-being is more than the absence of ill-being and poor mental health, and includes how individuals feel, function, and evaluate their lives (Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2023).

The concept of human well-being has long interested scholars, dating back to Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in the 4th century BC. Similarly, early Buddhist teachings in the 5th century BC emphasised the cultivation of ethical conduct, mindfulness and wisdom as pathways to “sukha”, a state of deep contentment, well-being, and flourishing (Rahula, 2007). In 2021, the WHO expanded its glossary of terms to include a distinct definition of well-being:

Well-being is a positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life, as well as the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world in accordance with a sense of meaning and purpose. Focusing on well-being supports the tracking of the equitable distribution of resources, overall thriving, and sustainability. A society's well-being can be observed by the extent to which they are resilient, builds capacity for action, and is prepared to transcend challenges. (WHO, 2021, p. 10)

This definition highlights the holistic nature of well-being, recognising that it is composed of multiple dimensions: physical, mental, and societal, influenced by personal capabilities and broader social, economic, and environmental conditions.

### 2.4.1 Hedonic and eudaimonic well-being

In relation to psychological well-being, a categorisation has been made between two distinct but complementary dimensions: hedonic well-being and eudaimonic well-being (Disabato et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Hedonic well-being refers to the experience of happiness, pleasure and positive emotions (Ryan & Deci, 2001). It originates from the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristippus of Cyrene, who taught that happiness is achieved through the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain (Delle Fave, 2020). One influential psychological approach to understanding hedonic well-being is the tripartite model of subjective well-being (Diener, 1984). According to this model, subjective well-being consists of three essential components: life satisfaction, the presence of positive emotions such as joy and pleasure, and the absence of negative emotions such as anger and sadness.

In contrast, eudaimonic well-being emphasises a life that is fulfilling, meaningful, and deeply satisfying (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Grounded in Aristotle's philosophy, the term eudaimonia is derived from "eu" (good) and "daimon" (inner spirit) and reflects the concept of living in alignment with one's true self. Waterman (1993) expanded on this concept, proposing that eudaimonia arises from both discovering and expressing one's authentic self and from personal growth. Unlike the hedonic approach, which views happiness as the goal, the eudaimonic perspective considers positive emotions (happiness and pleasure) as by-products of engaging in meaningful activities. Thus, eudaimonia implies that the value lies in the activity itself, rather than in the feelings it produces (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Waterman et al., 2010). Eudaimonic well-being overlaps with related concepts such as psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), human flourishing and thriving (Seligman, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014), and a high-quality of life (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Waterman et al., 2010).

The hedonic and eudaimonic types of well-being help explain how people experience positive mental states and underpin the concept of positive psychology. Although these two perspectives have different underlying assumptions, they are not independent of each other. For example, Waterman (1993) proposed that the concept of happiness is underpinned by both hedonic enjoyment and eudaimonic feelings of personal expressiveness. Thus, happiness from a hedonic perspective embraces positive emotions that accompany the satisfaction of needs, whether physical, cognitive or social (Waterman, 1993). On the other hand, Waterman (1993) suggested that happiness viewed through the eudaimonic lens involves the experience of engaging in an activity that feels deeply authentic, intrinsically fulfilling, and aligned with one's true self. As such, happiness derived from eudaimonia and personal expressiveness indicates success and personal growth and is strongly aligned with intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943), and thriving (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

In recent years, there has been growing interest in workplace-related happiness, also known as the subjective well-being of employees. Work-related happiness has been defined as “a mindset which enables action to maximise performance and achieve potential” (Pryce-Jones & Lindsay, 2014, p. 131). Previous research in other professions, such as engineering, has shown that increased happiness and well-being of employees are positively associated with increased workplace productivity and improved business financial performance (Awada & Ismail, 2019). Thus, well-being and happiness, whether seen as hedonic enjoyment or a eudaimonic sense of meaning, are associated with both personal and workplace benefits.

#### 2.4.2 Flourishing, engagement and flow

A range of terms have been used to capture the complex nature of well-being at work. Well-being is often viewed as an umbrella term encompassing happiness and flourishing. Flourishing refers to the optimal state of something, be it a community, a business, or an individual (De Ruyter et al., 2022). While happiness focuses on positive emotions and hedonic well-being (Diener, 1984), flourishing integrates both hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions, encompassing a deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and social connectedness.

The concept of human flourishing was introduced to psychology by Keyes (2002), who proposed that well-being exists on a continuum from languishing (low well-being) to flourishing (high well-being). He defined flourishing as complete mental health, encompassing emotional, psychological, and social well-being. This view positions flourishing as a multidimensional state in which individuals feel good and function well across various domains of life. Recognition of well-being as a continuum challenges the perception that it is an all-or-nothing concept. It also

highlights the complexity of well-being, acknowledging that individuals may flourish in some areas of life while struggling in others.

To capture this broader concept, Diener et al. (2010) developed the flourishing scale. This scale addressed the limitations of earlier well-being measures such as the life satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985), which primarily focused on emotional well-being. The flourishing scale includes key elements such as competence, relatedness, engagement, self-acceptance, and meaning, and combines both eudaimonic and hedonic aspects of well-being. The model posits that positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments are key factors for flourishing.

The concept of work engagement was first theorised by Kahn (1990), who proposed that engaged personnel are fully invested in their work, physically, cognitively and emotionally. As such, engaged employees are more likely to put in extra effort and go above and beyond their required duties, unlike those who are disengaged (Bakker, 2011). Work engagement is the positive opposite of burnout and is defined by Schaufeli and Bakker (2004) as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption” (p. 295). Vigour in this context refers to having high energy, mental resilience, and a willingness to persist through challenges at work. Dedication involves feeling enthusiastic, inspired, and proud, and finding meaning in work. Furthermore, vigour and dedication are the antithesis of exhaustion and cynicism (the dimensions of burnout). Absorption, the third element of work engagement, refers to concentration and being fully immersed in work, where time appears to pass quickly. Absorption is similar to the concept of “flow”, described by Csikzentmihalyi (1990) as a state of deep focus, effortless concentration, a sense of control, loss of self-awareness, altered sense of time, and intrinsic enjoyment. Flow occurs when a task is both challenging and matched to a high level of skill, creating a sense of being completely absorbed or “in the zone” (Csikzentmihalyi, 1990). This state is linked to feelings of eudaimonia, or deep fulfilment (Waterman et al., 2010). Unlike experiencing immediate pleasure (hedonia), the well-being derived from engagement and flow is often felt after completing a task and is long-lasting (eudaimonia).

### 2.4.3 PERMA and PERMA + 4 models of flourishing

The PERMA model, developed by Seligman (2011), is grounded in positive psychology and integrates both hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being. The model emphasises that flourishing is not only about feeling good but also effective functioning. Its five core elements —

positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment — offer a framework for understanding and promoting thriving at work.

The PERMA model encourages individuals and organisations to build strengths and support conditions that enhance psychological well-being and fulfilment, and has been applied in the veterinary context as the basis for the model of veterinary eudaimonic well-being (Coke et al., 2015). More recently, Donaldson et al. (2022) developed the PERMA + 4 framework to specifically address work-related well-being. Expanding on the original PERMA model, the authors included four additional factors: physical health, mindset, physical work environments, and economic security. The resulting PERMA + 4 framework provides a holistic, positive psychology approach to enhancing well-being and performance in the workplace.

#### 2.4.4 Thriving

While flourishing describes overall well-being and optimal human functioning, thriving is a concept more commonly used in workplace settings. Thriving captures not only well-being but also personal growth and vitality, making it particularly relevant for understanding how individuals succeed in professional environments (Spreitzer et al., 2005). It aligns closely with the concept of work engagement and flow, particularly through the dimensions of vigour and absorption (reflecting energy, resilience, and deep involvement), and dedication (which conveys enthusiasm and a sense of meaning).

Although thriving bears many similarities to flourishing and resilience, it differs in its emphasis on progress in response to both life challenges (adversity) and life opportunities (Brown et al., 2017). Thus, thriving includes high performance as well as high well-being and has been defined as:

The joint experience of development and success, which can be realised through effective holistic functioning and observed through the experience of a high level of well-being and a perceived high level of performance. (Brown et al., 2017, p. 174)

Furthermore, thriving at work has been defined as a positive psychological state where individuals experience both vitality and learning (Spreitzer et al., 2005). These definitions of thriving highlight that it has two components: development and achievement. Thus, it is not simply the absence of stressors but requires the presence of specific psychological states, behaviours, resources, and supportive contextual factors.

Spreitzer et al. (2005) proposed that thriving at work is fostered through proactive and purposeful behaviours, including task focus, curiosity, social awareness, and thoughtful interaction with others. Positive relationships are particularly important as a climate of trust, respect, and mutual

support enhances employees' ability to thrive. Other factors, such as active involvement in decision-making and information sharing, further sustain thriving by promoting social connection and resource building. In Spreitzer and colleagues' (2005) definition of thriving, vitality refers to feeling energised, enthusiastic, and alive, while learning involves acquiring and applying new knowledge and skills to support self-development. Thus, thriving is a holistic concept that includes physical health (Scheier & Carver, 1987), subjective well-being (Diener, 1984; Keyes, 2002), psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989), and social well-being (Keyes, 1998).

Personal factors that support thriving include individual traits and behaviours such as optimism, a proactive mindset, and motivation driven by meaningful work (Brown et al., 2017). Other key factors include a commitment to learning, and resilience through adaptability and flexibility, as well as social competencies such as conflict resolution and strong interpersonal skills. Thriving, however, is not solely based on individual characteristics and effort. It is also influenced by environmental factors that include access to learning and career development, a trusting relationship between employer and employee, support from colleagues and supervisors, autonomy in one's role, constructive feedback, and encouragement from family, friends, and partners outside work (Brown et al., 2017; McKay & Vaisman, 2023). With elements of both hedonic and eudaimonic concepts of well-being, thriving serves as a gauge of personal growth and progress and is a key contributor to workplace well-being (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014). Furthermore, when individuals thrive at work, they accomplish tasks, achieve goals and perform well (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014).

#### 2.4.5 Resilience and emotional intelligence

Resilience has been identified as a key factor that enables individuals to maintain, restore or improve well-being in the face of challenges, providing a foundation for thriving and flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Traditionally understood as the ability to cope with stress and adversity, resilience was often considered an inherent trait. However, earlier studies with at-risk children (Masten et al., 1990) and teachers (Beltman et al., 2011) highlighted the limitations of this definition. These studies suggested that resilience is not only an outcome but also a capacity and process. Both adversity and positive adaptation are critical elements of resilience, which has been defined as a "dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). While resilience is often considered the ability to bounce back from difficulties, this overly simplistic view is problematic when discussing well-being. Individuals should not be seen as responsible for being resilient in order to "soldier on" in

challenging situations (Dobree, 2019). To be resilient, individuals require both appropriate capabilities and support.

Resilience has been widely studied in high-stress professions, such as healthcare (Cacciatori et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2020), social work (Collins, 2007), and teaching (Beltman et al., 2011; Day, 2012; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Mansfield et al., 2016). However, there is minimal research into resilience in the veterinary profession. Cake et al. (2017) conceptualised veterinary resilience as a dynamic process that draws on personal and contextual resources to manage work challenges and called for further research in this area. In response, Matthew et al. (2020) found that proactive behaviour was consistently associated with resilience across all stages of a veterinarian's career. A recent interview study by van Gelderen et al. (2025) demonstrated that resilience in mid- to late-career veterinarians was shaped by the interaction of job demands, job resources, and personal resources. The authors noted that the way veterinarians utilised available contextual and personal resources influenced their resilience outcome. However, while resilience may be an asset, it has limitations, as even resilient veterinarians may struggle or fail to thrive in poor or toxic work environments. This highlights the growing recognition that veterinary well-being is not solely an individual responsibility but a dual responsibility between individuals and workplaces (Moir & Van den Brink, 2020). This view is strongly supported by van Gelderen et al. (2025), who proposed that, while personal resources can be developed, the demands of work are context-dependent. They argue that effective leadership and organisational initiatives can reduce workplace stressors and increase individuals' resilience.

This dual approach to well-being is well established in human medicine, where Shanafelt and Noseworthy (2017) demonstrated that physician well-being depends on contributions from individuals, teams, organisations, and broader system-level factors. While resilience supports coping and positive adaptation, thriving represents a broader and more sustainable state of optimal functioning. Wallace (2019) suggested moving beyond individual-focused strategies by adopting organisational interventions that contribute to veterinarians' meaningful work.

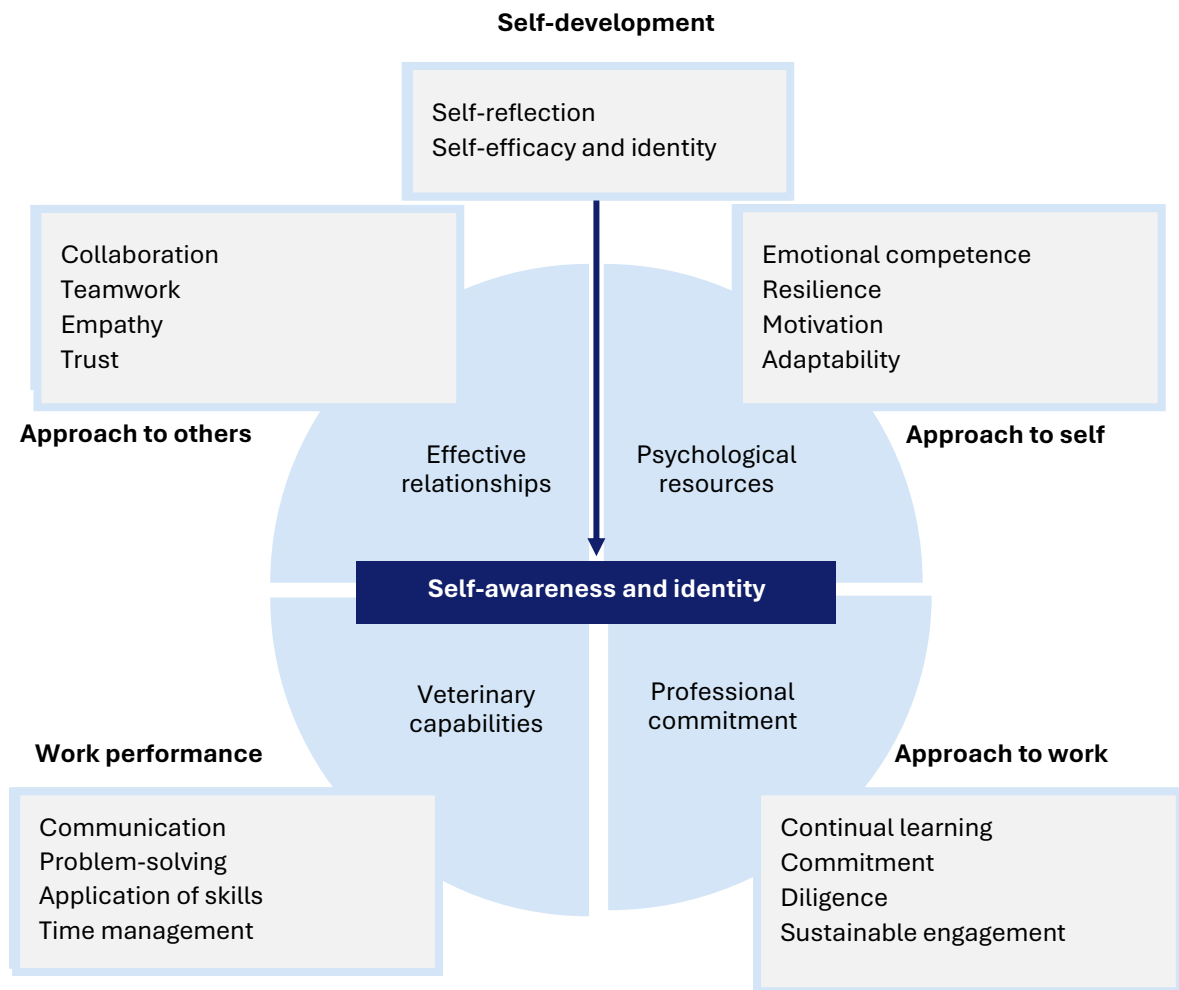
A more useful concept might be emotional intelligence (EI), which has gained widespread attention as a valuable attribute across many professions. While definitions vary, EI is commonly understood as the ability to recognise, understand, and manage one's own emotions as well as those of others. Salovey and Mayer (1990) arguably provide the most widely accepted definition of EI, describing it as "the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions" (p. 189). In their review article, Dulewicz and Higgs (2000) suggest that individuals with high EI are self-

aware, motivated, creative, perform at their best, and are skilled in managing interpersonal relationships.

In the veterinary profession, EI has been identified as a critical capability for established veterinarians (Lowe, 2017) and new graduates (Kittisiam, 2025), as it supports effective communication and relationship building with clients, colleagues, and team members (Bell et al., 2022). Cake et al. (2021), therefore, include emotional competence as a core component of psychological resources in their veterinary employability model (Figure 2.2). The model highlights 18 capabilities identified as important to veterinary employability. These capabilities are aligned with five broader overlapping areas: psychological resources (approach to oneself), effective relationships (connection with others), professional commitment (approach to work), veterinary capabilities (work performance), and a central domain of self-awareness and identity formation.

Research has identified EI as an important personal resource linked with greater compassion, satisfaction, lower levels of burnout and STS among veterinarians (Rohlf et al., 2022). In a study from the USA, veterinary students with higher EI scores reported lower levels of depression and anxiety (Wells et al., 2021). Furthermore, it has been proposed that EI training be incorporated into undergraduate veterinary education to enhance communication with clients and teams, improve conflict management, and reduce stress and burnout; all of which can contribute to better patient care (Timmins, 2006). Additionally, a recent Canadian study has found that EI in early-career veterinarians can be developed through good mentorship and self-compassion. This improves their overall well-being (Kittisiam, 2025).

**Figure 2.2**  
*Model of veterinary employability*



*Note.* Adapted from *Employability as a Guiding Outcome in Veterinary Education: Findings of the VetSet2Go Project* (Cake et al., 2021, p. 5).

Emotional intelligence has been increasingly identified as a key component of effective leadership (Sadri, 2012). A systematic review by Gómez-Leal et al. (2022) examining leadership in schools demonstrated that core EI competencies, such as self-awareness, self-management, and empathy, were essential for successful leadership amongst teachers. Furthermore, the authors highlighted that leaders with high EI are better able to understand and regulate emotions, foster trust, motivate their teams, and enhance overall team performance. EI is also associated with relational approaches to leadership, such as those of transformational leaders who encourage collaboration and motivate team members. Importantly, EI has been shown to be a trainable skill, with studies demonstrating that managers who received EI training improved both their leadership effectiveness and the organisational environment (Sadri, 2012).

## 2.5 Positive aspects of veterinary work

Over the past two decades, organisational psychology has increasingly focused on the conditions that promote positive well-being at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Likewise, in the veterinary field, growing attention is being given to understanding what motivates and sustains veterinarians, particularly in demanding clinical roles (Cake et al., 2015; Clise et al., 2021; Kittisiam, 2025; Mastebroek, 2017; Shibly et al., 2014; Wallace, 2019). Despite high job demands, many veterinarians perceive that their work has a positive impact on their well-being. Several studies have reported that clinical work provides pleasure, engagement, and a sense of purpose (Clise et al., 2021; Elte et al., 2023; Mastebroek, 2017). Likewise, a survey of Belgian veterinarians in clinical practice found that 95% of respondents reported moderate to high engagement (Hansez et al., 2008). Similar experiences of engagement, job satisfaction, and thriving have been observed in other demanding professions, including medicine (Gielissen et al., 2021; Hyman & Doolittle, 2022), nursing (Zhai et al., 2023), social work (Wendt et al., 2011) and teaching (Beltman et al., 2011).

Veterinarians often derive a deep sense of fulfilment and compassion satisfaction from their ability to make a significant impact on the lives of animals and people (Polachek & Wallace, 2018; Stamm, 2010). A survey of Australian and New Zealand veterinarians identified 32 positive factors that support veterinarians' psychological well-being, based on thematic analysis of free-text responses (Connolly et al., 2022). These protective factors included job satisfaction, supportive work conditions, strong collegial relationships, positive clinical outcomes, flexible work arrangements, client appreciation, and working with competent team members.

For many, the positive aspects of veterinary work often outweigh the negative. In a cross-sectional survey, Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al. (2009) identified sources of satisfaction among veterinarians in UK, including good clinical outcomes, relationships with colleagues, intellectual stimulation and learning. A British survey found the three "best things" about being a clinical veterinarian were working with animals, satisfying work, and intellectual challenge (Robinson et al., 2019). Similar findings were identified in an Australian qualitative study where clinical competence, successful outcomes, feeling appreciated, and meaningful relationships were sources of pleasure in veterinary work (Clise et al., 2021). Wallace (2019) identified meaningful work as a key mediator of psychological well-being among veterinarians. Sources of satisfaction contributing to this sense of meaning included self-actualisation, helping animals and people, and feeling a sense of belonging within the team. Similarly, Shibly et al. (2014) found that helping animals and opportunities for lifelong learning provided satisfaction and pleasure amongst Austrian

veterinarians. These findings suggest that making a difference, personal growth, learning, belonging, and a strong sense of professional identity (Armitage-Chan, 2020b) contribute to positive veterinary well-being.

Good relationships with clients were one of the main reasons production animal veterinarians in the UK stayed in practice and felt satisfied with their work (Adam et al., 2019). Similarly, a recent interview study of farm veterinarians in the UK found that trust and communication with clients were key factors that enabled them to cope with work challenges (Duncan et al., 2024). The authors reported that building long-term, trusting relationships with farmers improved veterinarians' job satisfaction, self-confidence, recognition, and social connection. In contrast, client relationships were not highlighted as a source of satisfaction among equine veterinarians from the UK, the USA and the Netherlands (Elte et al., 2023). Instead, work satisfaction and engagement in equine practice appeared to depend on alignment between personal values and the practice's mission (pride and purpose), the quality of interactions with colleagues and management (workplace culture), employment conditions and rewards (compensation and workload), and collegiality and support for ongoing personal and professional development (team culture and learning opportunities). In a recent qualitative study of equine veterinarians, Whitaker et al. (2025) found that personal resources, such as problem-solving skills and a desire to help others, contributed to job engagement. In addition, engagement has been shown to reduce job strain and increase job satisfaction, enjoyment, and well-being amongst veterinarians (Hansez et al., 2008). Other studies have highlighted more extrinsic forms of veterinarians' job satisfaction. For example, the main sources of job satisfaction identified in a study of German veterinarians included a "good work atmosphere" (culture), salary, and holidays (Kersebohm et al., 2017). However, the emphasis on holidays may reflect dissatisfaction and a poor work-life balance, which is a known stressor for veterinarians (Volk et al., 2024).

Research indicates that veterinarians' well-being is supported by team collaboration, high standards of care, and a strong sense of purpose in their work (Wallace, 2019). Furthermore, teamwork has been identified as a crucial factor in retention and improved mental health in clinical practice (Corrigan et al., 2025). Positive team environments have been linked to greater job satisfaction, engagement, and professional efficacy (Moore et al., 2014). In contrast, toxic team dynamics, characterised by distrust, negative behaviours, and a lack of respect, are associated with poor well-being and increased risk of burnout (Moore et al., 2015). More recently, Pizzolon et al. (2019) examined the complexity of the team environment and its influence on veterinarians' mental health and well-being; one construct that captures this complexity is relational coordination. Gittel (2002) defined relational coordination in the health sector as the

process of managing work through shared goals, knowledge, and mutual respect, supported by frequent, timely, honest communication and problem-solving among team members. In veterinary teams, strong relational coordination is associated with a more positive workplace culture, higher job satisfaction, and reduced intention to leave clinical practice (Blokland et al., 2025).

Several studies have highlighted the paradox of veterinary work being both deeply satisfying and highly stressful. Both compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue are key factors influencing both engagement and burnout. They also play a significant role in shaping veterinarians' sense of meaning and purpose in their clinical work. A concerning finding from a recent survey of newly graduated Canadian veterinarians revealed that, while 61% claimed to be thriving, one-third reported poor mental well-being (Kittisiam, 2025). However, high survey scores on compassion satisfaction can sit alongside negative experiences of compassion fatigue, burnout and traumatic stress (Best et al., 2020; Macía et al., 2022; Scotney et al., 2019). A study at an Australian specialist veterinary hospital found that many respondents reported both high job satisfaction and signs of burnout (Ashton-James & McNeilage, 2022). A large survey of staff in over 200 veterinary practices in the USA found that clients were a source of both satisfaction and stress (Figley & Roop, 2006). Challenging client interactions significantly increased compassion fatigue, while positive interactions boosted satisfaction in 83% of respondents, helping to buffer against burnout. These findings highlight the critical role of client communication in veterinarians' well-being. The paradox of compassionate work has also been demonstrated in studies which have shown that developing strong connections with animals, making a meaningful difference to animal welfare, and building positive client relationships were linked to both greater compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue (Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al., 2009; Cake et al., 2015; Clise et al., 2021).

### 2.5.1 Hedonic well-being in veterinary work

Positive emotions in veterinarians have received little attention in the literature. Stoewen (2016), however, highlighted the importance of researching happiness in the veterinary profession, noting its links to creativity, productivity, social connectedness, and resilience. In response to this call, Calitz et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative survey that offered valuable insights into factors influencing happiness among South African veterinarians, presenting a conceptual model that included workplace influence, social relationships, work-life balance, and other key elements (Figure 2.3). The study's cross-sectional design, reliance on self-report measures, and lack of

contextual depth, however, limited its ability to capture individual experiences, causality, and changes over time.

**Figure 2.3**

*Conceptual model of the happiness of veterinarians*



*Note.* Adapted from *Exploring the Factors that Affect the Happiness of South African Veterinarians* (Calitz et al., 2022, p. 93).

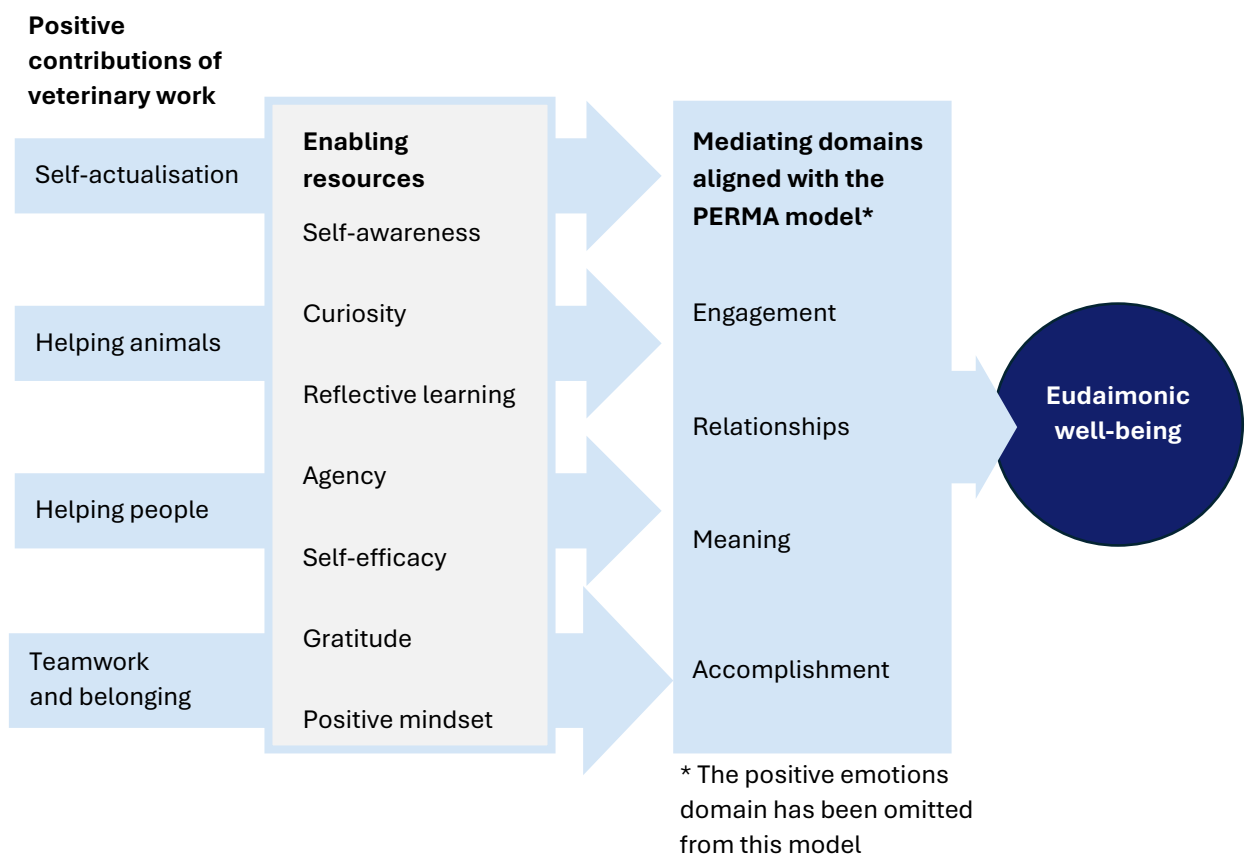
A recent qualitative study conducted by Clise et al. (2021) explored the sources of pleasure in veterinary work. Using the Ten Statement Test, 273 veterinarians responded to the prompt, “*I derive pleasure in my work when...*” revealing a range of positive job factors linked to enjoyment. While the study offered valuable insight into veterinarians’ perspectives, it was unclear whether responses reflected pleasure beyond job satisfaction. A qualitative interview approach could have provided a deeper understanding of these experiences, but such a method could have limited sample size and reduced the generalisability of the findings.

## 2.5.2 Eudaimonic well-being in veterinarians

Cake et al. (2015) proposed that work-related veterinary well-being is best represented by eudaimonic rather than hedonic well-being. This approach focuses on veterinarians' quest for meaning, fulfilment, and social connection rather than immediate pleasure, and downplays positive emotions like happiness, which are hedonic in nature. Rather, Cake et al. (2015) proposed that veterinary well-being is more aligned with Waterman's (1993) concept of eudaimonia. This refers to an individual's personal expressiveness and the fulfilment gained through self-development, optimal functioning, and pursuing meaning and purpose. Cake et al. (2015) proposed that meaningful work plays a mediating role in achieving eudaimonic well-being in veterinarians and developed a veterinary model for eudaimonic well-being (see Figure 2.4).

**Figure 2.4**

*Model of veterinary eudaimonic well-being*



*Note.* Adapted from *The Life of Meaning: A Model of the Positive Contributions to Well-being From Veterinary Work* (Cake et al., 2015, p. 188).

The model provides a positive psychology approach to explain the satisfaction experienced by veterinarians in their work. The model suggests that veterinarians' eudaimonic well-being derived

from clinical work is mediated through four domains: engagement, relationships, meaning and accomplishment. The domain of accomplishment and personal growth highlights the importance of striving for improvement and mastery for veterinarians. Cake et al.'s (2015) concept of veterinary eudaimonic well-being is closely aligned with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model; however, the component of positive emotions has been omitted, as shown in Figure 2.4. Wallace (2019) tested the Cake's veterinary model and confirmed that the well-being of veterinarians is facilitated by meaningful work characterised by self-actualising work (personal growth and development), helping others, and a sense of belonging, all of which are related to a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction.

Although the literature on positive aspects of working in clinical practice remains relatively scarce, emerging research offers encouraging insights and highlights the need for further study in this area (Cake et al., 2015; Cake et al., 2017; Clise et al., 2021; Wallace, 2019). The following section addresses the need for theoretical frameworks that support a positive perspective on thriving and well-being in the veterinary profession.

### 2.5.3 Summary of well-being in clinical practice

The previous section of the literature review highlighted individual characteristics and capabilities that support well-being and success in veterinary practice, such as those identified in Cake and colleagues' (2021) employability model (Figure 2.2). Much of the research on veterinary well-being has focused on individual characteristics such as resilience, EI, and coping skills. While these personal attributes are important, there is growing recognition that thriving at work also depends on the work environment. The next section shifts the focus to workplace factors that enable thriving, including theoretical perspectives on the balance between job demands and resources, psychological safety, and effective leadership.

## 2.6 Theoretical perspectives on stress, well-being and thriving

Several established models and theories offer valuable insights into well-being and thriving in veterinary clinical practice. This section reviews existing frameworks that identify work-related factors that support employee well-being. Many traditional models highlight work features that support well-being and thriving; however, some do not offer an integrated or holistic perspective. Later in the chapter, more integrated frameworks will be introduced, emphasising the importance of balancing work demands and resources. This will be followed by theories that explore the social dimensions of work and the concept of job embeddedness.

### 2.6.1 The demand-control-support and effort-reward imbalance models

The demand-control-support model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) proposes that job strain arises from a combination of high psychological demands, low control over work, and low social support. Bartram and Turley (2009) applied this model to the veterinary context and emphasised the importance of decision latitude (the ability to determine how and when to perform tasks), skill discretion (the opportunity to use and develop personal skills), and social support for veterinary well-being. A similar model, which focuses on perceptions of work demands, is the effort-reward imbalance model (Siegrist, 1996), which posits that work stress occurs when employees' effort is not matched by perceptions of adequate rewards such as salary, recognition or career opportunities. Bartram and Turley (2009) suggested that veterinarians who experience an effort-reward imbalance are at greater risk of stress, reduced well-being, and burnout, highlighting the importance of fairness and reciprocity in clinical practice.

### 2.6.2 Need theories

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a foundational theory for human motivation (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1954). According to the original theory, there are five levels of basic needs: physiological, safety, love, esteem and self-actualisation, which are often depicted in a pyramid as shown in Figure 2.5. The requirements for motivation are often grouped into maintenance needs (physiological and safety) and the higher growth needs (love, esteem and self-actualisation). Although the pyramid structure shown in Figure 2.5 suggests a rigid separation of needs, Maslow did not present his model as a strict hierarchy (Bridgman et al., 2019). Instead, he noted that needs are not met in a fixed order and suggested that higher-level needs are gradually pursued as lower-level needs are addressed (Maslow, 1943, p. 388).

**Figure 2.5**

*Maintenance needs: An interpretation of Maslow's hierarchy of needs*



*Note.* Adapted from *Diagram of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Based on his Original 1943 Paper, "A Theory of Human Motivation", and later clarifications Croker (2025).*

Although Maslow's theory has significantly influenced organisational psychology, Alderfer (1969) contested it and suggested an alternative model based on three categories of human needs: existence, relatedness and growth. Unlike Maslow, Alderfer (1969) did not assume that lower-level needs must be satisfied before higher-order needs emerge, and suggested that need satisfaction is related to the strength of the need. Both these models offer relevant insights for understanding veterinarians' experiences in clinical practice.

### 2.6.3 Herzberg's two-factor theory of work motivation

Herzberg's two-factor theory, also known as the motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg et al., 1959) explains job satisfaction through two distinct sets of factors. Motivators (intrinsic factors) lead to job satisfaction by fulfilling needs related to growth, achievement, responsibility, and meaningful work. In contrast, hygiene factors (extrinsic conditions) such as salary, policies, relationships, and

working conditions prevent dissatisfaction but do not promote satisfaction if improved (Shasha & Paphawasit, 2024).

The theory draws on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, particularly the role of self-actualisation and individual growth in motivation (Maslow, 1943). Although Herzberg's two-factor theory has not been applied in veterinary well-being research, it has been widely used as a theoretical framework in nursing studies, particularly to explore factors that influence job satisfaction (Alshmemri et al., 2017). While hygiene factors ensure a baseline for acceptable working conditions, according to the theory, only motivators enhance engagement and productivity. Thus, both sets of factors are interdependent: extrinsic factors reduce dissatisfaction, while intrinsic factors drive satisfaction and performance. Given its successful use in the human health sector, Herzberg's two-factor theory may also have valuable applications in the veterinary context.

#### 2.6.4 The theory of work engagement

The foundational theory of engagement, as described by Kahn (1990) outlines three psychological conditions required for individuals to engage fully in their work: psychological meaningfulness, psychological safety, and psychological availability. The first dimension, psychological meaningfulness, refers to the feeling of being valued and able to make a difference at work (Kahn, 1990). This concept concurs with veterinary literature that highlights meaningful work as a core contributor to eudaimonic well-being (Cake et al., 2015; Clise et al., 2021; Wallace, 2019). The second dimension, psychological safety, refers to a work environment where individuals feel safe to speak up, share ideas, and challenge the status quo without fear of negative consequences (Kahn, 1990). Later, Edmondson (1999) expanded this concept to include team psychological safety, which is discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Kahn's (1990) third engagement dimension, psychological availability, refers to the physical, emotional, and psychological capacity (personal resources) of an individual to invest in their work. The concept of depleted psychological availability aligns with the extensive literature focused on the negative outcomes of veterinary work, such as burnout, compassion fatigue, moral distress and poor mental health. The theory of work engagement is linked with the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) and self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2001) described below. Together they show that veterinarians with access to resources such as support, autonomy, self-efficacy, growth opportunities, and belonging are more likely to sustain motivation, engagement, and psychological availability for work (Cake et al., 2015; Elte et al., 2023; Mastenbroek, 2017).

### 2.6.5 Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a widely used framework for understanding human motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000) and has been applied across various professions, including teaching (Rice et al., 2024), human health (Babenko et al., 2019), and veterinary work (Cake et al., 2015). According to Deci et al. (2017), all employees have three basic psychological needs: autonomy (sense of control and independence at work), competence (experiencing personal growth and achievement), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). When these needs are satisfied, they foster intrinsic motivation, high performance levels, and positive well-being. Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in work tasks for their inherent interest, enjoyment, or personal satisfaction, rather than for external rewards or pressures (extrinsic motivation). Thus, employees who are intrinsically motivated tend to show greater task proficiency, higher job satisfaction, improved wellness and organisational commitment (Deci et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2024).

### 2.6.6 Person-job fit: The theory of work adjustment

To thrive and achieve career success in clinical practice, it is important that new veterinarians experience a good job fit (Bell et al., 2019). The theory of work adjustment is a widely accepted theoretical model of person-organisation fit (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984). According to this theory, fit is a reciprocal relationship in which individuals meet the demands of the workplace, while the workplace fulfils the needs of the individual. The ongoing process of achieving and maintaining this fit is known as work adjustment. Although person-organisation fit can be conceptualised in different ways, it is commonly described in terms of shared values and goals. Research in the medical profession has shown that good person-organisation fit is associated with increased job satisfaction and a reduction in job turnover (Abdalla et al., 2018). Person-organisation fit has not been widely studied in the veterinary well-being literature. In a recent interview study of veterinary employers, however, Schull et al. (2021) emphasised the importance of carefully recruiting new graduates to ensure a good employee-workplace match. Employers reported that a good fit was beneficial for the well-being and development of new graduates, boosting team dynamics, and contributing to veterinary retention. Therefore, a good fit reduces the high costs associated with staff turnover, such as hiring and training, and thus benefits the business.

### 2.6.7 The job demands-resources model

The job demands-resources (JD-R) model, as described by Demerouti et al. (2001), provides a more integrative framework for workplace well-being. While it primarily focuses on burnout

however the JD-R model can be applied more broadly to explore employee engagement. Building on earlier models, such as the demand-control-support and the effort-reward models, the JD-R model provides a broader lens for understanding how various job demands and resources interact to influence employee engagement, burnout, and engagement. The model proposes that high job demands, which require a sustained physical and/or mental effort, combined with insufficient resources, increase the risk of stress and burnout. However, when high job demands are matched with adequate job resources, they can instead foster engagement and thriving (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

The JD-R model explains how workplace conditions shape both employee well-being and job performance. It has been applied in veterinary research to examine workplace stressors and the resources that support well-being. For example, Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al. (2014) used the model to identify key demands and resources for early-career veterinarians. They found that high workloads, poor work-life balance, and interpersonal conflict were major demands. In contrast, autonomy, support, and opportunities for professional development acted as key resources that fostered engagement. Additionally, Paul et al. (2023) found that prolonged grief over animal loss was a significant job demand linked to burnout among Australian animal care workers. However, the study found that organisational and social support for grief acted as a protective job resource.

Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al. (2014) expanded the JD-R model to include personal resources, defined as “aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency and refer to people’s sense of having control over, and being able to successfully influence their environment” (p. 192). Their study showed that internal capacities, such as proactive behaviour, self-efficacy, and reflective behaviour, positively influenced the work engagement, performance and well-being of early-career veterinarians. Clise et al. (2021) also utilised the JD-R model to explore sources of pleasure in veterinary practice in Australia. These authors identified professional expertise, positive outcomes, job characteristics, relationships, recognition, and helping others as key job resources. A notable finding, however, was the significance of personal resources; veterinarians who demonstrated qualities such as self-efficacy and adaptability reported higher levels of job satisfaction and well-being, consistent with previous research from the Netherlands (Mastenbroek, 2017; Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Demerouti, et al., 2014; Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al., 2014). Research has shown that veterinarians’ personal resources can be promoted through targeted development programmes in veterinary practice settings (Mastenbroek et al., 2015). This suggests that implementing such initiatives may support veterinarians’ well-being and promote thriving in clinical roles. Overall, the JD-R model

emphasises the critical role of supportive job resources and personal resources in high-demand veterinary environments.

### 2.6.8 Job embeddedness and staff retention

The job embeddedness model, as described by Mitchell et al. (2001), provides a wider perspective on employee satisfaction and retention. The theory builds on the concept of person-organisation fit and identifies three elements: fit, links, and sacrifice, that contribute to employees staying in a job. Job fit is a central component of this model, referring to how well an individual's values, career goals, and lifestyle align with their job and organisation, and how well their skills and abilities match the workplace requirements. However, this model recognises that fit alone is not enough to ensure staff retention. In addition to fit, Mitchell et al. (2001) identified two other elements that contribute to job embeddedness: links, which refer to the social connections an individual has at work and within the community, and sacrifice, which refers to the perceived losses an individual would incur if they left their job. Together, these elements explain why employees are more likely to stay when they feel embedded both within their organisation and their wider community. Veterinarians experience embeddedness through developing positive relationships with colleagues and clients, which has been reported as a source of pleasure in clinical practice (Clise et al., 2021). Strong connections with farmers have also been identified as a key reason for production animal veterinarians to remain in practice (Adam et al., 2019). Furthermore, positive interactions with clinic staff and managers have been positively associated with engagement and job satisfaction among equine veterinarians (Elte et al., 2023).

### 2.6.9 The socially embedded model of thriving at work

Spreitzer et al. (2005) proposed that vitality and learning (the key elements of thriving) are deeply rooted in social connections. When individuals are part of teams that support decision-making, trust, respect, and information sharing, they are more likely to show positive behaviours (Bandura, 2023). The socially embedded model of thriving at work outlines how thriving arises from a combination of factors: individual attributes (e.g., knowledge and positive emotions), relational factors (e.g., support and trust), contextual elements (e.g., job autonomy and a climate of trust), and proactive work behaviours (e.g., task focus and exploration).

Based on the Spreitzer et al. (2005) model, Kleine et al. (2019) conducted a meta-analysis that showed thriving at work was related to important employee outcomes, including better health, higher commitment, and improved task performance. They highlighted that thriving at work was linked to individual characteristics such as self-directed action, positive affect, and work

engagement. Similar personal enablers of thriving have been reported in veterinarians, such as proactive behaviour, self-efficacy (Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al., 2014), motivation from meaningful work (Wallace, 2019), psychological flexibility and adaptability (McArthur et al., 2021), curiosity, and professional expertise (Clise et al., 2021).

Thriving in the workplace has been positively associated with relational factors, including supportive colleagues and supportive leadership (Kleine et al., 2019) and is particularly important for early-career veterinarians (Kittisiam, 2025). Both the thriving at work model (Spreitzer et al., 2005) and the job embeddedness model (Mitchell et al., 2001) highlight the importance of positive relationships, trust, and support as foundations for vitality, learning, and retention.

### 2.6.10 Summary of theoretical perspectives on well-being and thriving

The above theoretical models highlight the interaction of the individual and organisational factors in shaping well-being and thriving at work. While each theory or model offers a distinct lens, they share a common theme. They suggest that sustainable well-being and thriving at work depend on a balance between job demands and available resources, as well as meaningful relationships, personal attributes, and support within the workplace. Together, these models emphasise the dual responsibility of the individual and the organisation for veterinarians to thrive in the workplace.

Building on these theoretical perspectives, the next section of this literature review examines how key organisational factors shape the workplace culture, enabling employees to thrive.

## 2.7 Psychological safety

The workplace environment is a key element that emerges across several of these models. A healthy, psychologically safe environment is increasingly recognised as critical to well-being and thriving in veterinary clinical practice.

Psychological safety was introduced to the literature by Kahn (1990), who described it as a sense of interpersonal trust. This early concept was expanded by Edmondson (1999) to focus on team dynamics and has recently been applied to the veterinary setting (McKay & Vaisman, 2023). Team psychological safety is defined as “a shared belief held by team members that the team is safe for taking interpersonal risk” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350). In psychologically safe teams, relationships are grounded in mutual trust and respect, enabling open communication, learning from mistakes, increased engagement, and commitment (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009; Frazier et al., 2017).

Edmondson's (1996) early research in healthcare demonstrated that high-performing nursing teams led by inclusive managers reported more errors, not due to poorer performance, but because team members felt safe to be honest. In contrast, lower-performing, psychologically unsafe teams reported fewer errors due to fear of judgment and a lack of openness. Similarly, psychological safety has been identified as a critical factor in clinical veterinary practice settings. Recent research has shown that it promotes veterinarians' well-being (Volk et al., 2024), team effectiveness (Elwood, 2022), and positive workplace cultures (Vaisman, 2023b). In a large survey of veterinarians, Volk et al. (2022) found that creating a safe environment where team members could speak openly about stress or mental health concerns was critical for reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking. They identified four key elements of healthy clinic cultures: team belongingness, organisational trust, open communication, and sufficient time to provide quality care. These factors were associated with higher well-being, greater job satisfaction, and lower burnout among veterinarians.

Organisational trust is associated with increased job satisfaction, higher performance, and lower turnover of staff (Kath et al., 2010). Trust within teams, also referred to as collective trust, is a specific type of organisational trust and is closely associated with psychological safety (Edmondson & Lei, 2014). Collective trust involves mutual confidence in each other's abilities, respect, and a belief that team members can rely on one another for support (Bunjak et al., 2021). Similarly, strong relationships, based on trust, facilitate effective collaboration and effectiveness in veterinary teams (Elwood, 2022). Consistent with previous research in non-veterinary settings, Vaisman (2022) proposed that veterinarians who experience a trusting team environment foster higher job satisfaction and greater organisational commitment.

Vaisman (2023b) suggested that psychological safety is developed through ongoing interpersonal interactions, where supportive responses build trust and negative ones erode it. This implies that creating psychological safety in the veterinary context is a dynamic, team-influenced process. This highlights the importance of fostering safe teams that support effective communication, learning, well-being, and improved clinical outcomes (Edmondson, 1999). In 2022, the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) launched the Train-the-trainer Well-being Educator program to promote healthy veterinary workplace cultures. These bespoke training programmes focused on building communication skills that foster trust, rapport, and support healthy, sustainable workplace cultures (Arce, 2022). While this AVMA initiative was a positive step toward healthy workplaces, its effectiveness has not been systematically evaluated. Cultivating psychological safety takes time and can be supported by frameworks such as Clark's (2020) four-stage model, which incorporates inclusion safety (feeling accepted), learner safety (freedom to

ask questions and make mistakes), contributor safety (confidence to share ideas), and challenger safety (freedom to question the status quo). Applying Clark's (2020) framework in veterinary workplaces may enhance psychological safety and support veterinarians' well-being and ability to thrive in clinical practice.

An individual's mindset has also been shown to be closely associated with psychological safety. For example, Hopkins et al. (2023) proposed that a growth mindset helped medical students view errors as opportunities for learning and improvement, thereby enhancing psychological safety. A growth mindset is defined as "the belief that human capacities are not fixed but can be developed over time" (Dweck & Yeager, 2019, p. 481). People with a growth mindset make the most of their opportunities and seek challenges (Dweck, 2006). Furthermore, Babenko et al. (2019) demonstrated that medical students with a growth mindset fostered better positive psychological well-being than those with a fixed mindset. However, in a study conducted in the UK, Bostock et al. (2018) found that only 63% of veterinary students had a growth mindset, while the remainder identified with a fixed mindset. Thus, encouraging the development of a growth mindset amongst veterinary students may improve their psychological well-being and help foster psychological safety in teams that they join as new graduates. Being proactive and purposeful, and believing in their abilities (self-efficacy) has been linked to positive action and functioning (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Furthermore, in their comprehensive systematic review of the psychological safety literature, Newman et al. (2017) highlighted that individual-level characteristics such as self-efficacy and self-esteem are important predictors of psychological safety. They argued that individuals with these traits are more likely to take interpersonal risks such as speaking up or admitting mistakes, which fosters psychological safety in teams. However, because psychological safety is built on trust, and trust is fragile, a breach in trust can quickly undermine a psychologically safe environment.

Psychological safety has recently been closely linked to leadership in the clinical veterinary context (Kogan et al., 2025). Leaders play a key role in shaping the workplace culture and fostering environments where employees feel safe to speak up, take risks, and ask for help. The next section explores how leadership influences workplace culture and contributes to well-being and thriving in clinical veterinary practice.

## 2.8 Leadership and work well-being

Interest in leadership has significantly increased since the 1980s, resulting in a substantial body of literature on the topic (Klingborg et al., 2006). Contemporary views of leadership differ

significantly from the early classification of authoritarian and charismatic leaders. Up until the 1930s, theories that emphasised power and control were popular. One example is the “Great Man” theory, which posits that leaders are born, not made (Klingborg et al., 2006). In their most recent book, Kouzes and Posner (2023, p. 313) strongly contest this view, emphasising that leadership is determined by behaviour, not inherent personality, stating: “Leadership is not some mystical quality that only a few people have and everyone else does not. Leadership is not preordained. It is not a gene, and it is not a trait”. They argue that anyone can become an effective leader if they develop the necessary skills and abilities. Similarly, Klingborg et al. (2006) note that leaders who develop relationship-focused and visionary leadership qualities take centre stage and assume increasing responsibility for their followers.

By integrating leadership into the JD-R model and using SDT as a framework, Schaufeli (2015) proposed that, “engaged leaders, who inspire, strengthen, and connect their followers, provide a work context in which employees thrive, and may therefore stimulate sustainable employability throughout employees’ entire careers” (p. 456).

The impact of leadership on workplace well-being is well established in healthcare settings. Leadership plays a critical role in creating conditions that support thriving. It has been identified as a key factor in enhancing satisfaction and well-being among physicians (Shanafelt et al., 2015) and nurses (Mortier et al., 2016), and plays a key role in employee engagement (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015). Leaders play a vital role in influencing psychological safety, either positively or negatively. This includes both formal leaders with titles and informal leaders through shared or little “l” leadership, all of whom contribute to shaping the workplace environment (Frazier et al., 2017). There is growing evidence that leadership styles that prioritise intrinsic motivators, such as caring for others and personal growth, enhance work engagement and job satisfaction (Schaufeli, 2015). Van Tuin et al. (2021) found that leaders who emphasised these intrinsic values significantly boosted team motivation, whereas those focused on extrinsic goals, such as financial performance, were less effective. Furthermore, Schaufeli (2015) suggested that investing in job resources, such as engaging leadership, is more effective at increasing employee engagement and reducing burnout than attempting to reduce job demands. This is particularly relevant in veterinary practice, where high workloads and staff shortages are common. Providing resources — such as supportive leadership that offers constructive feedback, autonomy, and growth opportunities — may be a more practical approach to supporting veterinarians’ well-being than reducing workload alone. Furthermore, Klingborg et al. (2006) highlighted that the demand for more effective leadership in helping professions, such as the healthcare sector and veterinary

medicine, is growing. They pointed out that there is minimal research on leadership in the veterinary setting, despite growing interest in the topic.

### 2.8.1 Leadership in the veterinary profession

Both leaders and managers create order, develop goals and motivate team members (Klingborg et al., 2006). However, leadership focuses on guiding and inspiring others to reach shared goals through social influence (Kotter, 2017), whereas management is more task-oriented (Liphadzi et al., 2017). Nonetheless, leadership skills are critical for effective management and directly affect team performance and organisational outcomes (Liphadzi et al., 2017). Exceptional leadership has been identified as a core priority for the long-term sustainability of the veterinary profession (Vet Futures Project Board, 2015). Good leadership has been shown to influence patient safety in clinical practice through fostering psychologically safe team environments (Kogan et al., 2025). Clinic managers, often veterinarians, are frequently required to balance management responsibilities with leadership and clinical duties. While leadership and management are often used interchangeably in the context of veterinary practice, they are distinct yet complementary roles. Thus, effective clinic managers need to be both good managers and good leaders.

Research exploring leadership in the context of clinical veterinary practice remains limited (Elte et al., 2023; Pearson et al., 2018). Understanding how leadership behaviours influence thriving is therefore important for improving well-being, engagement, and sustainability within the veterinary profession. Several authors have emphasised the importance of effective leadership in veterinary workplaces (Fischer et al., 2022; Moore & Klingborg, 2001; Vaisman, 2023a), with recent evidence showing that the quality of the leadership is a key factor influencing veterinarians' decisions to join or remain in a clinic (Kogan et al., 2023).

Leadership in clinical practice is typically viewed as a predefined role, often held by senior (mostly male) veterinarians. Despite the increasing feminisation of the veterinary profession in New Zealand and worldwide, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles (Tindell et al., 2020). Although there is little information on gender in leadership roles in veterinary practice in New Zealand, a British study found that only 6.5% of female veterinarians held directorship positions compared to 24% of males (Buzzeo et al., 2014). Tindell et al. (2020) found that female veterinarians in the UK who transitioned into leadership positions were often motivated by a desire to make a positive difference, improve work-life balance, and shape their careers. The authors suggested that recognising female role models, offering mentorship, providing leadership training, and increasing flexibility could help support more women into leadership roles in veterinary workplaces.

Transitioning from clinical work to leadership can be challenging for veterinarians of any gender. Pearson et al. (2018) found that many senior veterinarians struggled with the interpersonal aspects of leadership and highlighted the need for support, such as continuing education and mentorship, findings echoed by Tindell et al. (2020). Fischer et al. (2022) supported the view that positive leadership skills can be developed through training. The authors emphasised the need to identify and support veterinary team members with an interest in leadership to meet both technical and interpersonal demands. A small, qualitative study conducted in New Zealand as part of a Master of Business Administration programme (MBA) also highlighted the need to provide training to better prepare veterinarians for leadership roles (Lowe, 2017).

In their comprehensive review, Fischer et al. (2022) presented an overview of some leadership theories as they apply to veterinary practice. They explained trait, functional, behavioural, and other theories, with an emphasis on transformational leadership, which they suggested was the most suitable style for veterinary workplace settings.

The following section examines a range of relational leadership theories that have been identified as particularly relevant and beneficial in healthcare settings. These include transformational, authentic, servant, shared, inclusive, and positive leadership approaches, all of which offer valuable insights into how leadership can support thriving in veterinary practice.

### 2.8.2 Transformational leadership

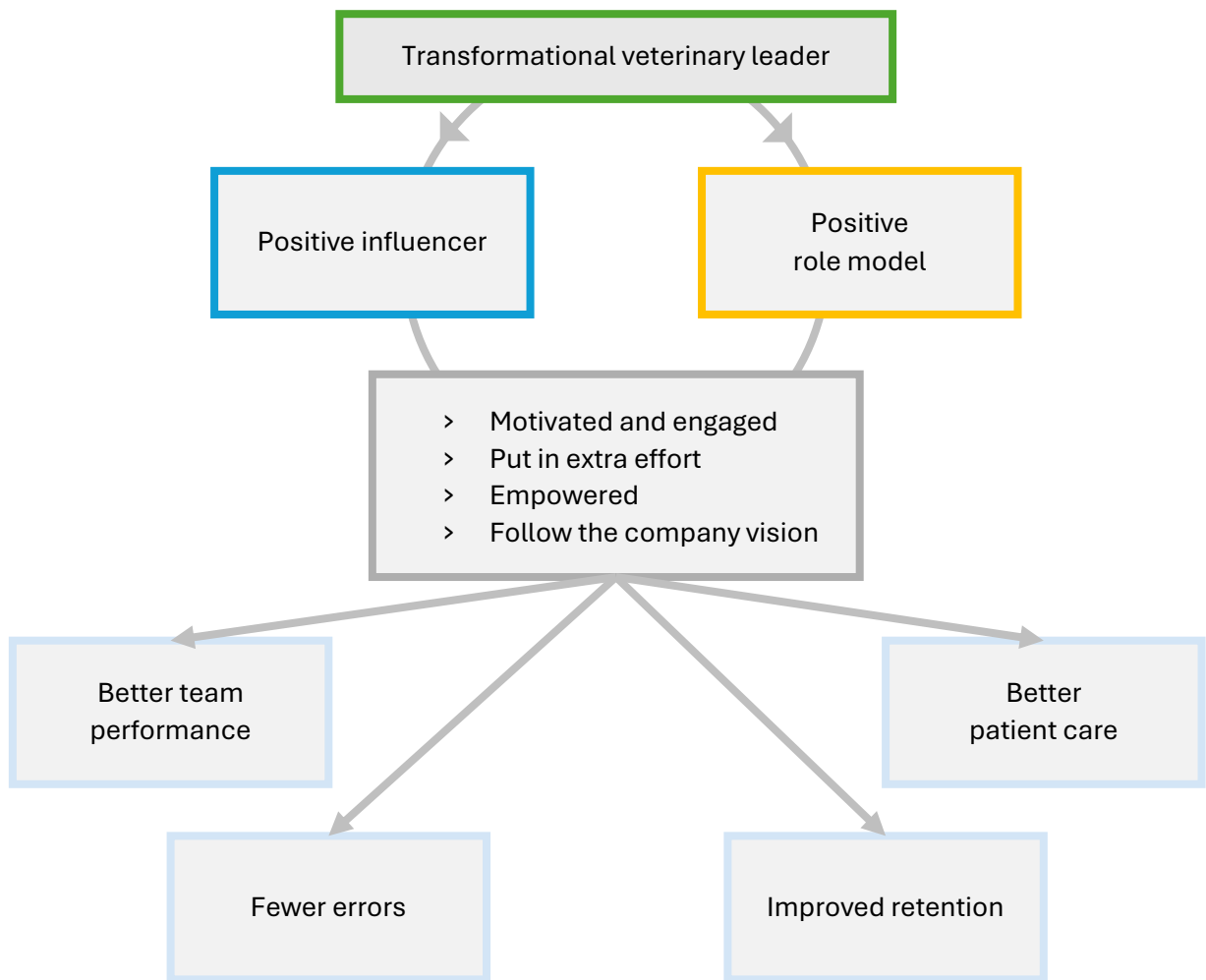
Transformational leadership emphasises the leader's role in inspiring and supporting others to grow and succeed. Building on this foundation, research shows that such leaders are central to fostering motivation, encouraging employee engagement, and promoting creativity in the workplace (Carmeli et al., 2014). Thus, effective transformational leaders, also referred to as "exemplary leaders," stimulate change through influence rather than formal authority, empowering team members to lead by example, motivate others, and drive positive change (Kouzes & Posner, 2023, p. 418). Research has consistently confirmed the effectiveness of the five domains of exemplary leadership, described by Kouzes and Posner (2023), which include: "model the way, inspire a shared vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart" (p. 5). These practices reflect the principles of transformational leadership in fostering engagement, trust, and positive change and have been linked to positive organisational outcomes. For example, Wayerski (2018) found that all five domains were associated with greater job satisfaction and retention among veterinary technicians. Similarly, in healthcare settings, transformational leadership has been shown to promote innovation, motivation, and a shared sense of purpose within nursing teams (Holly & Igwee, 2011).

Transformational leadership, as described by Fischer et al. (2022), emphasises inspiring, motivating and empowering others, fostering innovation, and adapting to change. Rather than focusing on managing daily tasks, transformational leaders set a clear direction and purpose to guide their teams. Transformational leaders are “people who not only do things right, they strive to do the right things” (Fischer et al., 2022, p. 12). The authors suggest this leadership approach is well suited for navigating the demands of clinical veterinary practice, such as workforce shortages, rising client expectations, and increasing mental health concerns. Kogan et al. (2025) highlight that transformational leadership plays a key role in establishing psychologically safe veterinary team cultures, which can support employee well-being and improve patient safety. Overall, the literature indicates that it is a valuable approach for building effective, motivated veterinary teams.

However, transformational leadership has faced criticism. Fischer et al. (2022) caution that it can be potentially manipulative, fostering a sense of belonging among employees without genuine input from employees and favouring the development of a select few. Nonetheless, they acknowledge that when applied effectively in veterinary practice, transformational leadership can enhance team morale, performance, client satisfaction, patient care, and potentially improve retention, as shown in Figure 2.6.

**Figure 2.6**

*Summary of potential benefits of transformational leadership in veterinary practice*



*Note.* Adapted from *Leadership Theories and the Veterinary Health Care System* (Fischer et al., 2022, p. 13).

### 2.8.3 Authentic leadership

Authentic leadership is a relationship-focused approach grounded in positive psychology, characterised by a leader’s self-awareness, ethical decision-making, and being genuine with others (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). Avolio and Gardner (2005) have linked this leadership style with positive psychological resources such as employees’ optimism, resilience and confidence, suggesting it contributes to individuals’ development and performance. However, critics, such as Cooper et al. (2005), have argued that authentic leadership overlaps with other models, such as transformational and servant leadership, making it challenging to apply it clearly in work contexts. Despite these concerns, Mortier et al. (2016) have provided empirical evidence from a healthcare perspective showing that authentic leadership enhances nurses’ vitality and learning, with

empathy mediating the effect on vitality and thriving. In veterinary practice, Elwood (2022) has suggested that positive leadership, aligned with authentic leadership principles, can foster trust, psychological safety, and shared responsibility, supporting team well-being. Nevertheless, its practical application requires contextual adaptation and further validation in veterinary settings.

#### 2.8.4 Servant leadership

Servant leadership is a values-based leadership approach that prioritises serving others, focusing on the growth, well-being, and development of individuals and communities (Greenleaf, 2013). Spears and Lawrence (2016) identified core characteristics of servant leadership, including empathy, listening, stewardship, and commitment to the growth of individuals. This relational and ethical style of leadership aligns well with caring professions such as healthcare and veterinary practice. Although not commonly applied in the veterinary context, it has been shown to foster trust and psychological safety in healthcare settings (Ahmed et al., 2023). Servant leadership shares key principles with transformational, inclusive, and authentic leadership. They are all positive people-centred approaches that focus on empowering, supporting, and engaging team members and have been linked to improved well-being, engagement, and retention in veterinary teams (McKay & Vaisman, 2023).

#### 2.8.5 Shared leadership

‘Leaderful practice’ offers an alternative to traditional, individualised leadership by promoting a collective, participatory model in which leadership is shared among team members (Raelin, 2016). This approach empowers individuals to contribute to decision-making, fostering collaboration, trust, and a shared sense of purpose. Elwood (2022) highlighted the importance of shared leadership in effective veterinary teams, where responsibility is distributed among team members who work collaboratively toward a shared goal.

Similarly, little “l” leadership refers to informal, everyday leadership where individuals step into leadership roles as needed, regardless of title (Turmel, 2007). Like leaderful practice, little “l” leadership promotes shared responsibility, open communication, and mutual support. These approaches reflect the principles of relational leadership (Uhl-Bien, 2006), emphasising the quality of team interactions over formal authority and supporting inclusive, collaborative team dynamics. Elwood (2022) has suggested that these leadership approaches encourage autonomy, shared authority, and inclusive participation, which in turn can foster psychological safety, social cohesion, and learning in veterinary teams. Furthermore, Lowe (2017) has argued that leaderful

practice, such as little “l” and shared leadership, is critical for high-functioning teams and is especially relevant for the veterinary profession.

### 2.8.6 Inclusive leadership

Inclusive leaders adopt a relational leadership style characterised by openness, accessibility and appreciation of team input. This leadership approach has been shown to foster a climate of trust and safety, encouraging team members to speak up, share ideas, and take interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999). This inclusive concept of leadership was introduced by Nembhard and Edmondson (2006), who showed that leaders who encourage and welcome input from others make team members “believe that their voices are truly valued” (p. 948). In another study, Carmeli et al. (2010) empirically demonstrated the relationship between inclusive leadership and psychological safety, which in turn increased employee creativity and collaborative problem-solving among team members.

In a healthcare context, inclusive leadership has been shown to improve psychological safety, especially when it reduces hierarchical barriers (O’Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). This inclusive “flat” non-hierarchical environment has been shown to empower team members with autonomy and shared responsibility, further supporting psychological safety, social cohesion, and team learning (Carson et al., 2007; O’Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020). Evidence from veterinary settings aligns with the findings from human healthcare (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006).

### 2.8.7 Positive leadership

The concept of positive leadership emerged alongside positive psychology in the early 2000s (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and refers to leadership behaviours that create conditions for individuals to grow and thrive at work (Samul, 2024). Good organisations value leaders who enable employees to engage, find meaning, and feel safe in their work. Positive leadership has been suggested as a practical approach to achieving these conditions by building strong relationships based on trust and teamwork (Cameron, 2012). While positive leadership may seem focused on making people feel good, its core aim is to improve organisational performance. It is essential for navigating the complex and evolving challenges of today’s workplaces.

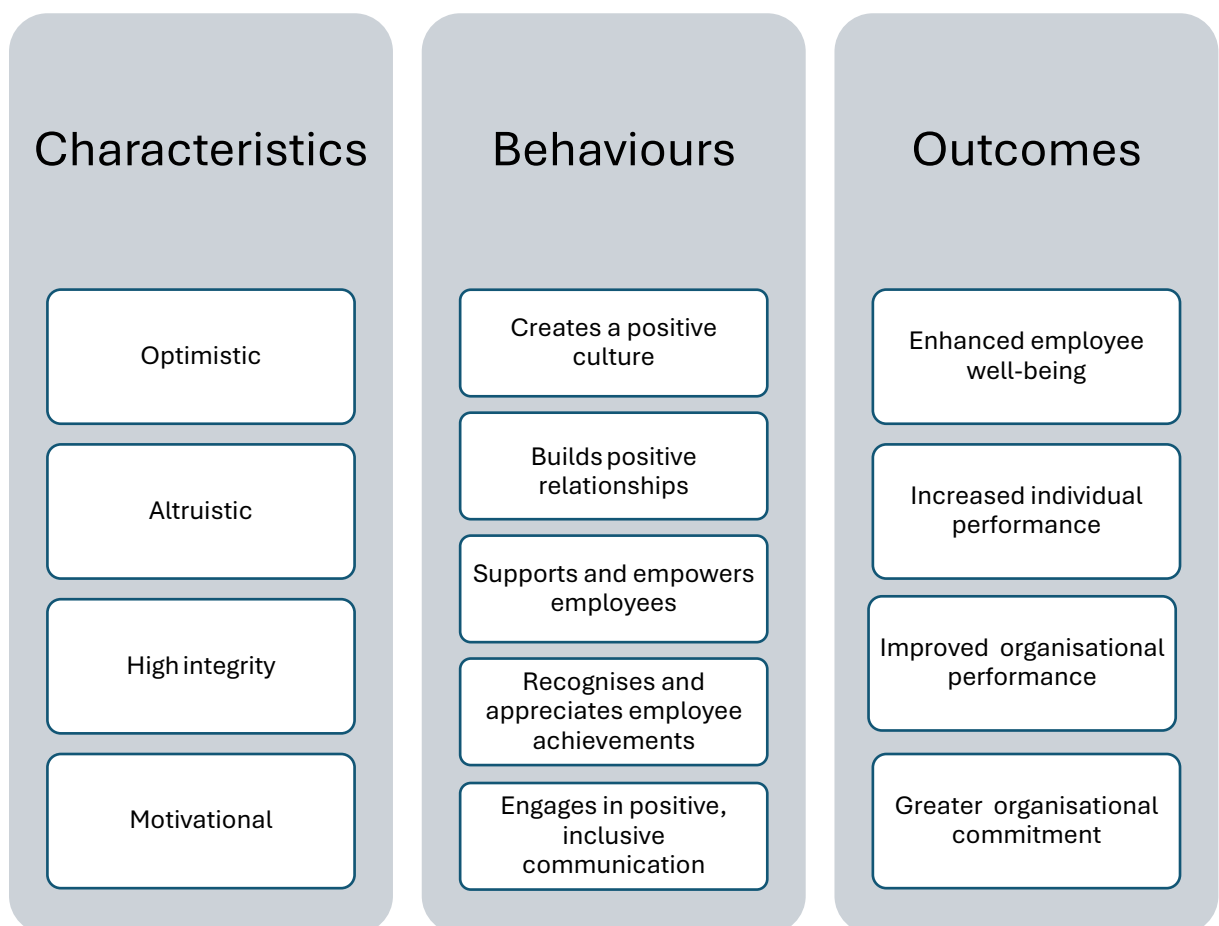
Despite growing interest in positive leadership, the concept remains inconsistently defined, with significant variation in how it is understood (Malinga et al., 2019). Overall, positive leadership is seen as a relational approach that values interpersonal dynamics, trust, and mutual respect. It focuses on strengths and successes, and sees challenges as opportunities for growth and

improvement (Cameron, 2012). It is a people-centred leadership style built on trust, respect, collaboration, and shared purpose.

In a critical review of the positive leadership literature, Malinga et al. (2019) developed an integrated model of positive leadership (Figure 2.7). Their model was derived from a thematic analysis of existing definitions of positive leadership and is conceptualised in terms of certain leadership characteristics, behaviours, and outcomes that benefit the employee, the leader, and the organisation. The authors highlighted key characteristics of positive leaders such as optimism, a “can-do” mindset, altruism, trustworthiness, and fairness, along with behaviours including building trust, fostering teamwork, encouraging open communication, and recognising strengths and successes. These practices are linked to positive outcomes such as improved employee well-being, engagement, performance, and organisational commitment.

**Figure 2.7**

*Integrated model of positive leadership*



*Note.* Adapted from *Positive Leadership: Moving Towards an Integrated Definition and Interventions* (Malinga et al., 2019, p. 10).

Many different leadership approaches share similarities with positive leadership concepts (Samul, 2024). In veterinary teams, effective leadership is increasingly based on relational qualities such as trust, collaboration, mutual respect, and EI (Fischer et al., 2022). These attributes align with positive leadership, which has recently been identified as a key contributor to psychological safety, workplace well-being, and retention in veterinary practice (McKay & Vaisman, 2023). Positive leaders foster healthy work environments by modelling vulnerability, encouraging input, and supporting team collaboration.

To build on this, Vaisman (2023a) proposed a veterinary-specific model of positive leadership, encompassing four core elements: psychological safety, purpose, path, and partnership. These components are considered essential for fostering healthy work environments where veterinary professionals can thrive. In a survey of 2,037 veterinarians from the 2021 and 2022 AVMA census, McKay and Vaisman (2023) found a strong link between positive leadership and veterinarians' intention to stay in clinical practice. This highlights the critical role of leadership in promoting well-being and retention.

The importance of work design and effective leadership in supporting well-being and retention in the veterinary profession is becoming increasingly recognised. In response, a range of workplace initiatives and interventions have been developed to address the challenges faced by veterinarians and their teams. The following section reviews some of these approaches and their potential to improve well-being and foster thriving in clinical practice.

## 2.9 Enhancing well-being in the veterinary profession

The mounting awareness of mental health issues in the profession has led to increased efforts to address this complex issue. However, the literature on well-being interventions in clinical practice is somewhat sparse.

### 2.9.1 Interventions at the individual level

Many veterinary well-being interventions focus on the individual, often placing the responsibility on veterinarians to build resilience rather than addressing systemic or organisational factors. Rohlf (2018) proposed psychoeducation, coping skills training, and mindfulness as strategies to reduce stress, while Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al. (2014) emphasised the development of personal resources and resilience. Other individual-focused approaches include stress and anxiety management training and reducing barriers to help-seeking (Fritschi et al., 2009; Hatch et al., 2011). Building personal resilience has been a key focus for various veterinary

organisations, including the RCVS, (2021a). Furthermore, Campion (2020) recommended using the validated Veterinary Resilience Scale – Personal Resources (VRS-PR) developed by Matthew et al. (2020) to assess resilience levels and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions such as mindfulness, peer support, self-care, and reflective practices.

An acceptance and commitment training programme has been used as an intervention to prevent and reduce burden transfer and burnout in veterinary teams (Spitznagel et al., 2022). Burden transfer occurs when clients' distress about their animals leads to emotionally challenging interactions that transfer stress onto veterinary teams (Spitznagel et al., 2019), contributing to burnout (Blokland et al., 2024). Spitznagel et al. (2022) found that the acceptance and commitment training programme, delivered in small team settings, reduced individuals' reactivity to difficult client interactions with participants reporting lower levels of burden transfer, stress, and burnout as a result.

Although interventions at the individual level are important, there is growing evidence that veterinary well-being is a shared responsibility between the individual and the workplace (Bartram et al., 2010; Hilton et al., 2023; Kittisiam, 2025; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020; Reinhard, 2023a). In a recent survey of Australian veterinarians, Hilton et al. (2023) found that improved psychological well-being was associated with workplace factors such as managing workload and having job control. Although the authors recognised that individuals' resilience is an important area for development, they suggested that modifying workplace factors was a more straightforward and effective intervention.

### 2.9.2 Interventions at the organisational level

Organisational support has been proposed as essential for improving veterinarian well-being (Moir & Van den Brink, 2020), especially in recent graduates (Kittisiam, 2025). Work-related psychological ill health is not unique to the veterinary profession and has been reported in a wide range of employment sectors (Michie & Williams, 2003). In their comprehensive review, Michie and Williams (2003) revealed that human healthcare workers experience similar stressors to veterinarians, including long hours, work overload, a lack of control over work, a lack of decision latitude, and poor support. The review highlighted successful organisational-level interventions such as training and appraisals to increase autonomy, support, feedback, and communication. The medical profession has since acknowledged a twofold accountability for physician well-being, highlighting the influence of both individual and organisational factors. As part of the 2017 Action Collaborative on Clinician Well-being and Resilience, Brigham et al. (2018) developed a conceptual model illustrating how workload, autonomy, and the work environment significantly

influence doctors' well-being. They stated that "focusing on the individual suggests that burnout arises as individuals are unable to adapt; focusing on the organisation suggests that it is the environment that should adapt to promote quality of care and clinician well-being" (Brigham et al., 2018, p. 3).

Thus, while burnout may stem from individual challenges, lasting improvement requires systemic, organisational change. Shanafelt and Noseworthy (2017) further emphasised the importance of shared responsibility for physician well-being. They identified organisational approaches to promote physician engagement and reduce burnout. These include strategies such as supportive leadership, recognition of achievements, fostering a sense of community, and promoting flexibility and work-life balance. These factors are crucial for a workforce that balances professional and personal commitments. This dual focus on individual and organisational factors reflects the JD-R model (Demerouti et al., 2001), which recognises that both job demands and available resources influence well-being. While high job demands, such as workload, can lead to stress and burnout, adequate resources, including autonomy and support, promote engagement and well-being. In the veterinary context, Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al. (2014) found that personal resources were positively associated with engagement and well-being, and could be further developed through targeted development programmes in clinical practice (Mastenbroek, 2017; Mastenbroek et al., 2015). Similarly, van Gelderen et al. (2025) found that mid-career veterinarians' resilience is shaped by personal resources that can be developed over time. However, they emphasised the critical role of organisational support and access to job resources in buffering demands and promoting well-being. These studies reinforced the need to strengthen both individual capabilities and organisational support systems to foster sustainable veterinary well-being.

This shared responsibility for veterinary well-being has recently been acknowledged in the World Small Animal Veterinary Association's professional wellness guidelines (Paton et al., 2024). This report highlighted the critical role of the education sector, universities, professional organisations and veterinary businesses in improving veterinary well-being.

### *2.9.2.1 Workplace improvement programmes*

Veterinary organisations worldwide have recognised the importance of healthy workplace initiatives to promote health and well-being in clinical practices, and some have developed voluntary programmes that veterinary practices can implement (AVA, 2025; BVA, 2024). Healthy veterinary workplace programmes generally promote the development of a positive,

psychologically safe clinic culture, which has been highlighted by Vaisman (2023b) as a critical factor in veterinary well-being.

With growing recognition of the challenges to professional well-being, veterinary businesses are increasingly assessing the financial value of fostering a culture of wellness. Oxtoby et al. (2015) suggested that workplaces that prioritise veterinary team well-being may promote improved productivity and overall organisational performance, a finding echoed by Kogan et al. (2025). For example, the BVA (2020) outlined a vision for good veterinary workplaces that prioritises staff well-being, equity and sustainability. The policy emphasises that shared responsibility between employers and employees is key to fostering healthy, productive teams. Core principles include supporting mental and physical health, promoting diversity and inclusion, offering fair pay and flexible working arrangements, and ensuring access to career development opportunities and mentorship. The guidelines highlight that investment in well-being benefits both individuals and business outcomes, including retention, performance, and workplace culture. Employers are encouraged to actively create environments that foster psychological safety, manage stress effectively, and uphold professional values. Similarly, the AVMA (2025b) developed healthy veterinary workplace programmes, and the AVA has created the Safe Teams project focused on identifying and mitigating psychosocial risks in veterinary workplaces and promoting the development of psychologically safe work environments (AVA, 2025).

### *2.9.2.2 Identification and mitigation of workplace stressors*

Identifying and assessing workplace stressors is an important factor in mitigating risks and improving veterinarians' well-being. Bartram et al. (2010) have suggested that the identification of psychosocial risks (workplace stressors) in veterinary clinics and the implementation of practical mitigation strategies should be formalised by veterinary regulatory bodies. Recently, Mudry et al. (2025) created the Veterinary Stressors Questionnaire (Vet-SQ). This questionnaire, based on the results of individual interviews with 40 veterinarians, explored psychosocial risks associated with clinical work. Mudry and colleagues' (2025) survey tool, consisting of 32 items divided into eight main categories of stressors, assessed for suicidal ideation, burnout, and sleep problems in veterinarians. To validate the survey, it was completed by 3,244 veterinarians across various clinical practice types in France, which confirmed that all identified stressors were associated with burnout and, in some cases, suicidal ideation. The study also found that exposure to the stressors identified in the survey also contributed to chronic stress, sleep disturbances, and poor mental health outcomes. Although only used in France to date, the Vet-SQ may be a useful tool to

identify workplace stressors and their impact in veterinary practice in other countries, including New Zealand.

In recent years, there has been a growing emphasis towards integrating mental health and psychological well-being into government workplace health and safety initiatives. While New Zealand's Health and Safety Act (Work Safe NZ, 2015) primarily focuses on physical health, increasing attention is being given to mental well-being in the workplace. Australia has already implemented regulatory changes around mental health in the workplace. This includes a National Code of Practice requiring employers to identify and mitigate psychosocial risks and prevent psychological injury (Safe Work Australia, 2022). In New Zealand, similar policy developments are underway, as highlighted by Lovelock (2019) in the WorkSafe New Zealand report that emphasises the importance of identifying and reducing psychosocial workplace risks. These regulatory changes aim to promote workplace safety, support employee well-being and facilitate the identification and prosecution of poor procedures. Thus, the inevitable legal requirements for businesses to protect employees' mental health in New Zealand highlight the importance of veterinary businesses proactively integrating psychosocial risk evaluation and mitigation into well-being strategies.

### 2.9.3 Interventions at the undergraduate veterinary education level

There are growing concerns about the psychological well-being of veterinary students and new graduates globally (Allister, 2020). Traditionally, veterinary education has focused on clinical skills and competencies. There is, however, an increasing focus on broader professional capabilities, such as communication, relationship-centred care, critical thinking, business acumen, self-awareness, and resilience strategies. This non-technical education is essential for professional performance, and benefits both veterinarian well-being and the client experience (Gordon, 2020). Martin Cake et al. (2019) identified many of these capabilities as critical in the employability of new graduates (Figure 2.2). At graduation, veterinary students are required to have reached day one competencies that include both technical abilities and professional skills to help them manage the demands of clinical practice (RCVS, 2023). Furthermore, the need to embed mental wellness strategies into veterinary education has been increasingly recognised (Moir & Van den Brink, 2020; Scott-Orr et al., 2023). As a result, many universities worldwide have integrated well-being programmes into the veterinary undergraduate curriculum to better equip new graduates in their transition to the veterinary workforce (Paton et al., 2024). There is, however, an argument that overemphasising coping strategies may contribute to negative perceptions of the profession amongst veterinary students (Cake et al., 2015). Despite this, a systematic review of well-being-

specific interventions for veterinary students by Liu and van Gelderen (2020) has suggested that cohort-based courses and workshops focused on improving well-being strategies have a positive impact on students' mental health. Although useful, the lack of control groups and follow-up interventions restricted the generalisability of this study. Similarly, a qualitative study by Taylor et al. (2022) found that Australian veterinary students responded positively to an undergraduate career development programme, delivered by qualified professionals, which was designed to build resilience and teach practical stress management strategies.

The importance of teaching the spectrum of care, defined as “a wide spectrum of diagnostic and treatment options [that veterinarians] can provide for their patients” (Stull et al., 2018, p. 1386), has recently been identified as a critical approach to support new veterinarians in managing the realities of financial constraints in general practice (Fingland et al., 2021). As such, Warman et al. (2023) proposed a spectrum of care pedagogy and suggested an integrated undergraduate educational approach across both primary care and referral clinic settings.

#### 2.9.4 Mentoring and well-being support for graduates

The need to better support new graduates has been widely recognised in New Zealand and internationally (Gardner & Hini, 2006; Gates et al., 2020; Volk et al., 2018), resulting in various voluntary and compulsory mentorship initiatives. For example, the VCNZ has partnered with the NZVA to develop a voluntary online training programme for mentors and mentees (NZVET Mentoring Support programme), which aims to foster productive mentoring relationships (NZVA, 2025a). The NZVET Mentoring Support initiative also includes a software platform (Mentor Loop) to match new graduates with experienced veterinary professionals external to their clinic. Although not formally evaluated, anecdotal evidence suggests that Mentor Loop matches are particularly valuable for new graduates seeking guidance on career and interpersonal challenges. In addition, the VCNZ has recently implemented revised professional development requirements, which stipulate that all new graduates must have a supervisor or mentor for their first year in practice (VCNZ, 2025).

Similarly, the AVA offers a 12-month voluntary Graduate Mentoring Programme, which connects new graduates with experienced veterinarians to receive one-on-one advice and support as they transition into the profession (Scott-Orr et al., 2023). In contrast to the more flexible approaches mentioned above, a compulsory, structured new graduate development programme has been implemented in the UK. All new veterinary graduates are required to complete the Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP). The programme involves being paired with a trained VetGDP advisor (mentor) who must provide structured support, professional development

and supervision for a minimum of an hour a week (Prescott-Clements et al., 2023). Furthermore, in the USA, a semi-commercial veterinary-specific mentoring programme has been established that has reportedly been beneficial for participants (Reinhard, 2023b).

In addition to mentoring support, various veterinary well-being programmes exist globally to support veterinarians at different career stages. Many veterinary organisations offer resources such as well-being assessment tools (AVMA, 2025a) counselling services, mental health first aid training, resilience workshops, self-care guides, and managing a healthy work-life balance (AVMA, 2025a; AVA, 2025; NZVA, 2025b; RCVS, 2025; VetLife, 2025).

## 2.10 Summary

This thesis focuses specifically on the clinical veterinary profession in New Zealand. As outlined, New Zealand veterinarians face similar challenges and mental health concerns to those reported internationally (Gardner & Hini, 2006). Well-being research on clinical veterinarians in New Zealand has confirmed the presence of issues, including workplace bullying (Gardner & Rasmussen, 2018) and moral distress (Doolan-Noble et al., 2023). However, Gardner and Fletcher (2009) found that veterinarians in New Zealand can also experience positive emotions and job satisfaction when they perceive workplace demands as challenges rather than threats and employ effective coping strategies. This highlights the importance of understanding not only the factors that contribute to poor well-being but also those that support veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice.

While the existing literature provides a strong foundation for understanding the negative aspects of veterinary work, there is minimal research on the positive factors that support veterinarians to stay in clinical practice. There is a particular lack of in-depth qualitative studies that investigate job satisfaction, engagement, and thriving in clinical practice. Such information is crucial to improving veterinary well-being, which may positively influence retention in the veterinary profession.

The qualitative research studies reported in this thesis contribute to the veterinary well-being literature by exploring organisational and personal factors that promote satisfaction, engagement and thriving among clinical veterinarians in New Zealand, across different career stages. The results from the in-depth semi-structured interviews are then used to inform recommendations to promote the thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice.

# Chapter 3: Research design and methodology

## Investigating thriving in clinical practice

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the qualitative approach employed in this PhD research. It begins by stating the primary aims of my research and then justifies the use of a qualitative approach, which guided the three studies and shaped the research questions. The philosophical foundations underpinning my methodological choices are discussed, and details of the methods used, including participant recruitment, data collection and analysis, are described. The chapter concludes with an explanation of ethical considerations and a discussion of how my approach ensured validity and rigour while showing respect for the data and those veterinarians who kindly shared their experiences with me.

The primary aim of my research was to investigate the factors contributing to job satisfaction, engagement, positive well-being, and thriving among veterinarians working in clinical practice in New Zealand. The overarching objectives of this research were:

1. To evaluate the perceptions of clinical veterinarians who have been in practice for 8 or more years about the factors that help them thrive in clinical practice. (Study 1)
2. To explore the perceptions of new graduate clinical veterinarians who have been in practice for less than 3 years about their transition into, and experiences of, clinical practice. (Study 2)
3. To investigate the perceptions of employee veterinarians (who are not owners or managers) with more than 3 years of clinical experience on what measures practices have adopted to support staff motivation and well-being. The focus will be on which initiatives have supported their personal well-being and ability to thrive in clinical practice. (Study 3)
4. To develop recommendations that support the well-being, job satisfaction, and thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice with the aim of improving retention.

The objective of this research was to develop a comprehensive understanding of job satisfaction and positive well-being of veterinarians in clinical practice, focused on the factors that enable them to thrive. My overarching goal was to provide actionable insights for the wider veterinary profession.

To address the objectives of this thesis, a qualitative research design was used to develop three separate studies, each employing semi-structured interviews. This technique provided rich, deep descriptions of participants' lived experiences in clinical practice, which helped elucidate the complex concept of thriving in clinical practice.

## 3.2 Qualitative research: An area of growth

There are two main approaches to research designs: quantitative and qualitative. The field of veterinary medicine has traditionally used quantitative methods that involve collecting numerical data from large samples through experiments, surveys, and questionnaires. Statistical analysis is used to test or confirm theories or hypotheses and make generalisations or predictions about the findings (Bhandari, 2023). In contrast, qualitative research evolved from the social sciences and is less widely used in the veterinary field (May, 2018). The objective of qualitative research is to understand the experiences, meanings and perspectives of people. Qualitative studies involve collecting and analysing non-numerical data, usually comprised of words (text, audio or video), to gain a deep, rich understanding of a phenomenon through people's lived experiences. This type of research is commonly used in social sciences, education and health sciences (Bhandari, 2024). It has been defined as "a form of social inquiry that tends to adopt a flexible and data-driven research design, to use relatively unstructured data, to emphasise the essential role of subjectivity in the research process, to study a small number of naturally occurring cases in detail, and to use verbal rather than statistical forms of analysis" (Hammersley, 2012, p. 12). It is therefore a process that generates scientific knowledge by virtue of developing a rich and deep understanding of the question being studied (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

There is growing recognition in the field of organisational psychology that quantitative methods alone are not sufficient to understand intricate workplace dynamics fully, as this requires a more in-depth exploration of experiences and meanings. This has resulted in an increased use of qualitative research in workplace situations (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). Similarly, there has been a steady rise in the use of social science-focused qualitative methodologies in medical research.

Qualitative interviews are commonly used in social sciences to understand how people make sense of their environment (Brooks et al., 2018). Thriving in the veterinary context is shaped by multiple workplace and personal factors that influence job satisfaction, motivation, engagement and positive well-being. While qualitative interviews have not been widely used to examine the positive aspects of veterinary work, this method has been applied to explore thriving among primary care physicians (Gielissen et al., 2021) and medical residents (Hyman & Doolittle, 2022).

A recent Canadian study used a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, to examine EI and thriving in early-career veterinarians (Kittisiam, 2025).

Most veterinary well-being research has relied on quantitative surveys. However, some studies have included free-text survey responses to add qualitative insights (Adam et al., 2019), but such responses limit opportunities for follow-up or clarification. The use of qualitative approaches to explore complex issues in the veterinary context is on the rise. For example, Schull et al. (2021) used semi-structured interviews to explore factors employers consider when selecting new graduates for employment, and Whitaker et al. (2025) used focus groups to explore job dissatisfaction and burnout among equine veterinarians. Other recent veterinary qualitative studies have used one-on-one semi-structured interviews to explore workplace stressors in veterinarians (Campbell et al., 2025), why veterinarians leave clinical practice (Arbe-Montoya et al., 2020), and career transitions in new graduates (Bell et al., 2019).

Mixed methods research combines both qualitative and quantitative approaches to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem and has been widely used in the healthcare sector (Doyle et al., 2009). Qualitative methods offer in-depth insights into people's experiences and perspectives, while quantitative methods help test ideas and measure patterns using data. Recent veterinary research studies in New Zealand that have successfully applied a mixed methods approach include the exploration of career changes in veterinarians (King, 2021) and the investigation of professional qualities important for career success in veterinarians (Gordon, 2020). As awareness of the importance of health and well-being in the veterinary profession grows, so too does recognition of the value of qualitative research methodologies to explore complex human phenomena.

Adopting a qualitative interview approach for the current research allowed participants to openly share their feelings, opinions, and experiences of thriving in clinical practice. It provided an in-depth understanding, beyond what hypothesis testing alone could achieve. Building rapport with the participants was a key part of the interview process, as it fostered an environment of trust where the participants could speak openly and honestly about their experiences, and enriched the depth and nuances of the findings (Brooks et al., 2018).

However, undertaking qualitative interview research poses new challenges for traditional scientists who are more familiar with quantitative research. The key differences lie in data collection and analysis, as well as in the fundamental philosophical perspectives on the nature of reality and the creation of knowledge.

### 3.3 Researcher positionality and reflexivity

In qualitative interview research, achieving complete researcher neutrality is nearly impossible, particularly when the researcher is passionate and personally connected to the topic (Brady, 2019), as in this thesis. However, it is essential to maintain a high level of self-awareness and reflexivity throughout the research process. This means acknowledging and considering the potential impact of the researcher's position and subjectivity on the study.

I am a New Zealand European woman from a middle-class background and am a veterinarian with over 30 years of clinical and non-clinical veterinary experience. As a well-connected member of the New Zealand veterinary profession, I hold an insider position within the community I studied. According to Holmes (2020), a researcher who holds an insider position is someone who shares a common identity, experience or is part of the same profession or community as the participants. Wilson et al. (2022) demonstrated that having insider status was an advantage in qualitative interview research with paramedics. Having a shared background can potentially provide a deeper understanding and rapport with participants, but it requires careful reflexivity to manage potential bias.

My professional background and networks were helpful in recruiting participants and helped me craft the interview guides. Furthermore, as a veterinarian and a research interviewer, I was able to establish rapport with the participants based on trust, mutual respect, and understanding. This resulted in a more relaxed interview atmosphere, where participants were perhaps less cautious than they would be with an outsider, and helped generate deep, rich data. Nevertheless, I was mindful of maintaining a professional but friendly relationship with all participants and reflected critically on my insider position throughout the research process.

My personal experiences in clinical practice, including both the pleasures and challenges, significantly shaped the development of my research question. Although I loved many aspects of clinical practice, I left after becoming frustrated and suffering from poor mental health. I experienced a lack of belonging and struggled to balance part-time clinical work and family responsibilities due to limited support and a lack of career opportunities. By transitioning to non-clinical veterinary work, I expanded my professional network and was able to incorporate veterinarians working in various areas of practice, including equine, production animal, and companion animal care.

Conversations with my veterinary colleagues over the years demonstrated that while many shared my enjoyment of clinical work, they also grappled with significant stressors and personal

challenges. While some chose to leave clinical practice, many stayed and thrived, prompting me to question why this difference occurred.

My personal story shared at the start of this thesis provides the context for why I chose to undertake this research at this stage of my veterinary career. My personal journey has shaped my understanding of the passion, commitment, and high expectations that often accompany the decision to pursue a career as a veterinarian. Like many, gaining a place at veterinary school was a significant milestone for me, and I hoped for a rewarding and fulfilling career.

During my time in clinical practice, I experienced both the joys and the challenges that veterinarians face. I understand the workplace stressors that impact the lives of those working in clinical practice. I am also familiar with the complex emotions that come with stepping away from a clinical career that had become a core part of my identity. While I have always cared about clients and their animals, my focus gradually shifted to supporting veterinarians themselves and advocating for their well-being.

This shift in perspective, coupled with my experiences as a clinician and the extensive connections I have developed with veterinarians across New Zealand, inspired my decision to pursue this research. I am committed to contributing to the profession in a meaningful way, particularly in the area of well-being, and I wanted to approach the topic from a different perspective. Rather than focusing my research on the well-documented challenges of veterinary work, I chose to adopt a positive psychology lens and a strengths-based qualitative approach to explore what enables veterinarians to thrive and build sustainable careers in clinical practice.

These motivations led me to embark upon this full-time PhD alongside my part-time role as well-being advocate for the NZVA. My researcher positionality, shaped by my lived experiences as a clinician, colleague and advocate, informed my philosophical assumptions, values and beliefs. This, in turn, influenced not only the research question but also the research design, interaction with the participants, and data interpretation throughout the research.

### 3.4 Philosophical assumptions underpinning my research

The concept of philosophical assumptions was new to me, and I found the “iceberg metaphor” described by James (2015) to be very useful in illustrating the connection between the research methods and underlying philosophical perspectives. James (2015) explains that the visible tip of the iceberg (which is about 10% above the water) represents the methods that are clearly visible to everyone. However, approximately 90% of the iceberg is below the surface and is an intricate

component of the entire system. This large hidden portion represents the philosophical assumptions underpinning any research. These include the values held (axiology), the understanding of reality (ontology), the acquisition of knowledge (epistemology), and the methodological approach.

My research, exploring thriving in clinical veterinarians, was underpinned by a social justice and caring axiology, a relativist ontology, a constructionist epistemology, and an interpretivist theoretical perspective (see Table 3.1).

### 3.4.1 Axiology – Social justice and caring

Axiology refers to the role of values and ethics in research (Brown & Dueñas, 2020). My philosophical worldview is grounded in values of social justice and caring. Social justice highlights fairness and respect for participants' rights and well-being. Caring reflects my personal and professional commitment to supporting others.

As a veterinarian with clinical experience, I have a deep understanding of the joys and challenges of veterinary work, including its ethical quandaries. Although I did not share my own story during the interviews, my knowledge of the profession and my empathetic approach helped build trust and encouraged participants to speak openly. As a researcher, I conducted each interview and managed the data with care, respect and integrity, ensuring informed consent and confidentiality were maintained throughout.

My research focus on job satisfaction and thriving among veterinarians reflects a caring axiology, grounded in my values of empathy, compassion, and genuine concern for their well-being. These values also guided the development of the semi-structured interview guide, which was informed by a strengths-based lens. Open-ended questions were designed to explore the positive aspects of participants' work experiences. This strengths-based approach integrated the principles of positive psychology into the research design in a way that closely aligns with my personal and professional values.

**Table 3.1**

*The qualitative framework used in this thesis to explore veterinarians thriving in clinical practice*

<b>Elements that inform each other</b>	<b>What each element means</b>	<b>Elements chosen for this research</b>	<b>How does my choice fit in the context of this research</b>
<b>Axiology</b>	Researchers' values and how these influence the study	<b>Social justice and caring</b>	As a veterinarian myself, I deeply care about the well-being of the profession, which inspired my research journey. I prioritised the well-being, dignity and privacy of participants during the research process.
<b>Ontology</b>	Assumptions about the nature of reality	<b>Relativist</b>	Assumes that there are multiple realities, each shaped by individuals' unique perspectives, experiences, and contexts. I believe thriving is experienced and described differently by each veterinarian and is shaped by their unique clinic context and personal perspective.
<b>Epistemology</b>	The nature of knowledge and how it is created	<b>Constructionist</b>	Knowledge is socially constructed through interaction and meaning-making; I believe understanding what it means to thrive in clinical practice was co-constructed between the participants and me, the researcher.
<b>Theoretical perspective</b>	The overarching worldview or lens through which the research is conducted	<b>Interpretivist strengths-based</b>	This approach focused on understanding how veterinarians interpret and make meaning of their experiences, with an emphasis on positive experiences, personal strengths, and enablers of thriving.
<b>Method</b>	The specific techniques used to collect data	<b>Semi-structured interviews</b>	Allowed participants to express their experiences and perspectives in their own words. While providing some guidance, this method also offers flexibility to explore nuances about thriving.
<b>Analysis method</b>	The specific approach used to examine the qualitative data	<b>Reflexive thematic analysis</b>	A flexible, interpretive method of analysing patterns of meaning across qualitative data, enabling deep insight into how veterinarians describe and understand thriving.



### 3.4.2 Ontological positioning – Relativism

Ontology refers to beliefs about the nature of reality and how things come to exist (Crotty, 1998). A researcher's ontological position reflects whether they view reality as objective and independent or as subjective and shaped by context (Grix, 2002). This research adopts a relativist ontology, which assumes that reality is individually constructed through experience and may vary across contexts (Moon & Blackman, 2014). I assumed that individual veterinarians develop a unique reality of what it is to thrive in clinical practice, influenced by their work environment.

Relativism acknowledges that people may interpret the same situation differently (Crotty, 1998). In contrast, the naïve realist assumes a single reality exists outside our constructions of it (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Critical realism sits between the naïve realist and the relativist ontological perspectives, assumes a real world exists independently of our perceptions, but our understanding of it is always partial and influenced by context (Braun & Clarke, 2021b; Moon & Blackman, 2014). Therefore, any claims about reality must be comprehensively and critically investigated (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

Although I considered critical realism, I adopted a relativist position to embrace the subjective and interpretive nature of how veterinarians perceive clinical practice. This reflects my belief that there is no single truth about what enables thriving. For instance, two veterinarians in the same clinic may view the environment differently—one as supportive, the other as stressful. A relativist stance allowed for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of thriving and supported ongoing reflexivity in my role as a researcher.

### 3.4.3 Epistemological position – Constructionism

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge; it is concerned with how knowledge is acquired, its validity and scope (Grix, 2002; Moon & Blackman, 2014) and the ontological position often informs the epistemological stance. Epistemology can be viewed as a continuum between objectivism, which assumes that meaning exists within an object, independent of the individual's mind, and subjectivism, which assumes that meaning exists entirely within the subject's mind (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Constructionism sits mid-way between objectivism and subjectivism and challenges the notion that knowledge is an objective, external reality waiting to be discovered. Instead, it emphasises the subjective and dynamic nature of knowledge construction (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

There is, however, sometimes confusion around constructionism and constructivism, which are two different epistemologies. This research is underpinned by a constructionist epistemology,

which suggests that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between the individual and their environment (Crotty, 1998; Moon & Blackman, 2014). Constructionism assumes that individuals shape their meaning of a situation through social interaction and the shared cultural context (Hyde, 2020). In this research, constructionism refers to the social creation of meaning that occurs at the level of the veterinary clinic and the research relationship itself. In contrast, constructivism focuses on how individuals construct knowledge internally, based on their personal experiences and interpretations. The key distinction lies in the level at which knowledge is formed: constructivism focuses on the individual, whereas constructionism emphasises the social nature of meaning-making (Hyde, 2020). Given the relational and context-dependent nature of this research, a constructionist epistemology was considered most appropriate.

Adopting a constructionist epistemology is aligned with the aim of this research to explore what helps veterinarians thrive in clinical practice. Thriving is not just an individual process; it is shaped by social interactions with colleagues and clients, workplace culture, leadership, and personal life experiences. Constructionism recognises that meaning is created socially and culturally, making it well suited to this research. I assumed that veterinarians' understanding of thriving in their clinical careers was actively constructed through their experiences, internal narratives, and interpersonal relationships both within and beyond the clinical workplace. In qualitative interviews, meaning is co-created through dialogue between the participant and the researcher. This collaborative process is central to a constructionist epistemology and supports the reflexive, interpretive approach used in this thesis.

By grounding my research in the principles of relativism and constructionism, I aimed to develop a nuanced understanding of the participants' perceptions of job satisfaction and thriving by exploring the intricacies of veterinarians' lived experiences in clinical practice. This philosophical position recognised the active interplay between the participants, whose individual lived experiences were the focus of the research and me, as the researcher.

#### 3.4.4 Interpretive, strengths-based theoretical perspective

The theoretical perspective provides the overarching lens through which research is conducted. Veterinary research has traditionally been conducted from a positivist or post-positivist stance. Positivism and post-positivism are both objectivist views. Positivism assumes that valid knowledge comes from scientific methods and unbiased observation, while post-positivism also recognises that an objective reality exists but accepts that it can never be fully or perfectly known (Crotty, 1998; Moon & Blackman, 2014). In contrast, interpretivism surfaced in "contradistinction to positivism in attempts to understand and explain human and social reality" (Crotty, 1998, pp.

66–67). Interpretivism recognises that knowledge is more subjective and constructed through individual perspectives, valuing the meanings people attribute to their experiences (Crotty, 1998). Interpretivists aim to understand human behaviour by exploring individual cases and how their experiences unfold, usually using qualitative methods (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

Adopting an interpretivist perspective enabled me to explore veterinarians' lived experiences through interviews, focusing on how they understood and described thriving in clinical practice. Combining this with a strengths-based positive psychology lens allowed me to investigate the positive aspects of their work. My interpretive, strengths-based perspective aligns with my axiological, ontological, and epistemological positions, forming the philosophical foundation of this.

Phenomenology is one of the many types of qualitative research methodologies, and it is unique in that it captures and examines the lived experiences of people (Frechette et al., 2020). I employed aspects of a phenomenological approach in my research, focusing on exploring and understanding individual participants' lived experiences and the factors that help them thrive in clinical practice. In the phenomenological approach, researchers engage in a process called “bracketing” or “epoche”, where they consciously set aside their preconceptions and biases to approach the phenomenon under study with an open mind (Byrne, 2001). During the interviews, I was mindful to set aside my personal experiences as a veterinarian and focus solely on the participants' stories. However, I believe reflexivity is vital in qualitative research, as it values researcher subjectivity, leading to more nuanced interpretations – a strength to be embraced, not avoided (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

## 3.5 Methods of data collection and analysis

### 3.5.1 Research design

Adopting a positive psychology lens enabled me to explore participants thriving with a focus on positive emotions and strengths, as opposed to the traditional psychology approach that is more deficiency-oriented and focused on pathology and unwellness (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014).

Rather than identifying problems that veterinarians encounter in the clinical workplace, my positive psychology lens aimed to discover and build on existing strengths and successes of the veterinary workplace as perceived by participants. More specifically, I focused on what was

working and enjoyable in the workplace to develop recommendations to improve thriving and positive well-being in clinical practice.

My research design comprised three qualitative interview-based studies:

**Study 1:** Interviews with experienced veterinarians who had been working in clinical practice for more than 8 years.

**Study 2:** Interviews with new and recent graduate veterinarians (graduated less than 3 years prior).

**Study 3:** Interviews with clinical veterinarians (graduated more than 3 years) who had worked at a clinical practice for more than 12 months.

### 3.5.2 Sampling

The objective of qualitative research is to develop a deeper understanding of a phenomenon being explored rather than focusing on the generalisability of the findings (May, 2018). The sample needs to be wide enough to provide in-depth answers to the research question. Thus, sampling is usually non-random. Non-probability sampling (where not every member of the population has an equal chance of being selected) is the method of choice for most qualitative research projects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This research employed a combination of two non-probability sampling methods, purposive sampling and convenience sampling, to select participants for the interviews.

#### 3.5.2.1 Purposive sampling

Purposive sampling involves deliberately selecting participants who meet the study selection criteria (Patton, 2015). Therefore, the first step of purposive sampling was to determine the selection criteria important for identifying the participants to be interviewed. These criteria were unique to each study in this research, reflected the purpose of each study, and led to the identification of information-rich participants. The criteria included factors such as duration in clinical practice, years since graduation, and employment status.

An important guiding principle in purposive sampling is maximum variation within a limited sample size. It is essential to include participants who represent a diversity of perspectives within the range specified by the study criteria (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). I aimed to represent the diversity of the New Zealand veterinary profession in each study and therefore selected participants from a range of different practice types, including private, corporate, and club practices from various locations in both the North and South Islands of New Zealand, covering both rural and urban settings. Participants across the three studies were selected from a variety

of practice types, including companion animal, equine, production animal, and rural mixed animal. Additionally, a mix of male and female veterinarians was included to ensure a broad range of perspectives. More details on the specific selection criteria and the implications of practical constraints are provided in each study chapter.

### *3.5.2.2 Convenience sampling*

Convenience sampling is a non-probability sampling method where participants are selected based on ease of access (Stratton, 2021). Factors that influenced the convenience sampling in this research included consideration of participant location, availability and willingness, as well as my time limits and travel funds. However, I was mindful that selection based on convenience sampling can be subject to sampling bias and self-selection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, convenience sampling is also more vulnerable to researcher bias (Gordon, 2020), as selecting participants who are easily accessible may limit the diversity of perspectives in the study.

### *3.5.2.3 Participant recruitment*

Recruitment of veterinarians to participate in the interviews was based on meeting the specific selection criteria for each study. Potential participants for Study 1 were identified via my professional networks, publicly available sources such as veterinary practice websites, and the VCNZ register. For Study 2, information about the study was provided to new graduates at an NZVA new graduate event, and those interested were invited to provide their contact details. For Study 3, practice owners and leaders (gatekeepers), identified through my professional networks, were provided with study details and asked to share study information with their veterinary staff. Veterinarians who were interested were invited to contact me for further information about the study.

All potential participants were initially contacted via email, which included an invitation to participate, an overview of the study's objectives, and a brief description of the interview process. Those interested then received a detailed information sheet to help them make an informed decision. Those who agreed to participate were contacted by phone, text or email to arrange a mutually agreed-upon interview date and location.

### *3.5.2.4 Sample size*

There is no easy answer to the question of sample size in qualitative research. There is no simple formula that can account for the rich, deep, complex nature of qualitative data to determine the right sample size for a certain study (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

The concept of saturation is a widely accepted way of determining sample size in qualitative studies using thematic analysis. Data saturation is defined as “information redundancy” when ongoing data collection and analysis indicate that further collection of data would not add new concepts or themes and is therefore unnecessary (Braun & Clarke, 2021c, p. 201). The concept of theoretical saturation was developed in 1999 by Glaser and Strauss (2017) as a specific element of grounded theory analysis. Theoretical saturation has been described as the point at which “no new emergent themes or concepts are generated” (Koerber & McMichael, 2008, p. 469).

However, Braun and Clarke (2021c) argue that the notion of data saturation is problematic and not consistent with the values and assumptions of reflexive thematic analysis. They contend that themes are “generated” through interpretation of the data rather than simply emerging, and suggest the concept of “information power” as a more appropriate way to determine sample size (Malterud et al., 2016).

Information power requires that the researcher reflect on the richness of the information the dataset provides and on how well it meets the specific aims and requirements of the study (Malterud et al., 2016). The information power of data is also dependent on the use of established theory (if applied or not), which, if used, guides the researcher’s thinking and helps to connect findings to the broader literature. Additionally, the specificity of participants’ experiences and the quality of the interview dialogue contribute to the information power of the data.

Each study, therefore, adopted an approach to sample size that was not focused on the number of participants but rather on the richness of the data information determined by analysis.

To identify how many participants were needed in the present research to provide sufficient rich information, analysis was conducted throughout the data collection phase. Data collection ceased when the information collected was deemed sufficient. This was the point at which no new themes or concepts relevant to the research question were generated from the data. Therefore, sample sizes for each study in this thesis were not pre-determined; instead, the concepts of both saturation and information power guided the sample size adequacy in this research.

### 3.5.3 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed in all three studies and were considered appropriate for exploring veterinary thriving in clinical practice, a multifaceted human phenomenon. Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research and offer a balance between structure and flexibility through an interview guide that does not need to be strictly followed

(Braun & Clarke, 2013; Kallio et al., 2016). This approach provided valuable insights into individuals' lived experiences (King et al., 2021) and facilitated the generation of rich data enhanced by 'thick descriptions' conveyed through the participants' own voices (Dunwoodie et al., 2023). In addition, the flexibility of this method enabled participants to raise issues and perspectives that I had not considered, adding depth to the data. Overall, the semi-structured interview technique allowed for an in-depth exploration of thriving among veterinarians.

### *3.5.3.1 Interview procedure*

Specific interview guides were developed for each study using mainly open-ended questions. The interview guides provided an outline of the main questions, but were flexible in terms of wording and the order in which questions were asked (Brooks et al., 2018). Probes (follow-up questions to deepen the response) and prompts (guidance to help participants respond) were used to encourage participants to provide a richer understanding of their experiences or to explain a question to the participant if they were unsure how to respond (Brooks et al., 2018).

For each study, pilot interviews were conducted with local veterinarians who met the specific study's criteria. These interviews followed the same procedure planned for the main interviews, including written informed consent and recording. The pilots allowed me to trial the interview guides, evaluate the responses, refine the questions and develop my interview technique.

At the start of each interview, I provided a verbal overview of the study. Participants were provided with the information sheet previously emailed to them. They were reminded of their rights, including how to access psychological support if needed, and asked to provide written informed consent.

My veterinary background and insider position were helpful when conducting the interviews. My understanding of everyday life in veterinary practice enabled participants to share their experiences without having to explain clinical terms. However, I maintained my role as a researcher during the interviews and was cautious about sharing my own clinical experiences.

An informal, friendly chat before the formal interview commenced helped build rapport and create a relaxed atmosphere. The interviews concentrated on participants' personal experiences rather than their perceptions of others. If discussions shifted toward colleagues, the conversation was gently redirected to focus on their own experiences. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. The interview guide consisted of open questions, unless probing for further clarification on a point. I was mindful not to ask leading questions and allowed the conversation

to progress naturally whilst following the interview guide. Brief handwritten notes were taken as reminders to go back to points participants raised without interrupting the flow of conversation.

### *3.5.3.2 Face-to-face versus online interviews*

Most interviews were conducted in person. However, some were held remotely via online platforms to accommodate participants who were geographically distant, who had busy schedules, or whose personal circumstances made in-person interviews difficult.

Face-to-face interviews were prioritised where possible as they allowed for a relaxed atmosphere, stronger rapport, and observation of non-verbal cues. In contrast, online interviews offered greater flexibility, accessibility, and cost efficiency. However, online platforms posed challenges such as dependence on stable internet connections and limited ability to observe non-verbal communication. Ethical standards, including informed consent and participant confidentiality, were adhered to for all interviews.

### *3.5.3.3 Interview setting and recording*

The physical setting of an interview can significantly influence its flow, with privacy, quietness, and comfort being key considerations (Brooks et al., 2018). Participants were asked where they would like the interview to be held. Most interviews took place in a quiet room at the participant's clinic. However, some chose a quiet café, and others preferred their own home.

All interviews were recorded with participant consent using a digital handheld recorder if face-to-face, or using Zoom or Teams recording technology if conducted online. The participants were aware that the recording could be paused at any time, and anything they said when the recording was stopped was considered "off the record".

Each interview concluded by inviting participants to share their final thoughts, followed by a thank you and a stop to the recording. Participants were reminded they could review their transcript and would receive a summary of the findings. Permission was sought to contact them for any follow-up clarification. After each interview, reflective notes were recorded to document the process and any key observations.

## **3.5.4 Data analysis**

### *3.5.4.1 Transcription*

The interview recordings were all transcribed verbatim either by me or a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement. I re-listened to the recordings when reading the

transcripts to check them for accuracy. Transcripts were de-identified by replacing participants' names, practice names, locations and any other identifiable information with pseudonyms or a number/figure codename. The participants who wished to review their transcripts were given 2 weeks to make any amendments or comments. The de-identified transcripts were imported into NVivo (Version 14; QSR International, 2023) for analysis and coding. The analysis of transcripts was an ongoing process commencing at the start of the interview process. The saturation point was identified when the information captured in the data was such that further interviews did not generate any new themes or concepts.

#### *3.5.4.2 Thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis (TA) is a widely used method for identifying, analysing and interpreting qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Terry et al., 2017). It is a flexible and accessible approach that can be applied across a range of theoretical perspectives and is particularly useful for generating rich, nuanced insights into participants' experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006; King, 2004).

Thematic analysis has been described as “ a family of methods” (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, p. 39) that provides a variety of approaches. Depending on the research purpose and philosophical stance, the TA methods include, for example, a descriptive or interpretive approach, an inductive or deductive approach, and a semantic or latent approach. While flexibility is a key strength of TA, it can also lead to inconsistency and a lack of coherence in theme development if not underpinned by a well-defined philosophical position (Nowell et al., 2017). Therefore, it is critical that the TA method chosen fits the purpose of the study, the research question, and the researcher's philosophical assumptions.

Finlay (2021, p. 105) suggests two broad but overlapping styles of TA that researchers may adopt. Firstly, there is the “scientifically descriptive” approach, which aligns with post-positivist or realist paradigms. This approach is sometimes referred to as “small q” qualitative research (Kidder & Fine, 1987) and prioritises objective, reliable, and replicable theme development through structured coding, codebooks and inter-coder agreement to minimise human bias (V. Clarke et al., 2019). It leans towards a more quantitative orientation and is seen as a bridge between qualitative and quantitative methods. However, V. Clarke et al. (2019) argue that this approach neglects the essential elements of qualitative research, such as reflexivity, flexibility, and deep engagement with data.

Secondly, Finlay (2021) described the “artfully interpretive” (p. 105) fully qualitative approach, underpinned by relativist, constructionist, and interpretivist assumptions. This approach is also called a “Big Q” approach to qualitative research (Kidder & Fine, 1987) and aligns with reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021a). RTA values researcher subjectivity and reflexivity as integral to the analytic process. It aims to generate themes that are meaningful, co-constructed through the interaction between researcher and data, clearly connected to participants’ experiences, and consistent with the research aims (Braun & Clarke, 2021b).

Reflexive thematic analysis was chosen for this research as it aligned with my relativist ontology, constructionist epistemology, and interpretivist perspective. This approach to analysis was suited to the research aim of exploring how veterinarians experience and interpret thriving in clinical practice through the identification of patterns and meanings within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b; Finlay, 2021). RTA supports an open, flexible, and creative engagement with the data, where themes are actively created and do not simply emerge (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). This approach enabled a rigorous, deep, and nuanced analysis of veterinarians’ lived experiences and the generation of meaningful themes.

A predominantly inductive (data-driven) approach was taken during the analysis process in the present research, which resulted in a strong link between the themes and the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach to TA shares some similarities with grounded theory and involves searching for patterns in the data and developing explanations or themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). However, a deductive (theory-driven) approach was also employed at times during the analysis process. This involved using pre-existing theories and constructs as the lens to explore the data and generate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b).

The reflexive thematic analysis of my research followed the six-phase process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), and I collaborated with my supervisory team throughout the process. While these phases of TA provided a helpful framework, they were not applied in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Instead, I adopted an iterative approach, revisiting each phase repeatedly.

The analysis began by identifying semantic (explicit) surface meanings, followed by a deeper exploration of latent (implicit) underlying meanings through repeated, deep engagement with the data. Thus, the development of latent themes was interpretative rather than purely descriptive. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process through reflective note-taking and regular discussions with my supervisory team. This approach aligns with a constructionist perspective, recognising that knowledge is co-constructed through the researcher’s interpretation of

participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Even during the final stages of writing up the findings, I returned to the raw data to check the context of specific quotes.

#### 3.5.4.2.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

The transcripts were checked for accuracy by re-listening to the interview recordings. During this stage, I made notes and recorded any initial thoughts or emerging patterns. I then re-read the transcripts to immerse myself in the data and engage critically with its content (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Ideas and concepts were discussed with the supervisory team throughout this process. Familiarisation with the data was a deeply satisfying and enjoyable process, as it revealed nuances that I had not initially noticed, which gradually became clearer.

#### 3.5.4.2.2 Phase 2: Creating the codes

Codes are segments of data that capture a single idea or concept relevant to the research question and are considered the building blocks of TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Coding is the process of exploring the data and identifying codes that create a pattern of meaning.

The coding phase was approached with openness and curiosity, acknowledging that participants' experiences often differed from each other and my own. Initial coding focused on the semantic level of meaning, generating a wide range of codes. Through repeated and deeper engagement with the data, latent meanings were identified, allowing for the refinement and consolidation of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This iterative process was conducted using NVivo 14 software and was mainly inductive, with codes and themes being developed from the data. However, the flexibility of TA allows for the option of either inductive or deductive approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, the analysis began with an inductive exploration before shifting towards a more deductive lens, informed by pre-existing theoretical constructs related to veterinary well-being and thriving.

Throughout the coding phase, I made informal notes using the NVivo 14 software memo function, which allowed me to reflect on the process and note code definitions and any interactions between codes. These memos were useful when reviewing the codes and in the initial theme development phase.

#### 3.5.4.2.3 Phase 3: Developing initial themes

Following the refinement and finalisation of codes, the next phase involved developing initial themes. This required examining the codes for shared meaning and clustering them into groups that warranted further exploration before being confirmed as themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The

research questions guided this process, with attention focused on identifying patterns of meaning across the dataset.

Codes were reviewed for underlying ideas that could be grouped together. For example, in Study 1, a cluster of codes related to feeling a sense of purpose and meaning in clinical work formed the basis of an initial theme.

Codes that represented a single concept were combined into initial themes that represented multiple concepts of a central idea. Initial themes were not created by frequency count or magnitude coding. Instead, the development of themes focused on uncovering significant findings within the data that addressed the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

#### 3.5.4.2.4 Phase 4: Reviewing the themes

After clustering codes into initial themes, thematic maps were created for each study using pen and paper and Xmind software (Version 2024; Xmind Ltd, 2024). These maps were revised multiple times in collaboration with the supervisory team and were helpful in visually exploring relationships between themes. The development and review of themes involved two or more supervisors to ensure the validity of the findings. This process provided a clearer understanding of the broader thematic structure, which was difficult to grasp without a visual overview.

Theme development was an iterative and evolving process. Themes and sub-themes were often interconnected, with blurred rather than distinct boundaries. For example, a recurring concept across all three studies was the central role of support, which appeared to underpin many themes. This insight prompted me to re-examine the relevant codes, data segments, and transcripts to deepen my understanding of how support featured across themes. Revisiting the data in this way contributed to the validation of the analysis by ensuring coherence between the codes, themes, and underlying data in collaboration with my supervisory team.

#### 3.5.4.2.5 Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

Once the themes were finalised, they required a clear theme definition to “outline the scope, boundaries and core concepts of the theme” (Braun & Clarke, 2021b, p. 108). This phase aimed to clearly articulate what each theme represented and its contribution to the overall analysis. Theme names were refined to ensure they captured the essence of the theme in a concise and meaningful way. By the end of this phase, each study had a set of clearly defined major themes and associated sub-themes, ready for integration into the findings.

#### 3.5.4.2.6 Phase 6: Writing the results

In reflexive TA, the writing up of the results is considered an integral part of the analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). The narrative around each theme and sub-theme was carefully constructed to accurately represent participants' voices, with illustrative quotes included to validate the themes and bring the story to life. The findings were written and revised multiple times, with ongoing engagement with themes, codes, and raw data. I engaged with the themes, codes and raw data iteratively throughout the analysis and writing of the phase for each study chapter (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) as well as the general discussion (Chapter 7) and recommendations (Chapter 8) until all were finalised.

This research aimed to explore the meaning of thriving for veterinarians working in clinical practice rather than its measurement. Thus, in reporting my findings, I deliberately used terms such as “many”, “most”, and “numerous participants” to signal the strength and consistency of themes rather than indicate frequency. Similarly, emotive or value-laden terms such as “critical”, “essential”, and “vital” were intentionally used to convey the salience and pervasiveness of themes, rather than suggest any magnitude or numerical weighting within this reflexive, interpretive analysis.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

The ethical issues I considered included potential conflicts of interest, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, storage of data, and sharing of research findings.

This research was carried out in accordance with the Massey University Code of Ethical Conduct.

Study 1 was considered to be low risk. Consequently, it was not fully reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees and received a low-risk Human Ethics Notification – 4000027510.

Study 2 was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 23/38.

Study 3 was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 24/11.

#### 3.6.1 Power imbalance

An important ethical consideration in this research was the potential for power imbalance during the interviews, particularly given my insider position as an experienced veterinarian. Positionality

can influence power dynamics in qualitative research (Dowling, 2016) and steps were taken to mitigate this throughout the study.

In the first and third studies, the interview participants were established veterinarians, which resulted in collegial and reciprocal relationships. Although there was a possibility of a perceived power imbalance when interviewing more senior veterinarians, I felt that no such dynamic was evident during any of the interviews.

A greater potential for power disparity was recognised in the second study, which involved interviews with new and recent veterinary graduates. As a more experienced veterinarian, I acknowledged the risk of unintentionally influencing participants or making them feel uncomfortable. Rose (1997) proposed that power imbalances in interviews can lead to participant intimidation and an unwillingness to talk openly. To address this, adjustments were made to my interview technique following the pilot interviews. I made sure I adopted a more neutral and approachable position to build rapport and trust. Reciprocity was encouraged by inviting participants to ask questions. I avoided sharing my personal clinical experiences unless prompted explicitly by the participant, to keep the focus on their narratives and reduce any undue influence.

### 3.6.2 Participant and researcher safety

#### 3.6.2.1 *Informed consent and confidentiality*

The risk of harm to the participants was minimised in all three studies by ensuring that informed consent and confidentiality were maintained. This was addressed by providing a detailed information sheet outlining the study objectives, their rights as participants, and psychological support options. The participants were asked to sign a consent form confirming they agreed to take part in the study and for the interview to be recorded. Participants could choose not to answer any questions and could choose to withdraw from the study within a specified timeframe. Although the interview questions were not sensitive, they could potentially evoke strong emotions, so I provided a list of support contacts if needed.

Researcher safety was managed by notifying a support person or supervisor of the interview schedule and confirming the completion of interviews, particularly when travel was involved.

#### 3.6.2.2 *Storage of data and sharing of research findings*

All digital data, including interview recordings and transcripts, were stored securely on a password-protected computer, and the signed consent forms were kept in a locked filing cabinet.

Face-to-face interviews were recorded using a handheld digital recorder and were deleted from the device once transferred to the secure computer. The online interviews were recorded using Zoom or Teams technology, and the recordings were securely stored. All identifiable data will be disposed of after 7 years.

Upon completion, the findings of this research will be disseminated through this PhD thesis, presentations, and journal publications.

### 3.7 Validity of the research

All good quality research aims to generate valid and trustworthy knowledge using an ethical approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). As qualitative research is based on assumptions about reality, the principles for demonstrating validity and rigour are very different to those used in quantitative research projects (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

As an emerging qualitative researcher, I strove to develop a deep understanding of thriving in clinical practice through extensive in-depth interviews and prolonged engagement with the data. During the research process, I constantly reflected on the questions of accuracy and authenticity. I greatly appreciated the veterinarians who participated in my research, and it was important that my findings reflected their experiences accurately, clearly, and respectfully.

#### 3.7.1 Accurate recording and transcription

The reliability of qualitative research is established through accurate data recording and transcription prior to analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this research, the interviews were recorded using a reliable digital recorder (or online technology) and faithfully transcribed verbatim by me or by a professional transcriber who had signed a confidentiality agreement.

#### 3.7.2 Member checking

Member checking and ongoing collaboration with participants throughout the research is a well-described strategy for validation in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcripts were anonymised, and all participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview for accuracy. None of the participants made any edits or changes to the transcripts. I shared a summary of the findings with the participants and asked for any feedback. No participant requested a change to the summary, and some reflected on how they found the process a helpful experience, as the interviews highlighted the positive outcomes of clinical work.

### 3.7.3 Researcher reflexivity

Engaging in reflexivity is another important validation strategy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is also a critical element of RTA and enhances transparency and rigour by acknowledging the researcher's positionality (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). As I am both a veterinarian and a researcher, it was critical that I engaged in reflexivity and acknowledged my subjectivity. I reflected on my prior presumptions about veterinary well-being and thriving, as well as my drive and purpose for undertaking this research, and how my lens influenced the research. I took reflective notes in a research journal during the research process. I consulted with my supervisor team on any issues concerning my positionality.

### 3.7.4 Collaboration and peer review

The supervision team and I collaborated continuously throughout coding, theme development, and theme refinement. This iterative process involved revisiting the raw data on numerous occasions, reaching consensus on code and theme creation, and generating rich, detailed theme descriptions. Some of the research findings were shared with the broader New Zealand veterinary profession at national conferences and meetings, as well as through personal communications with members of the profession, who were invited to provide feedback. These discussions confirmed that the findings were meaningful and potentially beneficial to the veterinary profession.

# Chapter 4: Study 1

## Insights from experienced clinical practitioners

### 4.1 Overview

This chapter explores what enables experienced veterinarians to have enjoyable clinical careers and thrive in clinical practice. The chapter addresses the first of my research questions:

What are the perceptions of veterinarians with 8 or more years of clinical experience regarding factors contributing to job satisfaction, engagement and thriving in clinical practice?

The chapter provides a brief introduction to the literature on thriving in the veterinary profession. It then provides the methods specific to this study, including an explanation of participant selection, the interview technique used to generate the data, and a brief description of the analysis process. The results section outlines the main themes and sub-themes, followed by a discussion of the findings.

### 4.2 Introduction

Working as a clinical veterinarian is a popular career choice and is often the realisation of a childhood dream. Sadly, veterinary work has long been regarded as highly stressful due to the immense responsibility of providing high-quality patient care, rising client expectations, and demanding, irregular work hours, all of which can contribute to significant work-related stress (Gardner & Hini, 2006). The majority of research has focused on the negative effects of veterinary work, such as stress, burnout, poor mental health, and, in the worst case, suicidal ideation (Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al., 2009; Hansez et al., 2008; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020). These negative psychological states are often associated with experiences such as moral conflict, poor workplace relationships, long hours, and lack of support, and have been linked to veterinarians leaving clinical practice (Arbe-Montoya et al., 2020). Similarly, a recent British survey identified excessive workloads, out-of-hours duties, and limited growth opportunities as key factors influencing equine veterinarians' decisions to leave (Rigby & Prutton, 2025). The free-text responses in Rigby and Prutton's (2025) study provided valuable qualitative insights into additional reasons equine veterinarians left practice, such as pursuing alternative career interests or family commitments.

Thus, veterinarians' career pathways and decisions to leave a job, clinical practice, or even the profession are not straightforward and are influenced by multiple "push and pull" factors. Despite the aforementioned negative factors, numerous positive factors may impact veterinarians' career decisions, such as new opportunities, career progression, pursuing interests, intellectual stimulation, and starting a family (King, 2021).

Although it is crucial to understand the factors associated with the negative aspects of veterinary work, many veterinarians experience long and enjoyable clinical careers. For example, Clise et al. (2021) demonstrated that many veterinarians derive pleasure from their work despite the reported challenges. However, there are limited studies that explore the positive aspects of working in clinical practice. Furthermore, most studies examining well-being in the veterinary profession have relied heavily on survey-based research, with considerably fewer qualitative studies. This is a gap that the current research aims to address.

In the current research, thriving was considered a more appropriate term for the veterinary context than the related concept of flourishing, which reflects a broader sense of holistic well-being and life fulfilment. Thriving is defined as the "joint experience of vitality and learning" (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014, p. 245), which captures the personal growth and progress relevant to clinical veterinarians. Nevertheless, insights from positive psychology, particularly Martin Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing remain valuable in the workplace. Building on this model, Donaldson et al. (2022) proposed the PERMA + 4, which expands the five original domains (positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement) to include four additional factors necessary for workplace well-being: physical health, mindset, work environment, and financial security. These positive psychology approaches to well-being and thriving are grounded in the fundamental concept of reaching one's full potential and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). They are also informed by the SDT, which proposes that an individual's intrinsic motivation depends on meeting three basic psychological needs: autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Similarly, Ryff's (1989) six-factor model of psychological well-being is based on empirical and philosophical foundations, such as Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia, and is closely aligned with the PERMA model of flourishing. Ryff's (1989) model emphasises personal growth, purpose in life, and positive relationships, alongside self-acceptance, environmental mastery and autonomy.

The application of these frameworks in the veterinary context is evident in Cake and colleagues' (2015) model of veterinary work-derived well-being. Drawing on the PERMA model and the eudaimonic tradition of achieving one's best possible self, their model highlights how veterinary

work can positively contribute to eudaimonic well-being. They emphasise the importance of living a meaningful, fulfilling, and engaged professional life, principles that resonate strongly with the aims of the present study. Cake and colleagues' (2015) model suggests that eudaimonic veterinary well-being is dependent on meaningful work, positive relationships, and personal growth. Wallace (2019) empirically assessed Cake and colleagues' (2015) veterinary well-being model through a survey of 376 Canadian veterinarians, identifying job characteristics that contribute to veterinarians' well-being via meaningful work. While Wallace's (2019) study used validated measures to provide a broad understanding of well-being in the workplace, it did not explore the deeper, lived experiences of individual veterinarians. To address this gap, the present study utilised in-depth interviews to investigate the factors that contribute to meaningful work, positive well-being, and thriving.

## 4.3 Methods

A qualitative research methodology was employed to investigate the perspectives of experienced New Zealand veterinarians on the factors that have contributed to their success in clinical practice. The study focused specifically on experienced veterinarians' own perspectives, aiming to understand what supported them to thrive in their careers.

### 4.3.1 Ethical approval

Ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality, participant well-being, and the dissemination of findings, were integral to my philosophical approach to the research. The research was conducted in accordance with a Massey University Human Ethics low-risk Notification – 4000026466 (Appendix 4A).

### 4.3.2 Sampling methods and recruitment

Participants were selected through targeted purposive sampling, meeting the specific study criteria. In the study, the criteria for participation included veterinarians currently working in clinical practice in New Zealand who had at least 8 years of clinical experience and were willing to participate. The sample included a diverse mix of veterinarians working across various areas of clinical practice.

The preliminary selection of veterinarians was based on identifying potential participants through my professional networks. Veterinarians who met the study criteria were contacted by telephone, and an official invitation to participate in the interviews was sent via email (Appendix 4B). They were also provided with an information sheet (Appendix 4C) outlining the study's purpose and

details about the interview process. It also highlighted the participants' rights and contained assurances of confidentiality. Before commencing each interview, all participants were required to sign a consent form (Appendix 4D), confirming that they had read and understood the information sheet, agreed to participate in the study, and granted permission for the interview to be recorded. Once accepted, a mutually agreed-upon date was set for the interview in a location of the participant's choice.

This sampling process enabled the selection of a diverse group of experienced clinical veterinarians across various types of clinical practice. Sampling continued until saturation was achieved. This was the point at which analysis of new interview transcripts did not produce any major new concepts relevant to the research question.

### 4.3.3 Interview guide and pilots

The semi-structured interview guide (Appendix 4E) was developed to gather rich data exploring veterinarians' positive perceptions of their experiences in clinical practice. My personal experience with the positive and negative aspects of a clinical veterinary career was helpful when designing questions for the interview guide, which focused on exploring the positive aspects of clinical veterinary work. Additionally, the flexibility of the semi-structured interview technique allowed me to improvise follow-up questions based on participants' responses as needed.

Once the preliminary interview guide was established, it was tested using video conference technology with two of my supervisors, JW and SG, who are veterinarians. Three pilot interviews were then conducted in person with veterinarians in clinical practice. The pilot interviews helped refine my interview technique and improve the interview questions.

### 4.3.4 Interview process

A safe and relaxed interview environment was established to foster trust and respect. The interviews were conducted in a quiet room at the participant's workplace, their home or a quiet café. The participants were reminded that the interview could be stopped at any point if they felt uncomfortable, although this did not occur during the 19 interviews conducted. Eighteen interviews were conducted face-to-face, and one interview was conducted via video conference technology for the participant's convenience.

Interviews began with a warm-up question: "Tell me about your career path since you graduated," which helped create a relaxed atmosphere and build rapport. Open-ended questions explored participants' positive experiences in clinical practice and the strategies they used to manage

challenges. Interviews were recorded using a Sony digital voice recorder or Zoom recording technology.

To conclude the interview, participants were thanked and invited to share any final thoughts on their experiences of thriving in practice before the recording was stopped.

#### 4.3.5 Interview data and transcription

The interview recordings were downloaded to a password-protected computer immediately after the interview, then deleted from the recording device. All participant information, interview recordings, and transcripts were kept in password-protected files on a secure personal computer. Hard copies of any data or participant information were stored in a locked filing cabinet. The recordings were transcribed *verbatim* either by me or a professional transcriber, who signed a transcriber confidentiality agreement (Appendix 4F). I read all transcripts to ensure accuracy and shared them with participants who requested a copy. This process enabled participants to review, confirm accuracy, and evaluate how well the transcripts accurately captured their interviews. To preserve confidentiality, individuals and any people mentioned in the interviews were anonymised using pseudonyms and/or numbers. Veterinarians were assigned unique identifiers such as V1, V2, V3 representing veterinarian 1 and veterinarian 2, and subsequent participants.

#### 4.3.6 Thematic analysis of transcript data

The interview transcripts were imported into NVivo (Version 14; QSR International, 2023), and an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach was employed to explore the data comprehensively. The six analysis phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b) were followed in an iterative rather than a linear process. The themes were primarily generated directly from the data, using an inductive “bottom-up” approach. However, a deductive approach was occasionally employed when specific aspects of the data could be more effectively interpreted by applying existing theories or frameworks. The analysis followed six phases: familiarisation with the data, coding, grouping codes into minor themes, developing main themes, refining and naming themes, and writing. These phases are described in detail in Chapter 3.

This iterative analysis process provided multiple opportunities for engagement with the data, allowing for the review and revision of codes and themes. As the principal researcher, I was the primary coder and generated the initial themes. All codes and themes were reviewed with three supervisors, JW, DG and SG, throughout the analysis to help validate the study’s findings and strengthen the credibility of the research process.

During the analysis process, themes were initially identified at a semantic level, providing a surface-level understanding of the data. Further exploration of the underlying ideas and concepts about thriving led to the development of themes at a latent or interpretative level. By the end of the process, several key themes that represent a “patterned response or meaning” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82) were generated from the data and informed the research question.

## 4.4 Results

### 4.4.1 Description of participants

Nineteen experienced clinical veterinarians were interviewed for this study, all of whom had worked in clinical veterinary practice for 8 years or more.

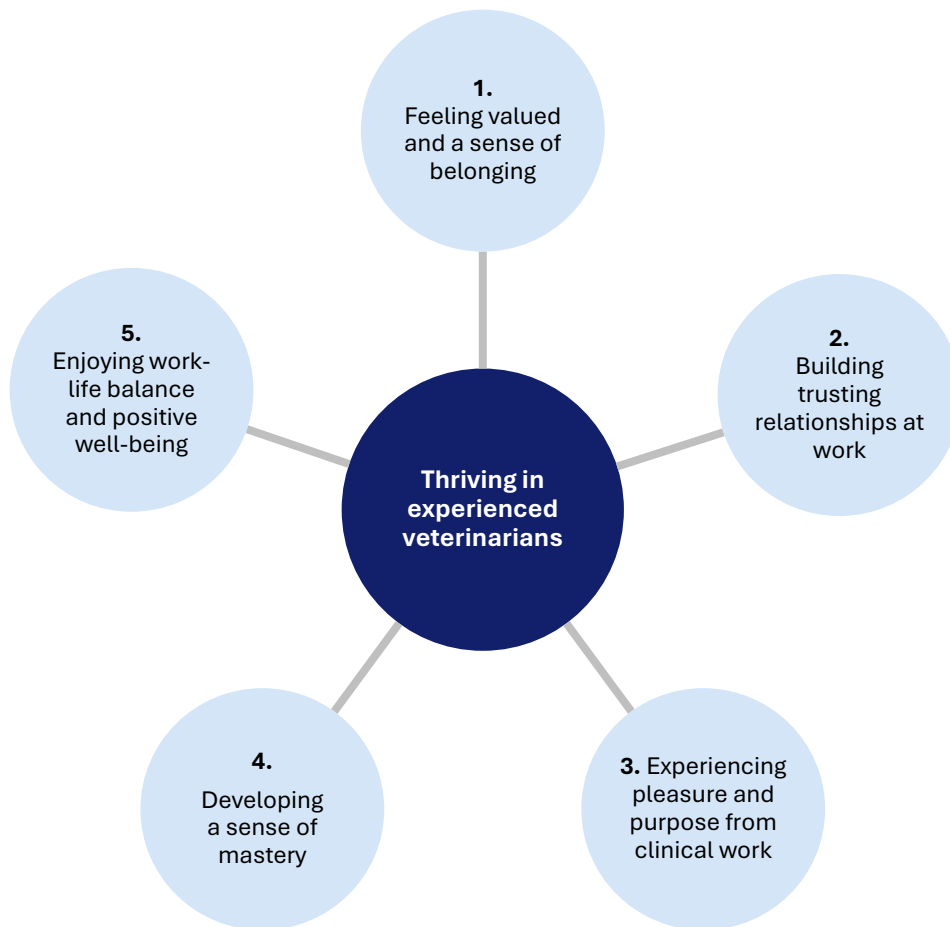
Of the 19 participants, seven were male, and 12 were female. Six had been in clinical practice for more than 20 years, seven had been in practice for 15–20 years, and six had been in clinical practice for 8–14 years. Seven were in production animal practice, nine were in companion animal practice, and three were in equine practice (Appendix 4G). Participants in this study worked in various clinical practices distributed across the North Island of New Zealand (Appendix 4H). Interview duration ranged from 50–90 minutes. Sixteen interviews took place in a quiet room at the participant’s practice, one was conducted at the participant’s home, another in a nearby quiet café, and one was held via Zoom.

### 4.4.2 Main themes related to thriving in clinical practice

The results of this study represent a construct built from the researcher’s interpretation of participants’ personal narratives and perceptions of thriving in clinical practice. RTA of the data generated multiple minor themes that were grouped into five main themes. These central themes reflected factors that influenced veterinarians’ ability to thrive, including feeling valued and having a sense of belonging at work, building trusting relationships, experiencing pleasure and purpose in clinical work, developing a sense of mastery, enjoying a work-life balance, and positive well-being (Figure 4.1). There was substantial interconnection between themes, which combined both workplace and personal factors.

**Figure 4.1**

*The five main themes that influence thriving in experienced clinical veterinarians*

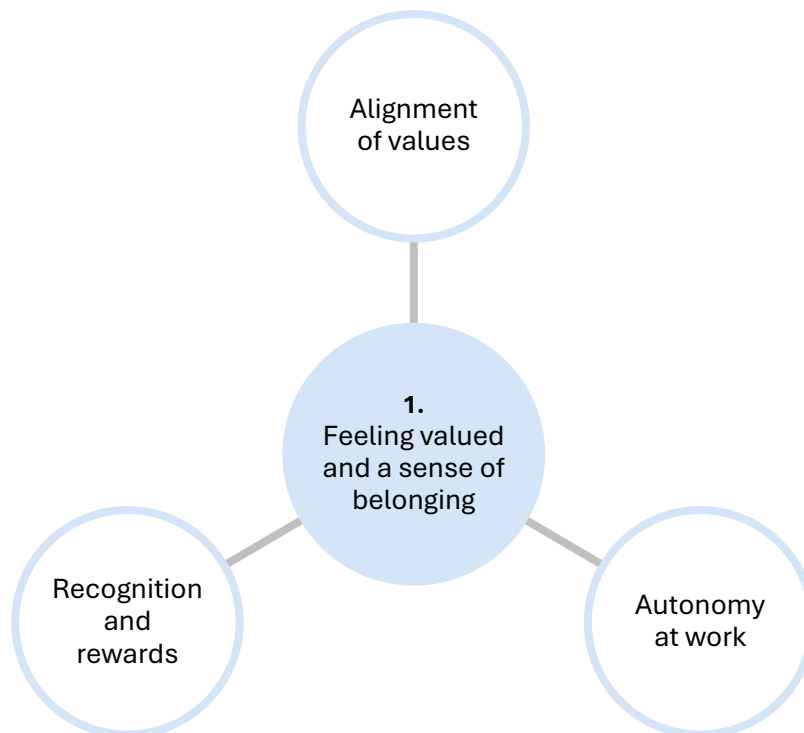


#### 4.4.3 Theme 1: Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging at work

Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging at work were essential for veterinarians to thrive in their roles. This was associated with the alignment between participants' values and core beliefs and those of the workplace. Support from employers, managers, and colleagues played a crucial role in fostering a workplace environment where veterinarians felt respected and cared for in their professional and personal lives. Veterinarians also felt valued when they were provided with career growth opportunities, work-life balance support through flexible work arrangements and recognition for their work efforts. Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging within the team were essential factors in fostering a healthy and safe workplace culture. Under this theme, three sub-themes were identified: alignment of values, autonomy at work, and recognition and rewards, as shown in Figure 4.2.

**Figure 4.2**

*Theme 1: Feeling valued and a sense of belonging, and the three nested sub-themes*



#### *4.4.3.1 Alignment of values*

Value alignment was fundamental to veterinarians’ sense of belonging (fit) within the clinic and influenced their commitment, purpose, and job satisfaction.

Participants felt it was important that the workplace values aligned with and supported their personal values around quality of care: *“being able to provide that higher-level GP service for clients”* (V4) and ethical standards: *“they are also welfare-aware, and I strongly feel we don’t compromise ourselves”* (V7). This alignment of values contributed to participants’ sense of belonging and engagement in their work.

Participants agreed it was important that their views around work-life balance and flexibility aligned with the business, and one participant felt:

*The reason we have such a good staff culture, and such a low turnover of vets is that they are flexible about what everyone does, and don’t have all these hard and fast rules. (V13)*

Several veterinarians noted that their practice’s commitment to staff well-being closely aligned with their own values. For example, V4, who cared deeply about psychological well-being, described how her workplace took a proactive approach to supporting mental health, which

strongly resonated with her personal beliefs. She felt genuinely cared for, describing the practice as one that understood “*the people and the team, and what makes them tick, and what their actual needs are*”.

Others emphasised the importance of shared values within the team, noting that value alignment not only enhanced communication but also fostered a strong sense of belonging and psychological safety at work. They felt that working with like-minded colleagues created a supportive, safe environment that promoted learning, professional growth, and improved job performance:

*We’ve (the team) all got different strengths, but we all have the same underlying values, so there’s no friction there. So, we all know what our strengths are – we all know where we’re lacking, and we’re quite happy to ask for help, and we’re always happy to help each other, as well. (V9)*

Some veterinary businesses had a mission statement that aligned with the participants’ values. For example, one veterinarian strongly agreed with his practice’s motto, which incorporated te reo Māori (Māori language) concepts resonating deeply with his values. These concepts included manaakitanga, representing care and responsibility towards people and animals, as well as kaitiakitanga, signifying teamwork and collaboration. As a leader himself, he felt he demonstrated the practice values in his work every day, saying:

*I feel like I’m kind of a guardian for the animals [...] I couldn’t do it without a team, and we work really hard together. (V16)*

#### 4.4.3.2 *Autonomy at work*

Having autonomy at work positively impacted participants’ sense of purpose, made them feel valued, promoted positive well-being, and ultimately benefited the business. Veterinarians enjoyed being influential at every stage of patient care:

*You get to see the whole project from start to finish. I really like that; I get to see myself reflected in the work. (V3)*

High autonomy and decision latitude (the ability to make decisions and utilise skills at work) in their everyday clinical work provided veterinarians in this study with job satisfaction and intrinsic motivation. Participants enjoyed the significant control and responsibility they experienced in determining patient care. For example:

*You’re the conductor of the orchestra. That’s the beauty of being a clinician. (V17)*

Veterinarians valued the freedom to use their clinical judgment to diagnose and manage clinical cases. Those who were able to balance their skills with the needs of both patients and clients enjoyed their work.

Autonomy held significant importance for numerous participants. Being trusted to work independently was reported as beneficial for participants' well-being. Veterinarians in this study did not enjoy or thrive at work if they felt micro-managed, and most agreed that they worked best when given free rein to manage their day and cases. Furthermore, veterinarians highlighted the benefits of managing their schedules and enjoying the flexibility to extend consult times. They appreciated being supported in developing their own niche within the practice, which made them feel engaged and valued.

#### 4.4.3.3 *Recognition and rewards*

Being recognised and rewarded for their contributions to the practice was important for participants' job satisfaction and positive well-being.

Participants identified several workplace system factors that contributed to feeling valued as a clinical veterinarian. These included fair remuneration, compensation for after-hours duties, opportunities for professional development, being offered a share in the business, and flexibility in the workplace. Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of being thanked for their efforts and receiving positive feedback from colleagues, leaders, and managers:

*I had a sit-down with one of the directors...and he said, 'We see how hard you have worked on this, and we do appreciate that'. So, it's nice to have that validation. (V19)*

Others agreed that the reciprocal nature of their work, the "give and take" dynamic within a practice, was a key factor that made them feel valued by and valuable to the business:

*I do feel valued by the practice. [...] The business has given back to me for my hard work by providing me with enormous flexibility. By giving to the practice, I feel I got it back in truckloads when I needed it. It's not all monetary gains, but the flexibility and that is important. (V1)*

Participants appreciated the opportunity to invest in the business, which made them feel valued, motivated, and more engaged in their work. Some considered the offer of a share in the business to be a pivotal moment in their careers. It provided them with an enhanced sense of belonging, purpose, and involvement in the practice's decision-making processes:

*That was really rewarding for me. I felt I really had skin in the game. I felt really proud and valued to be approached [...] So, that re-energized my enthusiasm. (V6)*

When participants' opinions were heard and they were included in practice decision-making, they felt valued and respected as members of the business. Several veterinarians noted that having a voice in practice decisions enhanced their motivation and job satisfaction. As V4 explained, being included in the business decisions “*was a big drawcard for keeping my interest in being a vet*”.

Veterinarians who were not part of the leadership team particularly appreciated having the opportunity to contribute their opinions and ideas. As V7 noted, being invited to have “*a seat around the table*” and having “*a voice*” enabled her to contribute to improving how things were done in the practice. This ability to contribute to important decisions contributed to individuals' sense of value and self-efficacy.

#### 4.4.4 Theme 2: Building trusting relationships at work

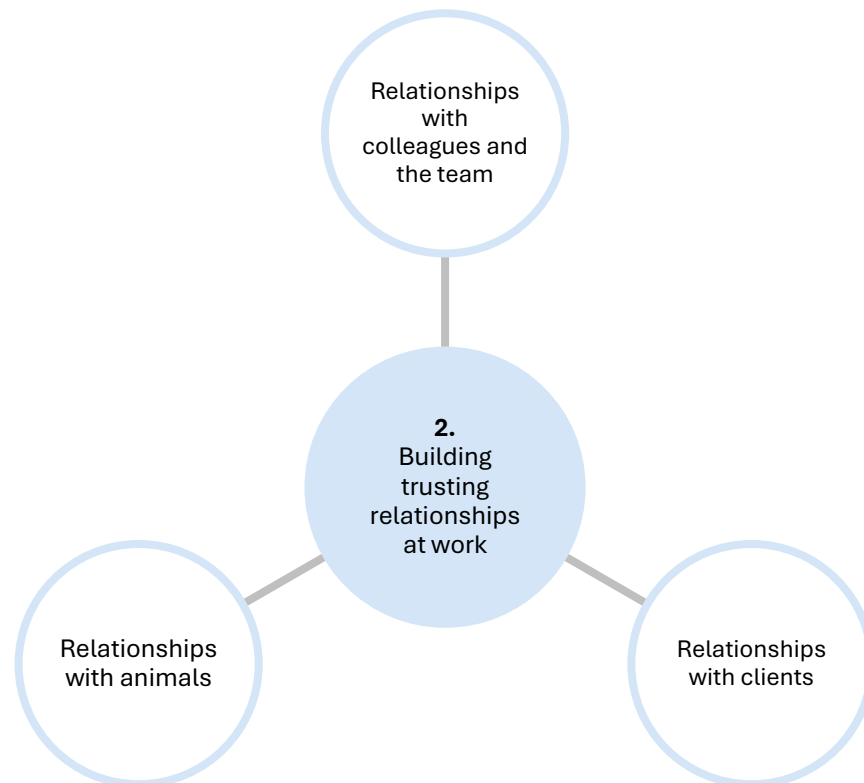
The second major theme highlighted the importance of trust in the workplace. Building strong relationships with people at work was central to engagement, satisfaction, thriving and, in some cases, retention in clinical practice. Despite being in a profession focused on animal care, most participants found that their job satisfaction and enjoyment stemmed primarily from the interactions and connections with people. As V3 noted: “*I very much enjoy people. That's what I think is the main thing that's given me longevity in the profession. I enjoy people*”. Many participants felt that the relationships they built with colleagues were an essential factor in their job satisfaction and enjoyment of clinical work:

*Most of my career high points are tied up with the people whom I've worked with at the time. (V1)*

Participants described the intrinsic rewards of building positive relationships with colleagues, clients, and animals. This theme is further explored through the three sub-themes: relationships with colleagues and the team, relationships with clients, and relationships with animals, as shown in Figure 4.3.

**Figure 4.3**

*Theme 2: Building trusting relationships at work and the three nested sub-themes*



#### *4.4.4.1 Relationships with colleagues and the team*

Three minor themes underpinned the sub-theme relationships with colleagues and the team: 1. A team with a shared purpose, 2. Inspiring mentorship, and 3. Feeling supported and safe at work.

The veterinarians in this study recognised the importance of trusting interpersonal relationships within the team in order to work effectively and achieve shared goals:

*You can't do veterinary work without a team. It's just impossible. (V17)*

##### *4.4.4.1.1 A team with a shared purpose*

Participants reported that being part of a supportive and productive team where members had a shared purpose and felt they were all working towards the same goals was a critical factor for positive outcomes, sense of belonging, and accomplishment:

*Everybody is working together – all working for the same goal [...] I do enjoy it when as a team, you've done it – as a team, you've succeeded. (V14)*

Experiencing success as a team rather than an individual created stronger relationships and a sense of group achievement. Veterinarians considered team collaboration to be an essential component of clinical veterinary work and spoke of the key role the wider team played in achieving good patient outcomes and ensuring job satisfaction. Participants described feeling psychologically safe in their teams when they shared the same values and trusted each other. This collaborative environment enabled them to ask for help and learn from one another, which had positive effects on individuals, patient outcomes, and the business:

*We're very open in saying – I don't know what I'm doing here, or I don't know the answer to this, or I can't figure this out – can you help me? [...] So, that is number one. When I come to work, I know I'm working as a team; I'm not on my own. (V9)*

#### 4.4.4.1.2 Inspiring mentorship

Participants emphasised the importance of trusting work relationships, particularly with mentors, senior veterinarians, and leaders who had inspired, guided, and encouraged them in shaping their careers. These relationships often played a pivotal role in helping them navigate challenges and grow professionally. One veterinarian who returned to clinical practice after a family-related break commented:

*There is no way I would have succeeded or been brave enough to come back into practice without the amazing mentorship I've had throughout my career, and that has really been the crux of why I've bounced back when things haven't gone well. [...] So those are the people who keep you going. (V19)*

Some veterinarians found that positive relationships with mentors and coaches had a significant impact on their professional lives. These supportive people often served as important role models, helping participants achieve their personal and professional goals.

#### 4.4.4.1.3 Feeling supported and safe at work

Participants described a sense of safety that was fostered by trusting team relationships, mutual care and support:

*I feel very safe here, because we've all got each other's backs; we're all checking in with each other – 'is everything all right – do you need a hand with anything?' So, it's all very safe here. (V9)*

Participants appreciated the support from colleagues in managing challenging clinical situations and resolving client conflicts. They highlighted the significant impact of kind and empathetic leaders and senior veterinarians on their clinical careers and job satisfaction. Support from team

members who showed genuine care was particularly appreciated by participants. For example, one participant felt safe and cared for when a colleague provided meaningful support, which positively contributed to her experiences of clinical practice:

*He was the sort of person who would turn up – if you were out on a call, and you'd been there a bit longer than he thought you should have been there, he'd pop in if he was driving past and go, 'Oh, how's it going?'. (V1)*

Having workplace support for personal problems was highly valued by participants, and many felt it contributed to their loyalty to the practice. Veterinarians who had faced personal challenges shared their experiences of receiving support and understanding from their leaders. This support gave them the confidence to prioritise personal responsibilities without fear of negative consequences, fostering a strong sense of safety, loyalty and gratitude:

*The bosses were fantastic, and they continued to be fantastic as my partner recovered; there were days where I had a whole lot of stuff booked in my diary, and I had to ring them and say, hey – sorry, but I can't come in today [...] So, if I hadn't had that (support), I don't think I would have stayed and that made me incredibly loyal, I suppose – and grateful, [...] I was kind of blown away by how supportive they were. (V12)*

Veterinarians highlighted the importance of trusting relationships with colleagues and leaders when seeking support or asking for help. One veterinarian noted: “*I definitely will go to people I trust for advice*” (V14). Trust fostered a psychologically safe environment where participants felt comfortable asking for help and discussing mistakes without fear of judgment. Participants described a range of clinical issues or unexpected outcomes that caused them emotional distress. However, these participants were able to discuss their experiences with trusted colleagues or mentors, who reassured them and restored their confidence. Debriefing in a trusting, psychologically safe environment was a vital part of veterinarians' well-being. As one participant remarked:

*It's people like that you need in your life, who have your back. They enable you to cope. (V19)*

Being able to share and learn from their mistakes in a safe environment with trusted colleagues was important for participants' ability to regain their clinical confidence. Participants felt that open communication and supportive colleagues helped them manage when things went wrong:

*I had that conversation, we talked through it, exactly what I did, and then I got confidence reinstated in me. (V5)*

Another feature of a psychologically safe clinic was the establishment of trusting relationships between colleagues and team members who demonstrated vulnerability. This behaviour fostered help-seeking behaviour among veterinarians. Participants felt reassured and less alone when they realised others had made similar mistakes:

*If I was feeling embarrassed about something or stressed that I may have handled something wrong, I would talk to a senior vet, and they would say, 'Oh, it'll be all right – I've done such 'n such – I've done that before'. (V12)*

Some female veterinarians in this study talked about how they found menopause an issue that they struggled with. They appreciated their colleagues' understanding and support when they felt anxious: Participant V11 reported, “*some days I'm on the verge of tears over nothing, and then other days I'm just really angry – if someone looks at me wrong, I might snap their head off. Yeah, it's quite draining*”. However, trusting and supportive relationships with team members helped participants navigate these challenging days. The symptoms of menopause affected some veterinarians' confidence, as noted in the quote below:

*I felt impostor syndrome. I was going to do this locum, but had trouble with my memory, like with menopause my brain doesn't function as well it should, and I was like, oh – I'm going to be terrible – I'm going to be useless – I'm not going to remember anything – which is ridiculous. I'm a really experienced vet. All my clients love me. My colleagues love me, but I still had that crisis of confidence. (V11)*

Providing a safe and supportive clinic environment where veterinarians felt “*comfortable asking for help about women's health issues*” (V13) was critical for positive well-being. Several participants also emphasised the importance of having accessible resources and increasing awareness about menopause and women's health in general. They noted that many people remain unaware of the wide range of symptoms women may experience at different life stages. Participant V15 noted: “I think we need to be more open about talking about topics like women's health”. Feeling comfortable talking openly with trusted colleagues about women's health issues helped participants navigate potentially challenging, yet normal, life stages.

#### *4.4.4.2 Relationships with clients*

Central to workplace relationships were the interactions and connections with clients. This sub-theme had two associated minor themes: 1. Part of a community and 2. Feeling appreciated and respected.

Client relationships were a positive factor for many veterinarians' experiences in clinical practice. Participants reported the importance of the strong relationships they had developed over time

with their clients. These connections were often based on trust, loyalty, and, in some cases, friendship, providing an overlap between their professional and personal lives:

*I enjoy that human interaction. I really enjoy that [...] I've got to know a lot of the clients very well and almost quite intimately. A lot of clients will just really open up about their whole lives. Yeah, so a few of them I would consider a friend. They always request to see me, and I love catching up with them. (V11)*

#### 4.4.4.2.1 Part of a community

These positive client relationships were a source of both social and professional fulfilment for participants, resulting in enjoyable and emotionally rich work experiences. Strong client relationships contributed to veterinarians feeling part of the community and provided a sense of loyalty to the practice. For example, V13, who works in a rural mixed practice, expressed: *"I'm only here because of my relationships with my clients, the community and my staff"*.

Furthermore, veterinarians working in urban companion animal practice spoke of developing strong positive client relationships, which connected them to the community, especially those who had worked in the same clinic for several years:

*For me, I've stayed in the same clinic for over a decade; I know my clients very well. I've got some that I'm very close with and others that I see once a year, but I feel like I'm part of a community. (V3)*

Participants in production animal practice spent a lot of time with their clients on the farm and found pleasure in building trusting, meaningful relationships with farmers. These relationships were often focused on problem-solving and supporting on-farm productivity. This gave veterinarians a strong sense of purpose, satisfaction, and value, especially when positive outcomes were achieved. Some participants discovered that their relationships with farmers extended beyond the professional sphere, leading to active involvement in the local community, which fostered a strong sense of belonging and commitment:

*I think that's what I'm really enjoying at the moment, that level of interaction with these clients (farmers). That's what I really love about it. That's what I'd find really hard about not doing clinical work. (V9)*

Veterinarians in this study who worked in equine practice discussed the importance of maintaining strong interpersonal relationships with clients, as well as with the staff working on horse properties. Participants involved in equine reproductive work visit stud farms daily during the breeding season. They described the close relationships they developed with the stud farm

staff whom they depend on for efficiency and safety. The connections and camaraderie with these workers were particularly noted as being an important part of their job satisfaction:

*I very much enjoy working with the hands-on people on the (horse) farm. Those are the people I like the most. You spend more time with those people than you do with your family at this time of the year. (V8)*

#### 4.4.4.2.2 Feeling valued and respected

When participants felt valued and respected by their clients, it strengthened the veterinarian–client relationship and contributed to their sense of self-efficacy and overall well-being. Mutual respect fostered open and constructive discussions, contributing to enhanced job satisfaction:

*People are happy to see me turn up and they appreciate me. They will listen to my opinion, they will question it, and I will have to justify it, but at the same time, they value and respect my opinion. The appreciation from the owner is very important. (V19)*

#### 4.4.4.3 Relationships with animals

This sub-theme was associated with one minor theme: the human-animal bond. An interest in, and love of, animals were motivating factors in participants' career choices and remained significant factors in their daily job satisfaction. Veterinarians experienced pleasure in working with animals, and they often developed meaningful relationships with their patients. This unique element of a veterinarian's career was a source of pleasure, enjoyment and engagement for many experienced clinicians:

*What I love about going to work each day is the horses, primarily. I really enjoy working with horses, especially those who have neat personalities. It's so cool helping them, and you feel like some of them appreciate it. It's very anthropomorphic, but you do get a little relationship with the patient, so you fix the problem and send it home. I get a lot of joy from that. (V19)*

Veterinarians in this study experienced intrinsic rewards such as positive emotions and personal growth through their interactions with animals during clinical work. Participants derived a sense of purpose from improving animal health and welfare, as well as increasing animal productivity, across various areas of clinical practice. Some felt that helping animals was the primary focus of their job:

*That's really all it's ever been about, for me, the animals [...] I think that making their life better is all that really matters. (V14)*

For some veterinarians in this study, the connection and interaction with animals in their work went beyond a transactional clinical relationship. Some participants discussed the mental health benefits of working with animals and the calming effect they had on them:

*If I'm having a very bad day – anxiety or depression-wise – I just have to see a waggy tail, and I feel better. (V15)*

#### 4.4.4.3.1 The human-animal bond

The relationship clients had with their animals was important to participants, and many found this relationship to be a source of interest and motivation in their work. Some veterinarians described how they endeavoured to deepen their understanding of the human-animal relationship to deliver the best care possible. Many participants felt a sense of pride in their role as advocates for animals, knowing that their efforts improved the well-being of both patients and clients. Participants also discussed how their clinical interventions positively impacted the human-animal bond, which they found to be a source of professional satisfaction:

*It's definitely the animals, and along with them come the humans. So, I am curious about their story. I remain curious about what this relationship brings. So, I guess, for me, it is the animal and the animal companionship or the animal-human bond. I think that, for me, is very fulfilling. (V15)*

Some participants believed that the human-animal bond was at the core of their clinical work and shared how they supported different types of bonds between clients and animals, depending on the animal's purpose. Participants mentioned various client-animal relationships in which they played a significant role, for example, a beloved family pet, a valued working animal, an animal used for recreation and sport, or a production animal. Many reported the importance of understanding the relationship the client had with their animals. This, in turn, informed the level of veterinary care they provided and strengthened their relationship with the client:

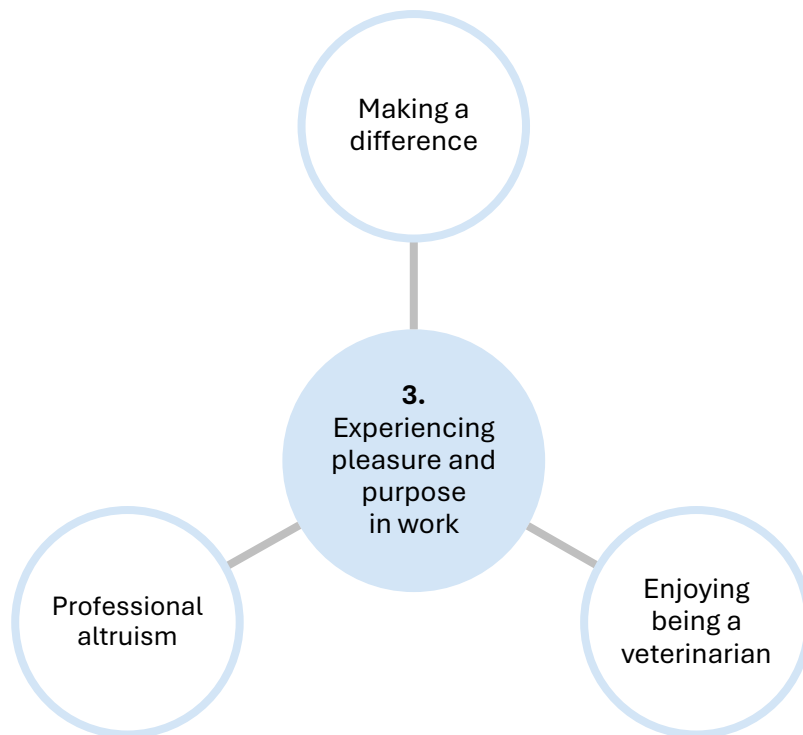
*So, when I meet people who love animals and see what that animal means to them, that relationship is hugely important to me. (V17)*

#### 4.4.5 Theme 3: Experiencing pleasure and purpose in clinical work

The previous theme, Building Trusting Relationships at Work, demonstrated the importance of teamwork, colleagues, and clients in thriving as veterinarians. This third theme highlights other aspects of a clinical veterinarian's career that provide participants with pleasure and purpose. The main factors are grouped into three sub-themes: making a difference, enjoying being a vet, and professional altruism, as shown in Figure 4.4.

**Figure 4.4**

*Theme 3: Experiencing pleasure and purpose in clinical work and the three nested sub-themes*



#### *4.4.5.1 Making a difference*

The sub-theme, making a difference, is associated with one underlying minor theme: positive outcomes. Contributing meaningfully to the lives of people and their animals was a key source of pleasure and purpose for veterinarians in this study. This theme was mainly focused on the clinical work itself. Participants acknowledged the important role animals play in society and found their work meaningful and fulfilling when they could help animals and clients:

*I think the main thing for me is that real feeling like you're having an impact: you're actually making a difference to people and their animals. (V4)*

##### *4.4.5.1.1 Positive outcomes*

As expected, a key aspect of veterinarians' job satisfaction stemmed from successful clinical outcomes, particularly when patients were very unwell and made a good recovery. Participants described feeling a sense of achievement and increased confidence when cases went well and had positive outcomes. They took pride in contributing to the health and welfare of their patients, and the thanks they received from clients when cases went well reinforced their job satisfaction:

*It makes me proud and happy when it's a genuine life-threatening situation, and you've literally saved the animal's life, and the client is so grateful. So, that's definitely very satisfying. (V11)*

However, participants viewed positive outcomes not only as successful clinical results. Rather, it was the client's appreciation that truly mattered. Participants spoke of managing sad and emotional situations when animals died or had poor clinical outcomes. However, they still felt a sense of fulfilment and achievement if the client felt satisfied. One veterinarian recalled the sad loss of an elderly man's dog, which was managed with great care and compassion. The owner's appreciation provided her with a deep sense of purpose in her work:

*That's why we do this – that's why we do this job – just those relationships and how important we are in those people's lives. (V15)*

Furthermore, some participants derived much of their pleasure from everyday experiences and small wins in clinical practice:

*I still get joy from driving around or the satisfaction of a wound that's healed nicely or an abscess that I've pared out [...] It's all the micro joys, it's not the big successes. (V19)*

#### 4.4.5.2 *Enjoying being a veterinarian*

The sub-theme, enjoying being a veterinarian, is underpinned by two minor themes: 1. A clinical career as a calling and 2. Variety of the job. Veterinarians in this study shared various aspects of being a clinical veterinarian that provided them with purpose and pleasure. This theme captures what being a veterinarian meant to participants personally and professionally.

##### 4.4.5.2.1 *A clinical career as a calling*

For many participants, being a trusted and valued professional provided them with a sense of responsibility, belonging, and fulfilment, which validated their role as veterinarians. Being part of the veterinary profession that was important to, and valued by, society provided them with an identity and career that they were proud of:

*I always say I love being a vet. I love my job. I have thoroughly enjoyed it, and I love just being able to say that I am a vet; I'm proud of it and proud of the industry, and I love talking to other vets, and I love stupid things like seeing how the vets set up their trucks, and all those sorts of silly little things. I love it. (V12)*

Some participants expressed a deep vocational commitment to their clinical work and felt that being a clinical veterinarian was their "calling":

*I quite often say to people, I think I was put on earth to do what I do now – to be a cat and dog surgeon, because I love it. (V16)*

#### 4.4.5.2.2 Variety of the job

Many veterinarians reported that they enjoyed the variety of clinical work and the fact that every day was different:

*I have variety, so I love the fact that vets are not only GPs; we're also ophthalmologists and orthopaedic surgeons. I love being able to do surgery and diagnostics. Yeah, I do everything. (V11)*

Combining their intellectual problem-solving and critical thinking skills with hands-on practical expertise to provide care to their patients was an important part of the job for many participants:

*I like it because it's quite physical, you do things with your hands, so it's got the technical aspect. But it's also an academic job, as well. (V3)*

Participants expressed the importance of working in an environment that embraced innovation and new technologies. They appreciated the variety of diagnostic and treatment options that well-equipped clinics offered and enjoyed being able to offer high-quality patient care, which increased their job satisfaction.

Veterinarians in this study also believed that being adaptable, open to change, and embracing new ideas in clinical practice was essential for staying current, achieving job satisfaction, and maintaining longevity in the profession. Instead of perceiving change as uncomfortable and something to be avoided, participants were enthusiastic about it:

*Change excites me because it's another challenge – it's another opportunity – it's another hurdle. It's all of that. (V8)*

#### 4.4.5.3 Professional altruism

This sub-theme is associated with three minor themes: 1. Mentoring others, 2. Voluntary work for the greater good, and 3. Contributing to professional organisations. Participants reflected on the pleasure and purpose they derived from selfless commitment to helping others. Their contributions included teaching students, mentoring new graduates, supporting colleagues, supporting the wider veterinary profession, promoting animal welfare, and educating the general public. Veterinarians achieved this by engaging in unpaid or supportive roles such as mentoring, education, community service, and contributing to professional organisations. Being supported and even inspired by managers and leaders to engage in altruistic activities was recognised as

crucial. Many described their mentors as highly influential role models who helped them develop their career paths. For example, V17 expressed that, “*the people who changed my life were my mentors*”. Participants who had positive mentoring experiences throughout their careers felt a professional responsibility and a desire to mentor and support others.

#### 4.4.5.3.1 Mentoring others

Many participants derived satisfaction from supporting and sharing their knowledge with fellow veterinary professionals. They enjoyed teaching students, mentoring new graduates and interns at their clinic and supporting colleagues in the wider veterinary community. Experienced veterinarians in this study derived great pleasure from helping recent graduates advance their careers and deliver high-quality clinical care:

*I love teaching because then I know that they're going to go out and be better at what they do – better at taking care of our pets – the patients, because I did a good job – I did good at teaching. Yeah, I love that. (V14)*

Participants often had students on placement at their clinic and reported the satisfaction and enjoyment they derived from helping them learn and grow. Some felt that they made a difference in students' careers and believed that supporting them was an essential and enjoyable part of their job:

*I love the student engagement. I feel like I'm making a difference to this person. (V4)*

Participants described a deep sense of pride and satisfaction in mentoring recent graduates and interns, particularly when those they had supported went on to succeed in their clinical careers. They derived genuine pleasure from sharing their knowledge, fostering growth, and witnessing the development and confidence of younger colleagues:

*The interns bring me immense joy. I love that aspect of the job. Teaching them and watching them learn, seeing the light bulb moments as they gain confidence. (V19)*

#### 4.4.5.3.2 Voluntary work for the greater good

Some veterinarians derived pleasure from engaging in philanthropic veterinary work such as participating in community spay clinics, rehoming animals, treating wild birds, and contributing to conservation projects. Others were involved with educational outreach to schools and educating the general public. Participants described engaging in various types of volunteer work with no financial return because they cared about the cause and wanted to make a difference:

*I went around every single primary school in the area and did dog safety talks; I taught the children how to interact with dogs so they didn't get bitten, and stuff. It was cool. I loved doing that. (V11)*

Furthermore, some enjoyed sharing their knowledge and expertise with the wider community. For example, a production animal veterinarian enjoyed travelling around the country, contributing to farmer action groups, and others derived pleasure out of sharing their knowledge with the local veterinary community:

*I get a buzz out of public speaking. I really enjoy it. It's challenging, and you have to know exactly what you're talking about. I'll do talks occasionally for local vets around here. (V3)*

#### 4.4.5.3.3 Contributing to professional organisations

Many veterinarians in this study actively contributed to professional veterinary organisations by organising conference speakers, serving on executive committees, and supporting student events at the veterinary school. They saw this involvement as a way to give back to the profession — something they valued and enjoyed. Their contributions were often met with appreciation, which reinforced their sense of purpose and a sense of belonging:

*I always feel like you've got to give something back and help out the new ones coming through, I guess. Yeah, I've been on the committee a long time now, and I've got a wealth of experience and knowledge about that. It makes me feel valued – it's also nice to feel needed, I guess. (V16)*

#### 4.4.6 Theme 4: Developing a sense of mastery

The theme, developing a sense of mastery, focused on veterinarians' feelings of expertise, personal growth, and achievement within their professional environment. Participants discussed how their enthusiasm, engagement and job satisfaction stemmed from their curiosity and the desire to grow expertise in new areas:

*I still love to learn something new. That's probably my greatest pleasure, if we have a specialist vet come and teach about scanning hearts. I'm like a student again – that's probably what keeps me most engaged in what I'm doing; I just love to learn. (V7)*

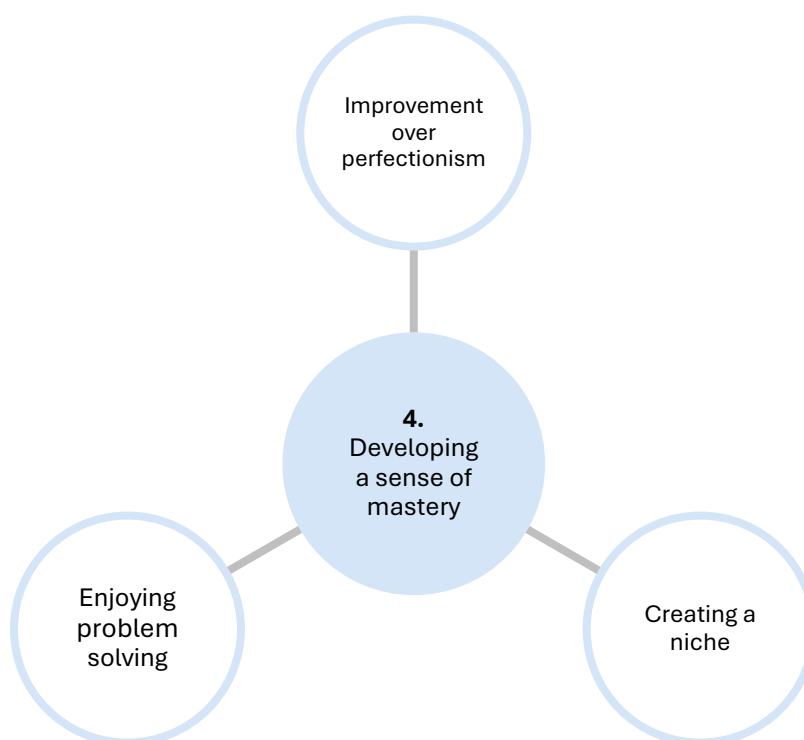
Developing a sense of mastery increased participants' confidence and proficiency, reduced their work-related stress, and provided personal satisfaction. Mastery was strongly linked to improved patient outcomes, which contributed to participants feeling valued, respected, and appreciated by clients and colleagues:

*It just went perfectly. I looked at the radiograph – I just could not have done that better... Wow, that was so awesome. The dog just healed beautifully; his elbow pain was gone. You just think, oh, that's a bit of mastery... I would have freaked out doing it years before. (V17)*

The main components of developing a sense of mastery were grouped into three sub-themes: improvement over perfectionism, creating a niche, and enjoying problem-solving, as shown in Figure 4.5.

**Figure 4.5**

*Theme 4: Developing a sense of mastery and the three nested sub-themes*



#### 4.4.6.1 *Improvement over perfectionism*

Veterinarians in this study recognised the importance of embracing personal growth rather than aiming for perfection. Many felt they had perfectionist tendencies and agreed that setting themselves extremely high standards, combined with critical self-evaluation, contributed to a fear of failure, stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion. While participants discussed the pursuit of excellence, they identified the benefits of moving away from the concept of perfection, which was described as unattainable. Instead, they talked about striving for better or continuous improvement in their work:

*Become better – absolutely. It's been my mantra – my whole life is about being better. You're never perfect, but you can always be better. It's as simple as that, but keeping the*

*why in front of me the whole time. It's about better patient care, concentrating on the patient. We're their advocate. (V17)*

Veterinarians reported enhanced well-being when switching their focus from a perfectionist mindset to the notion of always striving to do the best that they can:

*I hate that word – perfectionism, we're not aiming for that here, we're aiming to do a good job. (V7)*

Participants emphasised that reframing situations and viewing challenges as opportunities for personal growth were key to fostering a growth mindset and improving job satisfaction. Some participants engaged in targeted continuing education opportunities to develop their skills and boost their motivation. Veterinarians who reflected on their personal limitations and knowledge gaps were proactive about self-improvement:

*If there is something I feel is a weak spot for me, I like to go and find a course and learn it and then come back and apply it and practise it so that I am growing. (V19)*

Others emphasised the value of setting realistic, achievable goals to progress in clinical practice as this approach enabled veterinarians to improve professionally, become more confident, and enjoy clinical work.

#### **4.4.6.2 Creating a niche**

Finding a special area of interest or a niche within a practice was opportunistic for some, while for others it was a deliberate career plan. Participants believed that both personal motivation and workplace support for ongoing education played a crucial role in enhancing their professional efficacy. They discussed how gaining a deeper understanding of a specific clinical field increased their confidence and job satisfaction:

*Finding an area of interest in the practice that I could really foster and have support, that's really important. (V10)*

For some, developing clinical expertise in their area of interest led them to occupy a niche within their practice, such as dentistry, ophthalmology, surgery, or production animal consultancy. Some participants achieved specialist status through examination, while others identified a special interest that they pursued through targeted continuing education and, in some cases, non-specialist postgraduate qualifications.

Participants explained how having support from managers and leaders for professional development allowed them to carve out a unique area within the practice to become the designated “practice expert”. This motivated veterinarians, who felt engaged and valued. Participants spoke of having support to purchase specific equipment and flexibility to manage their schedules, which enabled them to offer a valuable targeted service within the practice:

*There’s great support from the bosses as they know what I want to do, and they’re happy for me just to book up my days and do whatever I need to do, and if I need to buy more gear [...] the equine dentistry that I do is valued, and they trust what I do. (V10)*

However, some participants had a more opportunistic approach to career advancement. For example, V3, who developed a niche in companion animal dentistry at his clinic, explained that: *“I haven’t been particularly deliberate; I’ve been more open-minded and explored opportunities as they’ve arisen”*.

This adaptable approach to career development was evident across different areas of clinical practice. When participants showed enthusiasm and initiative, they were often supported and rewarded to develop a specific area of interest within the practice. This was true for V1, who reflected: *“We didn’t really have anybody driving herd health at a practice level. So, I stuck my hand up to do that”*. As a result, her career has taken shape around the niche she moved into.

#### *4.4.6.3 Enjoying problem-solving*

This sub-theme is underpinned by three minor themes: 1. Having proficiency and confidence, 2. Teamwork, and 3. Solving ethical issues. Veterinarians in this study regarded problem-solving as a vital component of clinical practice, contributing significantly to their professional satisfaction. Effectively managing clinical challenges allowed participants to provide quality patient care and was motivational for many:

*I do enjoy solving the problem, and I do enjoy providing good care of that animal. (V15)*

Problem-solving in clinical practice satisfied participants’ intrinsic desire to help and was a source of pleasure for many:

*It’s a combination of the satisfaction of fixing the problem and the owner being happy [...] Getting that feedback is lovely. (V19)*

The successful resolution of clinical problems that improved patients’ quality of life was highly satisfying for veterinarians. They felt valued and appreciated by clients, which boosted their self-worth and well-being.

#### 4.4.6.3.1 Having proficiency and confidence

Participants agreed that having clinical proficiency and confidence in specific areas contributed to their problem-solving skills. Participants felt a sense of accomplishment and increased self-confidence when solving complex clinical problems. For example, one veterinarian described a successful but challenging calving she assisted with when supporting a recent graduate on after-hours duty. She attended the early morning call in rainy, muddy conditions but felt a profound sense of achievement and said, “*I still get that kick out of problem-solving*” (V6).

On the other hand, it was not only solving complex problems that provided participants with a sense of achievement. Many found pleasure in solving straightforward clinical issues impacting animals and clients. Although simple “quick fix” problems did not require the intellectual input of more complicated problems, they boosted participants’ self-efficacy and provided a sense of satisfaction:

*I still really get a lot of joy when they come in, and owners are really freaking out because they think the dog is dying, and it's frantic, and it's foaming at its mouth – and it's just because a bone's stuck in the roof of its mouth, and you can take it out, and then everything is fixed, and they think you're a hero.* (V14)

#### 4.4.6.3.2 Teamwork

Many participants emphasised the importance of teamwork in resolving complex clinical problems. Veterinarians agreed that problem-solving with colleagues was a particularly satisfying part of their work:

*I still just love this stuff [...] We had a cat with bladder stones, [...], but what was really cool is we were able to, with my colleagues' skills in ultrasound, see the stones and retro-pulse the urethral stone back into the bladder, and we could see it on the ultrasound as we were doing it – that was a cool day; we saw that, and we fixed it.* (V9)

#### 4.4.6.3.3 Solving ethical issues

Veterinarians were often faced with ethically challenging problems, such as clients with limited finances and animal welfare issues. These situations could be difficult to solve and lead to moral distress, a mismatch between their ethical beliefs and the care they deliver: As V10 noted: “*That can be really tough, knowing that you can do something better, but your hands are tied*”.

However, some participants described how they were able to overcome these contextual challenges and experience job satisfaction. They felt confident in embracing a spectrum of care approach, providing a flexible, tailored approach to patient care (Stull et al., 2018), rather than

focusing solely on the gold standard. This flexible problem-solving approach enabled them to offer the client appropriate and affordable options and alternatives, which was beneficial to the client, the animal, and the veterinarian's mental well-being:

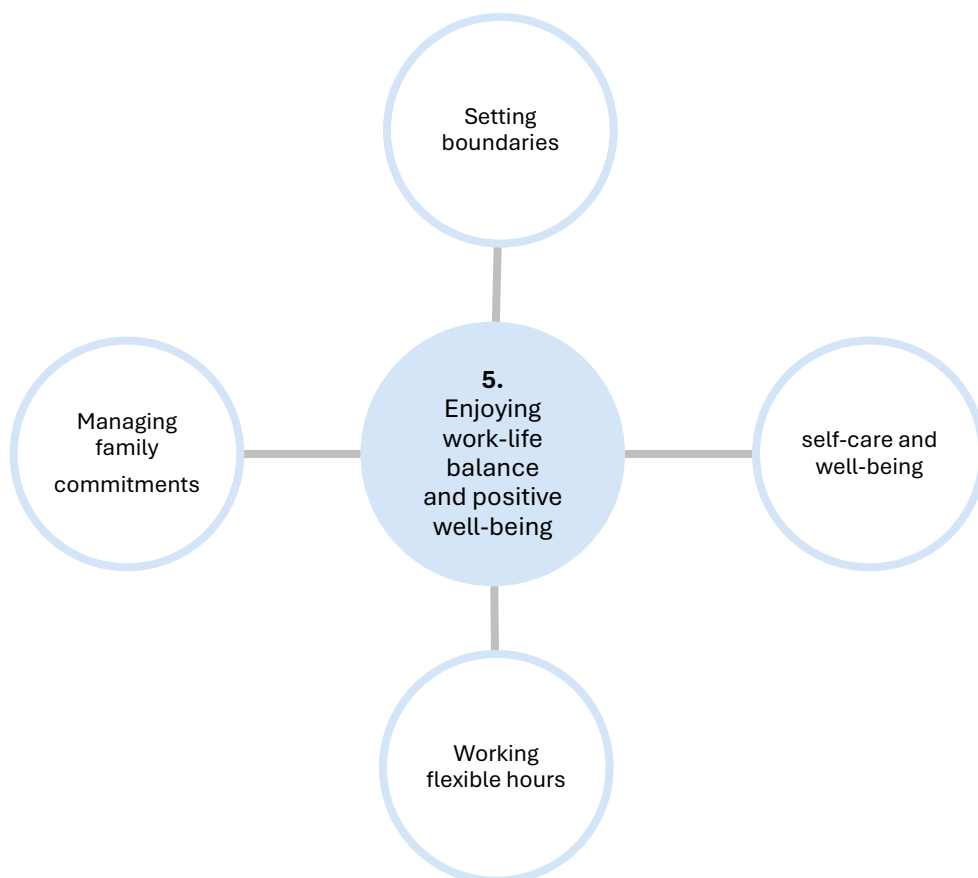
*But if they can't pay, which happens a lot in an emergency, [...] I think that's when it pays to be well-rounded. Now, what are my next options? What else can I do to make this pet better? – I don't have to only offer you gold-standard care and that's it. (V14)*

#### 4.4.7 Theme 5: Enjoying work-life balance and positive well-being

The theme of enjoying a work-life balance and promoting positive well-being had four associated sub-themes: setting boundaries, engaging in self-care, flexible working arrangements, and managing family commitments (Figure 4.6). Veterinarians recognised that managing a healthy work-life balance and positive well-being was sometimes challenging and was the responsibility of both the individual and the business.

**Figure 4.6**

*Theme 5: Enjoying a work-life balance and positive well-being and the four related sub-themes*



#### 4.4.7.1 *Setting boundaries*

Having the ability to disconnect from work and switch to a different mental state helped participants to mentally separate work and home to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Some participants found they could easily transition into a home mindset:

*When I leave work, that's it – I can turn the switch off and get into home mode. I've always felt that is a strength. (V2)*

Some, however, acknowledged the difficulties inherent in setting boundaries and stepping away from work, even within a supportive work environment:

*Work-life balance is probably a challenge for many veterinarians. Setting boundaries and saying no to things, I still find it really hard. It's a big challenge, and I know, even in a great work environment.... It's not my work that is putting any of that on me; it's me putting that on me. (V4)*

For others, even something as simple as changing out of work clothes at the end of the workday helped them mentally transition from work to personal life. Participants believed that setting boundaries, especially when handling constant demanding clients, was important for maintaining a work-life balance.

Furthermore, the mental engagement with work-related issues persisted for some veterinarians, even when they were physically away from work:

*I can check out on the weekends, but I'm always trying to think and solve problems, even subconsciously. It doesn't completely go away when I'm not at work. (V3)*

This highlights the importance of a veterinarian's self-awareness and implementation of effective self-care strategies.

#### 4.4.7.2 *Engaging in self-care and well-being*

This sub-theme was associated with six minor themes: 1. Self-awareness, 2. Self-compassion, 3. Personal well-being toolkit, 4. Personal support network, 5. Team support, and 6. Professional mental health support. Participants acknowledged that working in clinical practice was demanding and that establishing self-care strategies was important for maintaining personal well-being:

*Working in clinical practice does take a personal toll, and that's where the reality of looking after yourself first – that self-care and that self-compassion piece. (V15)*

#### 4.4.7.2.1 Self-awareness

Veterinarians in this study agreed that they often dwelt on negative outcomes and were highly self-critical. However, they discussed various personal attributes that contributed to their success. Self-awareness was considered an important capability that fostered participants' personal growth and positive well-being. By having a better understanding of their thoughts, emotions and values, participants were able to identify areas of their lives that needed attention, such as being less self-judgmental and irrational. Likewise, participants who embraced an accepting and optimistic outlook, focusing on positive aspects of their lives, experienced mental health benefits and higher job satisfaction:

*I'm programmed to think, what did I do wrong? Why was that a bad outcome? I know that now. I guess that's self-awareness that I've developed, and that's what makes me more rational [...] I think a more positive outlook is probably what keeps me appreciating the good and rolling with the bad. (V7)*

#### 4.4.7.2.2 Self-compassion

Some participants reported being self-compassionate when confronted with challenging situations or when clinical cases did not go as well as hoped. Participants spoke of having realistic expectations of themselves and embracing poor outcomes as opportunities to learn and grow:

*Sometimes you totally screw-up, but you just move on and learn from it. I know I'm not perfect, and I don't really expect myself to know everything and to fix everything because you can't. (V17)*

Nevertheless, they acknowledged the importance of self-kindness and, through a more positive lens, interpreted mistakes and suboptimal outcomes as chances to learn and enhance their performance.

Furthermore, self-acceptance enabled participants to appreciate themselves for who they were and to understand that everyone makes mistakes. Participants made comments around being fallible humans. This attitude protected participants from negative self-talk and cultivated self-belief. For example, V7, who feared making mistakes, would “*wake up in the middle of the night thinking about something I've done wrong*” but “*training my mind to think more positively and to be more accepting of myself and people*” helped their mental health and well-being.

Integrating gratitude as a self-care strategy in their daily routine was helpful for some participants. They found that actively recognising the positive features within themselves, in others, and in various situations was instrumental in developing an optimistic and self-empowering mindset:

*Actually saying...what I'm grateful for [...] 'you did a good job with that' – rather than 'oh well you could have done that better'. (V4)*

#### 4.4.7.2.3 Personal well-being toolkit

Participants spoke of various physical and mindful activities, creative hobbies, and interests they enjoyed outside work that contributed to their well-being toolkit and provided them with a balanced approach to life:

*I love woodwork, [...] and doing things that take you out of that world. They call it mindfulness now, I guess, where you don't think about work. (V17)*

Participants also mentioned that reading and cooking helped them unwind after a busy day in the clinic. Others enjoyed walking with their dogs in nature as a way to relax, recharge, and keep fit. On the other hand, many included intense exercise and physical activity as part of their self-care and wellness toolkit. Participants mentioned mountain biking, running, gym classes and team sports as activities that kept them physically and mentally healthy, and some particularly enjoyed exercising in the company of others. Others replenished their energy through larger community-based social gatherings and cultural activities:

*I've been part of the theatre [...] singing, dancing, and being sort of part of a big team [...] I'm definitely an extroverted person, so just having those social connections, community involvement and events [...], is always recharging. (V4)*

#### 4.4.7.2.4 Personal support network

Many participants felt that the support they received from family and friends significantly influenced their well-being:

*We've got a really close group of friends that meet monthly, and that's a big part of my life. (V3)*

Participants appreciated having an understanding, caring personal network to share experiences, seek advice, and receive emotional support. Many participants mentioned that their partner provided significant support for their careers. Having a network of supportive people outside of work was important for participants' well-being and overall career longevity:

*If you've good people around you, then you're okay. (V1)*

Talking about clinical problems and interpersonal issues with veterinary friends and family helped participants work through challenging situations:

*Support is the thing that gets me through [...] I always have the ability to call my friends or call my brother. So, often having someone who you can just phone and talk through a case.* (V5)

#### 4.4.7.2.5 Team support

Strong, supportive relationships with colleagues played a vital role in participants' well-being. Veterinarians described their colleagues and teammates not only as co-workers but also as friends. These trusting, meaningful relationships fostered a sense of belonging, emotional safety, and enjoyment in the workplace. Some veterinarians expressed a strong connection with their colleagues, saying they “*love the team*” and talked about the close, meaningful relationships they developed. Participants described feeling genuinely cared for by colleagues and teammates who provided both practical and emotional support, as well as fun:

*It's like a family here. We're very close. I know all their details, and they know all my details. We are quite open with everything. Some of my colleagues are also my best friends.* (V11)

Veterinarians in this study indicated that positive team relationships were crucial for maintaining well-being in clinical practice. Several participants emphasised the importance of a cohesive and supportive team for retention, describing it as “*the key to longevity*”. Others spoke of the intrinsic motivation they got from their team:

*This is an amazing team, and I'm so inspired by them.* (V6)

It appeared that meaningful team relationships acted as a buffer against the stresses of clinical work and were central to participants' sense of well-being and fulfilment.

#### 4.4.7.2.6 Professional mental health support

Some participants demonstrated proactive commitment to addressing and managing their psychological well-being by seeking professional mental health support. They discussed how they navigated challenging periods of their careers with the assistance of professionals, including clinical psychologists, counsellors, employment assistance programmes (EAPs), and general practitioners. Participants who received professional psychological support found it helpful:

*The doctor was awesome [...] I also did some EAP sessions, which were amazing.* (V8)

However, some avoided talking about mental health issues because they felt stigma around the topic existed in the veterinary workplace. Additionally, V4 explained: “*I think that it's still more of a taboo sort of subject than it should be*”.

#### 4.4.7.3 Flexible working

The sub-theme of flexible working has three underpinning minor themes: 1. Part-time work, 2. Compressed workweek, and 3. Team support. A workplace that supported flexible work hours to suit veterinarians' individual life stages and circumstances significantly influenced their job satisfaction and engagement. Participants reported that flexible work arrangements, which allowed them to manage personal and work commitments, helped them to thrive in clinical practice.

##### 4.4.7.3.1 Part-time work

These arrangements included working flexible reduced hours, a staged return to work after maternity leave, or a set part-time role. Businesses that accommodated participants' individual needs for flexibility were highly valued:

*I was completely backed 100% per cent, just to go back to however much I was able to do, which was about three days a week [...] Here I was with kids going; I've got this awesome business that supports me being able to do part-time, and I can start and finish when I need to [...], and that was great. (V1)*

Providing tailored, flexible work hours, such as part-time work for a designated period, was important for veterinarians to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Veterinarians had different reasons for requesting flexible work hours. For example, one participant who worked in dairy practice appreciated the businesses support for a temporary part-time role. He explained he was going to work “*three days a week, just for 6 months, [...] I've decided I want to take some time to chill out with them (young children) before my eldest goes to school*”. (V5)

##### 4.4.7.3.2 Compressed work week

Some veterinarians enjoyed working compressed hours (such as a forty-hour week compressed into four 10-hour days), which enabled them to have a free day every week and, in some cases, a three-day weekend. Participants agreed that this flexibility supported a more balanced life and enabled them to engage in pursuits that boosted positive well-being:

*I work four days a week – I manage to fit a full-time job into four long days [...] I love having a three-day weekend. For me, it works perfectly (V3).*

##### 4.4.7.3.3 Team support enables flexibility

Having a mutually supportive team also allowed participants some flexibility in choosing their working days and hours, which was an arrangement they valued:

*When people are away sick, I'll cover, or if they want time, I'll cover, and they do the same for me. We've got a really good team here, and we pick and choose [our workdays] – we make it work for us. (V11)*

Participants mentioned that another valuable type of flexibility was having a veterinarian designated to do administration duties for the day, who was readily accessible and could respond swiftly to assist with clinical work if needed. Participants found that this flexible approach helped reduce stress and prevent overload during emergencies or busy periods. It also contributed to greater job satisfaction and well-being:

*Having that sort of floating vet that can jump in if a hit-by-car comes in or just getting behind in your consults, [...] that's where we have the admin vet; they can maybe pick up a couple of consults so you can catch up sort of thing. Yeah, having flexibility is definitely key. (V11)*

Participants appreciated other types of flexibility, such as the opportunity to travel and work overseas, while their jobs were kept open for their return. Veterinarians felt that this arrangement was valuable for retention, as the travel was out of their system, and they felt more inclined to “*put roots down*”.

#### **4.4.7.4 Managing family commitments**

Veterinarians who had children described that successfully managing their family and work commitments was critical for them to thrive. However, some participants explained that balancing their roles as parents and clinicians was difficult:

*One thing I found really difficult is the whole mum versus vet thing; I've had years of struggling with feeling like I'm not doing either job properly. I know a lot of other women who feel the same. (V11)*

Despite the challenges, veterinarians who felt well-supported by their workplace and had supportive personal networks were able to achieve a healthy work-life balance and enjoy their work. They received support from their employers to work flexible part-time hours and adopted various childcare approaches that aligned with their values and needs. Participants described a variety of effective childcare arrangements that included their partners, friends, au pairs, nannies, childcare centres, and kindergartens. Participants agreed that flexible childcare enabled them to manage work commitments effectively and reduced stress:

*We have been really lucky with our childminder; she's a home-based childminder; if I ring her and say I'm stuck at work, she'll happily keep her for another hour and feed her. So, that makes a huge difference. (V7)*

Having supportive partners and family members was vital for participants to manage work and family commitments and remain positive and engaged in their work. Many felt they would have struggled to cope with the demands of clinical practice and caring for a child without the support from family, friends and partners:

*I've had really amazing support. My partner has been an amazing support. I couldn't do it without a supportive partner. (V1)*

## 4.5 Discussion

The present study adopts a positive perspective, examining the factors that support veterinarians in thriving in clinical practice through in-depth, semi-structured interviews.

An RTA of the veterinarians' narratives generated five main themes related to their positive experiences in clinical practice. The first main theme, feeling valued and having a sense of belonging at work, also emerged across the other four themes: building positive relationships at work, experiencing pleasure and purpose in clinical work, developing a sense of mastery, and enjoying work-life balance and positive well-being. Together, these interconnected themes represented a combination of workplace and personal factors, highlighting the dual responsibility of the individual and the business to achieve successful and thriving clinical veterinary careers. The findings of this study align with SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which suggests that fulfilling three psychological needs—competence (mastery), relatedness (team belonging and community connection), and autonomy (job control and decision latitude)—enhances veterinarians' self-motivation and well-being.

### 4.5.1 Feeling valued and having a sense of belonging

The theme of feeling valued and experiencing a sense of belonging was an essential element that enabled veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. Consistent with previous research (AAHA, 2024; Begeny et al., 2018; Clise et al., 2021; King, 2021), veterinarians in the present study felt valued when their contributions and efforts were recognised and appreciated by colleagues, managers and clients. Feeling and being valued strengthened a sense of belonging among participants and were linked to extrinsic and intrinsic work environment factors.

Extrinsic factors, such as salary, after-hours compensation, share in the business, and flexible work hours, represented tangible benefits provided by the employer. These factors not only contributed to job satisfaction but also demonstrated employer investment and fairness, reinforcing participants' sense of being appreciated. Intrinsic factors included recognition,

appreciation, autonomy, personal growth, career opportunities, and support for emotional, professional and organisational challenges. These intrinsic rewards fostered engagement, personal fulfilment, a deep sense of value, and belonging.

The present study found that some extrinsic factors, such as flexible work arrangements, also increased participants' sense of being valued and job satisfaction. This finding contrasts with Herzberg's (2008) two-factor theory of motivation, which proposes that extrinsic (hygiene) factors merely prevent dissatisfaction and only intrinsic factors provide motivation in the workplace. Intrinsic factors still emerged as key motivators in the present study, yet the findings suggested that some extrinsic elements can foster engagement and positive well-being rather than just prevent discontent. Herzberg's theory has also been applied to the nursing sector, where interpersonal work relationships were classified as an extrinsic, hygiene factor (Alshmemri et al., 2017). In contrast, the present study found that relationships with team members and colleagues fostered belonging and were often viewed by participants as a motivational factor. Clise et al. (2021) also found that meaningful feedback and gratitude, particularly from colleagues and clients, were valued more than financial rewards. This is significant, as a lack of recognition and appreciation has been cited as a primary reason veterinarians leave or consider leaving their jobs (AAHA, 2024; Robinson et al., 2019), and recognition has been identified as one of five key factors for a healthy workplace (Grawitch et al., 2006). Given these insights, it is recommended that veterinary workplaces offer both extrinsic factors, such as flexible work arrangements, and intrinsic rewards, including personal growth opportunities, and both formal and informal recognition. Together, these measures can enhance veterinarians' sense of value and potentially improve retention in clinical practice.

Veterinarians in the present study who experienced a strong sense of belonging in the workplace had positive well-being and thrived in clinical practice. Consistent with these findings, Bell et al. (2019) identified job fit as an essential factor for veterinarians' success in clinical practice and career longevity. Participants in the present research reported experiencing good person-organisation fit when their personal values and beliefs aligned with those of the workplace, and when both their own needs and those of the organisation were mutually fulfilled (Kristof, 1996). This included matching their ethical beliefs, welfare views, standards of practice, and personal views on work-life balance with the workplace vision and culture. Furthermore, the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) suggests that job fit can evolve over time through job crafting (Tims et al., 2013), and a good fit is associated with increased satisfaction and job commitment. Thus, when the fit is strong, veterinarians are more likely to feel satisfied, perform well, and remain

in their roles. A values mismatch between veterinarians and their workplace can negatively impact career satisfaction, emphasising the importance of a strong sense of fit (King, 2021).

In addition, the current study found that building trusting relationships with colleagues and team members fostered a sense of belonging, making participants feel valued, respected, accepted, included, and supported in their workplace. This aligns with the concept of job embeddedness described by Mitchell et al. (2001), which highlighted the critical role of both workplace and community connections, along with perceived fit, in enhancing individuals' intention to stay.

#### 4.5.2 Building positive relationships at work

Positive relationships with colleagues at work were highlighted as a key source of well-being among veterinarians in the present study. Participants reported deriving satisfaction and enjoyment from positive interactions and connections with clients, colleagues, and team members, which contributed positively to their mental well-being. The psychological benefits of positive interpersonal relationships have been well documented (Ryff, 1989) and are considered an essential human need (Maslow, 1943). Furthermore, relationships are one of the domains of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing (see Chapter 2) that formed the basis for the veterinary model of eudaimonic well-being proposed by Cake et al. (2015).

Participants established trust among their colleagues through shared values and goals, thereby fostering collaboration, motivation, friendships, and overall well-being. Similarly, Cake et al. (2015) identified social connections as an essential element of eudaimonic well-being in veterinary work. Furthermore, Clise et al. (2021) reported that 16% of veterinarians mentioned workplace relationships as a source of enjoyment in the profession. These authors found that client relationships were the most frequently cited source of pleasure, followed by relationships with animals, and, lastly, relationships with colleagues and the team. While their study did not provide insight into the nature of these relationships, the present study offers a more in-depth understanding of veterinarians' workplace relationships.

The present study concurs with Irwin et al. (2025), who reported that team civility is a strong predictor of job satisfaction and commitment in clinical practice. It also showed that collective trust (Bunjak et al., 2021) fostered psychologically safe teams, "a shared belief that it is safe to take interpersonal risks" (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350) and positive well-being in veterinary workplaces. These findings are consistent with Volk et al. (2022), who reported that veterinarians' well-being was enhanced when they felt a sense of belonging in a safe environment with a high level of trust. Furthermore, McKay and Vaisman (2023) underscored the critical role of veterinary

leaders in cultivating a safe clinic culture and reported that veterinarians working in psychologically safe workplaces were less likely to leave.

Although it was not the focus of the present research, some participants expressed concern about the impact of menopause on their clinical careers. They highlighted the importance of having a safe and supportive environment where they could talk openly about women's health issues. Feeling supported and having access to resources to help manage the physical and mental health effects of perimenopause, menopause, and other women's health issues was considered important. This finding echoes the results of a British menopause study conducted by the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (Barton & Judson, 2020). Despite this need, women's health often remains a taboo topic in the workplace, and many professional women suffer in silence due to fear of negative responses from managers or colleagues (BMA, 2020).

Building positive relationships with clients and their animals contributed to participants' job satisfaction, aligning with recent research (Irwin et al., 2025). Veterinarians reported feeling a sense of belonging and embeddedness in the community, which contributed to their sense of job commitment, especially when clients appreciated their efforts. While Pohl et al. (2022) highlighted client interactions as a potential source of stress, Duncan et al. (2024) found that experienced farm veterinarians built meaningful, trusting relationships with farmers, aligning with this study's findings. Additionally, previous research associated effective client interactions with practice success and improved veterinary retention in practice (Kanara & Werner, 2012). Participants who understood and validated the strong bond between clients and their animals experienced increased job satisfaction.

#### 4.5.3 Experiencing pleasure and an evolving purpose in clinical work

Participants in the present study identified making a difference in the lives of people and animals as a key source of job satisfaction and fulfilment, consistent with previous research (Clise et al., 2021; Figley & Roop, 2006; Morabito et al., 2025; Shibly et al., 2014; Wallace, 2019). Some participants who described their clinical work as a vocation or a calling experienced positive well-being and were satisfied with their work. They expressed a strong passion, dedication and loyalty to their clinical careers. Similarly, Yoon et al. (2017) found that physicians who viewed their work as a calling experienced greater purpose, well-being, career satisfaction, and clinical commitment, and were less prone to burnout. Others enjoyed the variety and challenge of clinical work, an experience previously noted in the literature (Robinson et al., 2019; Wallace, 2019).

A key finding in the present study was that veterinarians' sense of purpose evolved over time. They derived pleasure and purpose from helping animals and clients, but as they gained experience, their focus shifted towards supporting others in the profession to learn and grow. Participants valued mentoring new graduates, teaching veterinary students, and educating the public; viewing these as essential aspects of their job. Veterinarians' desire to teach others has also been reported previously (Clise et al., 2021), but the findings of the present study may have been more prominent due to the richness and depth provided by the qualitative interview method, in contrast to traditional survey techniques. The veterinarians in the present study found supporting and mentoring colleagues to be a rewarding experience, with gratitude from those they mentored boosting their sense of self-worth.

#### 4.5.4 Developing a sense of mastery

Developing a sense of mastery through professional growth, accomplishments, and self-actualisation was found to be an important factor contributing to veterinarians' work enjoyment and positive well-being. While these findings align with previous studies (Cake et al., 2015; Clise et al., 2021; Wallace, 2019), the importance of acquiring a sense of mastery by focusing on self-improvement, rather than striving for perfection, was a key finding in the present study.

Participants recognised that perfectionism can be prevalent among veterinarians. Consistent with the profile of some veterinarians in the current study, Armitage-Chan and May (2018) highlighted that perfectionism tends to be more pronounced in veterinarians who adopt a diagnosis-focused professional identity. However, some participants believed that setting themselves and others excessively high standards and being highly self-critical could result in poor mental health, increased anxiety, and depression. This agrees with the concept of maladaptive perfectionism described by Oxtoby (2018), which has been shown to result in negative psychological health outcomes (Clarke & Knights, 2018; Oxtoby, 2018), impostor syndrome (Kogan et al., 2020), and moral distress in veterinarians (Crane et al., 2015). Perhaps as an attempt to mitigate these risks, participants described how they tried to set realistic goals for themselves and others. This enabled them to enjoy their work, improve, and develop without the burden of perfectionism.

This approach to professional growth aligns with embracing a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Veterinarians in the present study who developed a growth mindset viewed challenges, mistakes, and unexpected outcomes as opportunities to learn, consistent with a more challenge-focused professional identity (Armitage-Chan & May, 2018). They considered what went wrong and why, and by taking proactive steps to improve, cultivated a sense of mastery and positive well-being.

Similarly, Whittington et al. (2017) demonstrated a link between a growth mindset and positive well-being in veterinary students. The authors reported that a growth mindset could be fostered in students by providing process-oriented feedback and focusing on goals rather than comparisons.

Creating an area of specific expertise or a niche within clinical practice emerged as an important factor for job satisfaction and thriving among veterinarians in the present study, a finding that has not been widely reported. Participants who became the go-to expert in a particular veterinary field felt highly respected and valued by colleagues and clients. Building a niche was sometimes opportunistic (filling existing gaps in the practice), or intentional (pursuing a passion). Regardless of the path, veterinarians who developed their own niche through mastery experienced professional fulfilment, a strong sense of value and commitment to their work.

Developing a niche in practice reflects an intrinsic aspiration and aligns with fulfilling the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). According to the SDT, support for and satisfaction of these needs are essential components of personal growth and well-being (Ryan et al., 2006). For example, a veterinarian who developed a niche in dentistry reported enhanced competence through learning, increased autonomy in decision-making, and stronger relationships with colleagues and clients. Therefore, supporting veterinarians by providing them with autonomy and the necessary resources to develop a special interest could enhance their work engagement, satisfaction, and commitment, while benefitting the business.

Many veterinarians in this study found that developing mastery enabled them to solve problems more effectively, which provided both purpose and pleasure. They enjoyed not only solving complicated clinical problems but also managing ethically challenging situations. For example, when clients' financial constraints prevented gold-standard care, participants reported that the spectrum of care approach was a satisfying way to solve the problem by providing a flexible, tailored approach to patient care (Stull et al., 2018). Veterinarians considered medical, financial, and contextual factors to provide treatment options that suited the client's circumstances and the patient's needs. Consistent with the findings from previous research (Warman et al., 2023), this helped the participants navigate ethical issues, reduce moral distress, and support positive well-being.

#### 4.5.5 Enjoying work-life balance and positive well-being

Establishing a healthy work-life balance was a critical factor enabling veterinarians in this study to thrive. However, maintaining balance was acknowledged both as a challenge and a shared responsibility that required individual effort and support from the workplace. Setting clear boundaries between work and home life, being self-aware of emotional needs, and implementing self-care strategies to manage stress were important personal factors that helped veterinarians manage a balanced life. Reflective self-awareness was highlighted as a crucial personal resource that enabled participants to manage their well-being and achieve a better work-life balance effectively. Self-awareness empowered veterinarians to recognise their emotions at a given time, to know their strengths and weaknesses, and to be mindful of behaviours that had followed certain feelings in the past. This critical capability was key to veterinarians maintaining positive mental health and aligns with the findings of Cake et al. (2015), who proposed that self-awareness was an enabler of eudaimonic well-being and a central element of new graduate employability (Martin Cake et al., 2019).

Engaging in physical, mindful, and social activities outside work also helped veterinarians in the present study to recharge and enjoy a healthy and balanced life. These out-of-work activities also connected them to the community, creating a sense of belonging which is a key element of job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Workplace facilitation of veterinarians' work-life balance included offering flexible work arrangements such as part-time hours, compressed work weeks, and job sharing. When veterinarians, especially those with family commitments, had work schedules that aligned with their needs, they felt valued, supported and enjoyed their work. This highlights the importance of tailored flexibility at work in achieving greater job satisfaction and commitment to practice. Furthermore, providing workplace support to pursue personal interests, hobbies, and community involvement may increase job embeddedness and intention to stay in a job (Mitchell et al., 2001). These results suggest that a flexible, dual approach to work-life balance can enhance veterinarians' well-being, job satisfaction, and work engagement, which is beneficial for the individual and the business.

#### 4.6 Summary

The thriving of experienced veterinarians in clinical practice was found to be a multifactorial phenomenon dependent on the interaction between workplace and personal factors. The findings of this study demonstrate the complex and nuanced nature of thriving described in the rich, in-depth descriptions of veterinarians' lived experiences of clinical practice. Although every

veterinarian's narrative of thriving in their clinical career was personal, the key factors aligned with Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT, which postulates that humans are intrinsically motivated when their needs for relatedness, autonomy, and competence are met.

Veterinarians who were strongly embedded in their workplaces and the community thrived. They experienced a strong sense of belonging through a good person-organisation fit and felt valued by colleagues and clients. They were embedded in the community and were part of a supportive, psychologically safe team. A sense of mastery also supported thriving, including when a growth mindset in a safe culture enabled participants to create a niche within the practice. Participants experienced a sense of thriving through autonomous involvement in meaningful work, particularly when it contributed to the well-being of animals and their clients. Furthermore, veterinarians' sense of purpose evolved as they gained experience. Over time, their focus extended beyond helping animals and clients to include mentoring recent graduates, contributing to the wider profession, educating the public, and engaging in philanthropic work. These activities became important sources of fulfilment in their careers. A healthy work-life balance was an important factor in veterinarians' ability to thrive in clinical practice. Those who were supported through flexible work arrangements, clear work-home boundaries, help with managing family commitments, and encouragement to prioritise self-care reported greater happiness and greater loyalty to their workplace.

Thriving in clinical practice resulted from both individual and workplace efforts, occurring during day-to-day work moments as well as exceptional, memorable times. Thriving veterinarians described a strong sense of enthusiasm and ongoing personal growth, fostering both career fulfilment and long-term sustainability. When veterinarians felt valued, had strong, supportive workplace relationships, found purpose and meaning in their work, developed mastery, and maintained a healthy work-life balance, they were more likely to thrive and remain committed to their practice.

## Chapter 5: Study 2

# Insights from new and recent graduates in clinical practice

### 5.1 Overview

This chapter examines the experiences and perceptions of job satisfaction and thriving among a cohort of early-career veterinarians in clinical practice and explores the research question:

What factors do new and recent graduate veterinarians, who have less than 3 years of clinical experience, perceive as important for their transition into, and thriving within, clinical practice?

This question was addressed using one-on-one qualitative semi-structured interviews, and themes were identified using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) as outlined in Chapter 3.

The introduction provides a brief review of the literature on transitioning into clinical practice and the early years of a new graduate veterinarian's career. The methods section for this chapter includes participant selection, interview technique, data analysis techniques and the ethical considerations for this study. This is followed by the results of an in-depth analysis of the factors that influence the ability of new and recent graduates to thrive in clinical practice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings and a brief conclusion.

### 5.2 Introduction

The transition from university to veterinary practice is a critical and challenging phase of a veterinarian's career (Allister, 2020; Gilling & Parkinson, 2009; Kittisiam, 2025; Rhind et al., 2011). Early-career veterinarians are at greater risk of burnout and poor mental health compared to their more experienced colleagues (Volk et al., 2018). New graduates must rapidly adapt to the demands of clinical work, build professional relationships, and manage the practical, emotional, and ethical challenges of the role, all of which add stress (Morabito et al., 2025; Reinhard, 2023a).

Veterinary schools aim to produce graduates who have achieved day one competencies and an appropriate level of training to enable them to practise safely and effectively in clinical practice. (Scott-Orr et al., 2023). However, there is often a gap between veterinarians' ability to practise independently upon graduation and real-world expectations of their competencies.

Unlike medical graduates, who must embark upon a supervised, structured hospital internship year, veterinarians graduate fully licensed to practise with no formal additional training. Most new veterinary graduates do not feel fully prepared, technically or professionally, to work independently and depend on their first employer to bridge this gap (Gates, McLachlan, et al., 2021; Gilling & Parkinson, 2009). They require additional training and support to develop both clinical and non-technical capabilities (Routly et al., 2002). This need for further development highlights the challenges for both graduates and employers.

Several studies have identified a lack of adequate support as a significant factor in early-career veterinarians leaving clinical practice. For example, Halliwell et al. (2016) found that support for recent graduates in the UK was highly variable, with the majority feeling under-supported. Similarly, a New Zealand survey of 162 new veterinary graduates by Gates et al. (2020) reported that nearly half left their first job within 2 years, citing toxic workplace culture and inadequate support as the main reasons. Both these studies emphasised the need for employers to provide new graduates with clinical and professional support, regular feedback, and manageable workloads in a supportive practice environment. Similarly, a review focused on the psychological well-being of human healthcare workers highlighted that effective organisational interventions, such as increased support, feedback, and improved communication, positively impact the mental health of employees (Michie & Williams, 2003). The authors noted that many workplace stressors associated with poor mental health are modifiable and present an opportunity for primary prevention.

In response to this need, various veterinary organisations and registration bodies worldwide have implemented new graduate support programmes. For example, the Veterinary Graduate Development Programme (VetGDP) in the UK is a structured but flexible programme that requires each new graduate to be assigned a dedicated coach (advisor) in the workplace (Prescott-Clements et al., 2023). Other support systems for new graduates include a one-year personal development programme in the Netherlands designed to assist with the transition into practice. (Mastenbroek et al., 2015). Additionally, a voluntary mentoring system has been implemented in Australia, pairing experienced veterinarians with new graduates (AVA, 2024a). In New Zealand, mandatory continuing education requirements for new graduates have been updated to include regular meetings with a mentor or supervisor in their first year of practice (VCNZ, 2021a). These initiatives recognise that new graduates' early-career experiences in clinical practice are strongly influenced by their work environment and the level of support they receive.

A positive start in clinical practice sets graduates up to become successful, proficient, and confident veterinary professionals who have enjoyable careers and contribute positively to the profession and society (Bell et al., 2019; Clise et al., 2021). Despite the challenges of clinical practice, many new graduates experience a smooth, enjoyable transition into the clinical workforce (Gilling & Parkinson, 2009), and some even thrive (Kittisiam, 2025). Cake et al. (2016) showed that communication skills were critical for new graduates' success. In their qualitative interview study of Australian new graduates and their employers, Bell et al. (2019) showed that job fit, support, resilience, and work-life balance were essential factors for a successful transition into practice. Furthermore, Reinhard (2023a) highlighted the shared responsibility of the workplace and the individual for new graduates to thrive in clinical practice. They suggested solutions such as mentorship and adequate training in non-technical skills and emphasised the individual's role in managing self-care and asking for help. Furthermore, in a recent mixed methods study, Kittisiam (2025) demonstrated that thriving among Canadian new graduates was linked with high emotional intelligence (EI) and was positively associated with good workplace support.

A recent Canadian study conducted by Morabito et al. (2025) found that early-career veterinarians derived meaning and purpose in their work through strong connections with animals, making a difference in communities, problem-solving, and reflecting on their evolving roles. Research suggests that applying a positive psychology lens, focusing on strengths and what is working well, can effectively support mental health in veterinary practice (Cake et al., 2015). A strong sense of purpose and meaning at work is linked to eudaimonic well-being (Cake et al., 2015), so identification of the factors that foster thriving among recent graduates may offer a pathway to improved well-being.

In recent years, there has been an increasing research interest in exploring successful career transitions and early-career success among new and recent veterinary graduates. The current study investigated the perceptions of new and recent veterinary graduates' experiences across a wide variety of clinical practice settings in New Zealand. This study adds to the existing literature on thriving and success in early-career veterinarians.

### 5.3 Methods

This study employed a qualitative, strengths-based approach informed by a positive psychology lens to investigate the factors that support job satisfaction, engagement, and thriving among new and recent graduates in clinical practice. This research focused on understanding the factors that

support a successful transition into clinical practice and early-career success for new and recent graduate veterinarians in New Zealand.

### 5.3.1 Ethical approval

The primary ethical concerns identified with this study were confidentiality, informed consent, and the potential for a power imbalance between the researcher and participants. The study was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Otu Matatika 3, Application OM3 23/38 (Appendix 5A).

### 5.3.2 Participant selection

Participants for this study were purposively selected and identified through my professional networks. Inclusion in the study was dependent on participants meeting the following selection criteria:

1. Graduated as a veterinarian less than 3 years ago.
2. Working in clinical practice since graduating and holding a current VCNZ annual practising certificate.

Participants were also selected to reflect the diversity of clinical practice in New Zealand, including companion animal practice in urban areas, mixed animal practice in rural settings, production animal practice, and equine practice. A mix of male and female veterinarians was selected, working across various practice types, including private practice, club practice, New Zealand-owned large businesses, internationally owned corporations, and a university clinical setting.

Potential participants were initially contacted by email (Appendix 5B) and asked if they were interested in participating in the study. The email contained an information sheet about the project, which highlighted the interview process and participants' rights (Appendix 5C). Veterinarians interested in participating were asked to reply by email or telephone to arrange an interview date and venue. A consent form was signed before the interview (Appendix 5D). In all cases, the employer was contacted to ensure that the new graduate was supported in participating in the study and conducting the interview during work hours. The interviews were scheduled at a venue and time convenient to the participant. All details were finalised via phone, text or email, and reminders were sent the day before.

### 5.3.3 Interview guide and pilot interviews

The interview guide was developed in collaboration with the supervisory team and focused on gathering in-depth data about new graduates' perceptions of their transition to clinical practice and their experiences in the early stages of their careers (Appendix 5E). Pilot interviews were carried out with three new graduates working in clinical veterinary practice. Based on their feedback, minor adjustments were made to the interview guide to better enable participants to share their experiences of transition from university and their early years working in practice.

### 5.3.4 The interview process

A total of 22 interviews were carried out. Recording commenced when the participants were ready to start the interview, with the option to pause if needed. Participants were also informed of the option to stop the interview at any point, although none chose to do so.

### 5.3.5 Preparation of transcripts

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim either by the researcher or a professional transcriber who signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix 5F). All transcripts were immediately de-identified by replacing participants' names and any mentioned people or places with numbers or pseudonyms. Participants were assigned unique identifiers such as NG1 and NG2, representing New Graduate 1, 2, and so forth. As outlined in Chapter 3, participants were given 3 weeks to review their transcripts and make any changes. This cross-checking process allowed them to verify the contents, confirm the accuracy of the transcription, and ensure the transcripts accurately reflected their experiences. No amendments were made to the transcripts by participants in this study.

### 5.3.6 Thematic analysis

Transcripts were imported into NVivo 14 software (QSR International Pty Ltd., Melbourne, Australia, Version 14) to assist in TA. The analysis was an ongoing iterative process that involved engaging with the six steps of RTA: familiarisation with the data, creating the codes, developing the initial themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes and writing the results (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014), as previously described in Chapter 3. RTA facilitated a thorough examination of participants' lived experiences and encouraged researcher reflexivity. It was considered a suitable choice for analysing new graduates' experiences of their transition to practice and the complex concept of early-career thriving.

The transcripts were thoroughly read and re-read, coded, and systematically analysed to identify new or recurring patterns associated with the new graduates' positive experiences of transitioning to practice and early-career thriving. Quotations were provided for each code to validate the analysis, reflecting the actual words spoken by the participants. Similar or overlapping codes were grouped into thematic categories, leading to the development of minor themes. Further analysis and grouping resulted in the development of major themes. The definitions of the themes were noted in the memo function of NVivo to help explain the relationships and patterns identified in the data. During the phases of TA, triangulation was conducted with the supervisory team (DG, SG, JW, and FM), who reviewed and refined the coding system, quotes, and transcripts. This helped enhance the validity and reliability of the findings and ensure that interpretations were grounded in the data.

## 5.4 Results

### 5.4.1 Description of participants

Twenty-two recently graduated clinical veterinarians from across New Zealand were interviewed. Eight (36%) identified as male, while 14 (64%) identified as female. Participant age and ethnicity were not reported to ensure that individual participants could not be identified. Seven participants worked in companion animal practice, ten in mixed practice (predominantly companion animal and production animal), one in a mixed equine and production animal practice, one in dairy practice and three in equine practice. Nine veterinarians were employed at privately owned practices, five at New Zealand-owned corporate practices, four at club practices, three at practices recently purchased by international corporations, and one at a university clinic (Appendix 5G). These practices were located in the North and South Islands of New Zealand (Appendix 5H).

Nineteen interviews were conducted face-to-face at participants' workplaces or homes, while three were conducted online via Zoom. Each interview lasted between 50 and 80 minutes. Participants reported that they enjoyed the interview process, finding it helpful to reflect on their early careers. They also valued the opportunity to contribute to the research project and to the wider veterinary profession. Participants described a range of factors that contributed to their positive transition from university to clinical practice.

### 5.4.2 Central overarching theme and associated main themes

Analysis of the data generated an overarching theme of graduates thriving in a supportive workplace environment. Four interrelated main themes described the factors associated with support that enabled new graduates to transition smoothly and thrive in clinical practice: developing proficiency and confidence, building trusting relationships, feeling a sense of purpose and meaning, and having a flexible and balanced working life, as shown in Figure 5.1. Under each of these themes were sub-themes with some minor themes nested below each sub-theme, which are described below.

**Figure 5.1**

*The central theme: Thriving in a supportive workplace environment, with the four associated main themes*

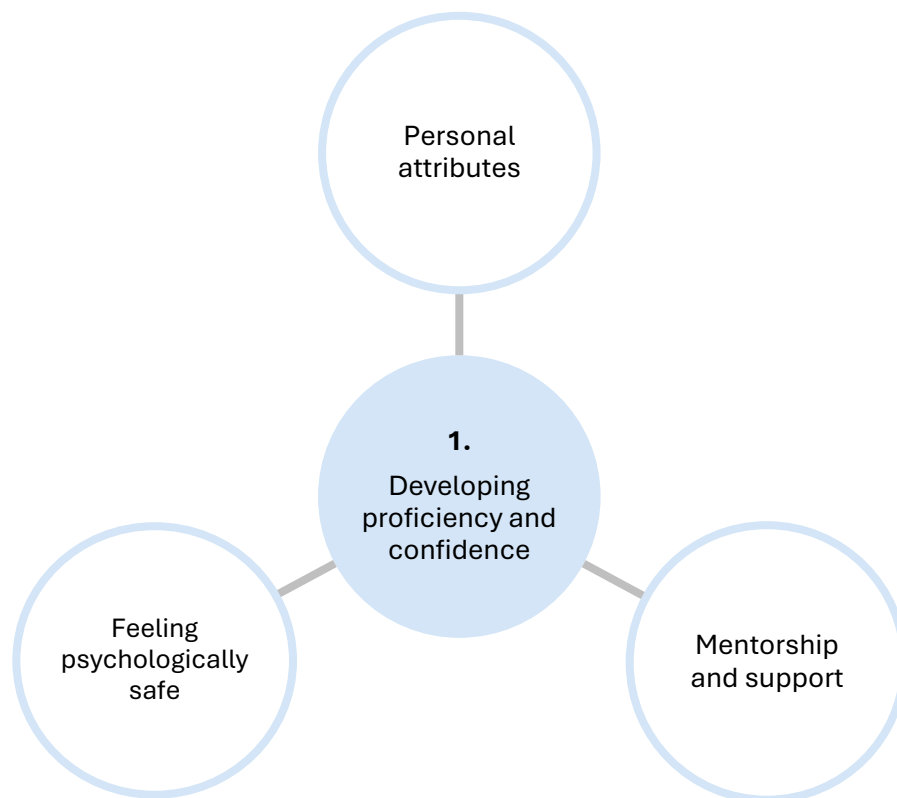


### 5.4.3 Theme 1: Developing proficiency and confidence

Being supported to develop proficiency and confidence in both clinical and professional (non-technical) skills was a major factor that enabled new graduates to transition smoothly and thrive. Under this main theme were three sub-themes: Personal attributes, mentorship and support, and learning in a psychologically safe environment, as shown in Figure 5.2.

**Figure 5.2**

*Theme 1: Developing proficiency and confidence and its three nested sub-themes*



#### 5.4.3.1 Personal attributes

The sub-theme personal attributes referred to the individual qualities or capabilities of new and recent graduates that influence how they adapt to clinical practice and manage the challenges of their early career. This sub-theme was underpinned by two minor themes: 1. Curiosity and love of learning, and 2. Proactive behaviour and reflective learning.

##### 5.4.3.1.1 Curiosity and love of learning

Participants reported being curious and having a “love of learning”. They were intrinsically motivated to increase their knowledge. One participant said that the opportunity to keep on

learning was, “a reason why I picked this job” (NG9), and others referred to their personal curiosity as an essential factor for personal growth and fulfilment of their career ambitions:

*I’m the sort of person who will always be motivated to do more learning; I think that’s just my personality that really motivates me to keep going, and I’ll hopefully see a long career in this industry. (NG2)*

Participants reported a strong desire to learn, grow professionally and become technically proficient at their clinical work. The variety of learning opportunities that new graduates experienced was considered a source of excitement for many:

*I feel like I’m just learning exponentially, but I just love that; so much learning and excitement, and every case is different. [...] That really motivates me; developing my skill set is really important to me. (NG2)*

#### 5.4.3.1.2 Proactive behaviour and reflective learning

Participants reflected on, critically analysed, and sought feedback on their experiences in clinical practice, which helped them develop and gain confidence. For example, one participant said, “I think about cases that I’ve had in the field,” and would reflect on “How could I have done that better?” (NG4). New graduates who embraced a reflective approach to practice developed a growth mindset and described how they learnt from experiences and tried different ideas. Recognising when to seek help was viewed as a crucial aspect of this reflective learning process. Many participants described proactive behaviours, such as asking questions and promoting discussion of cases with colleagues, which supported reflective learning and development:

*There’s always someone in the clinic that I could ask. [...] so if I ever had a question– I felt comfortable enough to just ask them; [...] sometimes I bring the dog down the back and ask them, what do you think? [...] or, can I get some help? (NG21)*

Some recent graduates recognised their personal growth and improvement, for example, NG9 explained, “I feel like I’m just so much better than where I was last year”. This self-awareness built confidence and increased their desire to learn and improve.

#### 5.4.3.2 Mentorship and support

Mentoring, supervision, and learning support were central to developing proficiency and confidence. This included both formal and informal mentoring from veterinarians and non-veterinarians. The key feature of effective mentor support was a balance between support, guidance, and encouraging independence. A good mentor provided new graduates with caring,

accessible, practical, and emotional support, including regular feedback, targeted continuing education opportunities, and encouragement to learn from mistakes. This sub-theme was associated with five minor themes: 1. Effective approaches to mentoring, 2. Formal structured mentoring, 3. Informal mentoring, 4. Tailored support, and 5. Constructive feedback.

#### 5.4.3.2.1 Effective approaches to mentoring

Participants emphasised the importance of having mentors who were caring, supportive, accessible, and knowledgeable. New graduates, in particular, valued mentors who understood their individual learning needs, genuinely cared about their development, and were readily available and responsive to their needs. For example, participants found it reassuring to be able to call a senior veterinarian for advice or assistance, particularly during moments of anxiety:

*I called (mentor), and she immediately said, I'll come in – [...] We did the surgery together, it went really well, the owner was so thankful, and it had a great outcome. It was just so nice to have that support. (NG11)*

Some recent graduates reported being supported to develop specific technical clinical skills through targeted continuing professional development (CPD) courses. Others valued the knowledge and expertise of their mentors, as noted by one participant, who remarked:

*He's amazing. A walking encyclopaedia. So, it's been really nice to learn from him. (NG21)*

Participants found it reassuring when mentors and other senior staff showed their vulnerability and shared their own examples of when things had not gone well. They particularly valued veterinarians who reflected on their own tough start in the profession and aimed to protect the new graduates from a similar poor start. Participants felt that having mentors who cared about them was helpful to their careers:

*The vets here were just very particular about the fact that they'd been pushed into the deep end, and they didn't want me to get pushed into the deep end, get overwhelmed, get burnt out, and then want to leave. (NG12)*

#### 5.4.3.2.2 Formal structured mentoring

Formal mentoring provided excellent learning support and was appreciated by many participants. These relationships included regular meetings to discuss clinical and interpersonal matters and sometimes included the use of checklists as a progress guide. Participants with formal mentoring

support described the benefits of working through a structured and staged new graduate plan that encompassed both the technical and non-technical aspects of transitioning to clinical practice:

*To begin with, it was once a week meeting with my mentor; now, we're up to about once a month-ish, and we kind of go through a framework of CPD, basically [...] and make a plan for what you're going to do, [...] then go away, and do some of the things that are written down in the plan [...] it's kind of like a checklist and is very helpful. (NG12)*

Ensuring that new graduates met critical milestones and recognising their progress was seen as motivating and helpful. Participants spoke of various types of progress charts and checklists that they worked through with their mentor. For instance, one new graduate described a colour-coded checklist used in their clinic. This system helped both the new graduate and the mentor track progress. It also served as a useful guide for the reception staff in assigning appropriate jobs, ensuring the new graduates were not overwhelmed and received support when needed:

*You're either red, orange or green. Red, being like a total newbie, send with another vet – so, before I'd done a cow caesarean – that sort of thing. Then, orange ...kind of varies; I might be happy to do it, but block me out heaps of time to do it, or really small numbers – that sort of thing. Then, green is good to go. (NG16)*

Several new graduates mentioned formal morbidity and mortality rounds in clinical practice as a valuable means of learning from poor outcomes and mistakes. These sessions focused on cases that did not go as planned, allowing participants to learn from their own and others' experiences in what one participant described as a “no-blame atmosphere” (NG4). Others talked of the benefits of working in a safe, open and trusting environment:

*It's very helpful to talk through the cases, and kind of figure out where it may have gone wrong, and how to prevent that in the future. (NG11)*

#### 5.4.3.2.3 Informal mentoring

Other participants described enjoying more informal mentoring arrangements, which were flexible and generally less structured. For example, NG18 noted the mentorship they received was, “very informal in its structure, which is fine with me”. NG22 indicated that mentor meetings were on, “more of a casual basis rather than a scheduled basis” and said they felt comfortable reaching out when they needed support, creating a more self-directed mentoring arrangement.

Adopting a more flexible and informal mentoring system seemed to be common among participants working in mixed animal practice. Several participants discussed having more than one mentor, typically, “one for large animal, and a separate mentor for small animal” (NG15),

while others noted that their mentoring was dependent on who was available at the time they needed help.

Other participants talked about more general support from the wider veterinary team. Many new graduates felt comfortable asking their colleagues for help when clients were unhappy or challenged them:

*I can just go and ask whoever is around for someone to help me. So, there's a backup plan, always. (NG12)*

Participants mainly benefited from mentorship provided by experienced senior veterinarians. However, they also noted the value of support provided by more junior veterinarians, typically those who had graduated within the last 3–5 years. Participants felt these younger veterinarians offered valuable insights from their own recent transition to practice. One participant (NG20) noted the more recently graduated veterinarians were very “*helpful in terms of understanding where your brain is at*” compared to the older veterinarians, who found it “*harder to relate to that starting point*”.

#### 5.4.3.2.4 Tailored support

Participants emphasised the significance of support that was tailored to their learning needs. The importance of striking a balance between providing support and encouraging independence was critical to ensure their successful transition to clinical practice. Several participants discussed the advantages of a gradual, step-by-step approach to working independently. NG12 described this gradual process, beginning with shadowing experienced veterinarians, where she observed “*how they did things—how they ran a consult*”. In the next step, an experienced veterinarian would be in the room while she “*ran the whole consult*”. By the second week, she was managing consults alone, knowing that support was available if needed. This gradual introduction to independence and more complicated cases allowed participants to progress and grow at a rate that suited them:

*As I became more confident, I would take on more challenging cases, but they were careful about what they gave me. Then, as time went on, obviously, they (the cases) got more difficult, and the time period got a bit shorter, but I would cope by that stage. (NG10)*

Several participants highlighted the delicate balance between feeling comfortable about a clinical situation and feeling challenged in their work. Their ability to take on new challenges depended on their own self-efficacy in addition to the support from experienced veterinarians.

#### 5.4.3.2.5 Constructive feedback

Several participants emphasised the importance of constructive feedback to develop their clinical skills and knowledge. Some reported a strong desire for feedback that gave them specific guidance on areas for improvement. Many viewed critical feedback as essential for providing direction and structure to their learning. Timely feedback helped participants understand what they needed to focus on to improve their clinical skills and grow professionally. For example, one participant said, *“I like feedback, good and bad”*, indicating that constructive feedback was necessary, and that without it, they felt they were *“aimlessly wandering around”* (NG7) without direction for improvement.

Positive feedback was especially appreciated by those who doubted their abilities and performance as veterinarians. Participants agreed that positive feedback made them feel good and was motivating. However, many felt they wanted more critical feedback from mentors and supervisors and noted that it was important for their professional development and growth:

*Something I've found a bit surprising is how much feedback us new graduates want – [...] I'm not afraid to hear what I should be doing better, [...] a lot of my feedback has been super-positive, which is great, but I've had to sort of repeatedly ask; okay, so what do you actually want me to do better - where do I go from here?* (NG5)

#### 5.4.3.3 Learning in a safe environment

Learning in a safe environment was the third sub-theme under the 'Developing Proficiency and Confidence' theme. Participants emphasised the importance of feeling safe, supported, and cared for in the clinical environment, particularly when they were experiencing challenges or difficulties. They described the importance of being able to ask questions and seek help without fear of judgment, embarrassment, or awkwardness. When they felt psychologically safe, they were more able to learn effectively, both from their own mistakes and from observing others. This sub-theme had three associated minor themes: 1. Caring support, 2. Learning from mistakes and seeking help, and 3. Normalising vulnerability.

##### 5.4.3.3.1 Caring support

Participants appreciated senior vets asking about their day:

*Whenever I come back from a call, they're always like, 'How did that go?'* (NG6)

This created a healthy discussion about cases, which they found was a positive way to learn and grow. Senior veterinarians who demonstrated an interest in, and care for, the new graduates,

developed a relationship based on trust, which made the participants feel comfortable discussing their problems and concerns. Participants emphasised the importance of collaborating with their mentor and team to solve problems. This collaborative behaviour fostered a culture of learning, built confidence and resilience, and supported their professional growth and overall well-being.

#### 5.4.3.3.2 Learning from mistakes and seeking help

Several participants accepted that mistakes were inevitable in clinical practice:

*Unfortunately, you do make mistakes. We're human beings. Things go wrong. (NG3)*

The new graduates believed that a supportive work environment, where they were not worried about being judged and where they felt they could talk openly about mistakes and ask for help, was crucial for their professional growth. Open discussions about challenges and issues created a safe workplace environment where participants felt comfortable asking questions without fear of judgment or feeling incompetent. One participant felt comfortable speaking up about issues or mistakes during clinic meetings, knowing “no one would say anything bad” (NG13). New graduates particularly valued colleagues who were “always there to help” (NG1). Discussing cases with experienced colleagues who were interested, shared their own experiences and listened was an important part of new graduates’ learning and development. Participants shared that they felt comfortable approaching anyone at the clinic for help, whether they were a veterinarian, nurse or reception staff.

*the people around me supported me – made me feel comfortable asking questions – didn't make feel dumb for asking or having to reach out – calling them on the weekend when they're the second vet on-call, and being like, hey – I don't know what to do – can you give me a hand – yeah, absolutely. No hesitation. Yeah, they've just been very supportive. So, that would be my biggest thing; to find a clinic that you feel that you're supported in, and hopefully you also you get along with interpersonally, like I do, with the vets and nurses here. (NG21)*

#### 5.4.3.3.3 Normalising vulnerability

An environment of psychological safety was fostered when senior veterinarians role-modelled openness and honesty, including sharing their own past mistakes. New graduates felt reassured and less alone when experienced colleagues admitted that they too had made similar errors. For instance, one participant recalled a senior veterinarian saying:

*If you made a mistake, the likelihood is that 10 of us have made the same mistake, if not more. (NG8)*

Another participant described feeling less anxious when her mentor responded to a mistake she made with, “*Oh, yeah – I did that 20 years ago*”. This open behaviour helped many participants realise they were not alone with their difficulties and worries, and they enjoyed discussing how things went and if they could have done better:

*They give us their inputs – their struggles and stories, and it’s still nice to hear that – I think she (senior vet) has been out for about 10 years now – maybe more, and she still has her down days. She still has cases where she doesn’t know what’s going on. It’s nice to know that senior vets also need help and support. (NG14)*

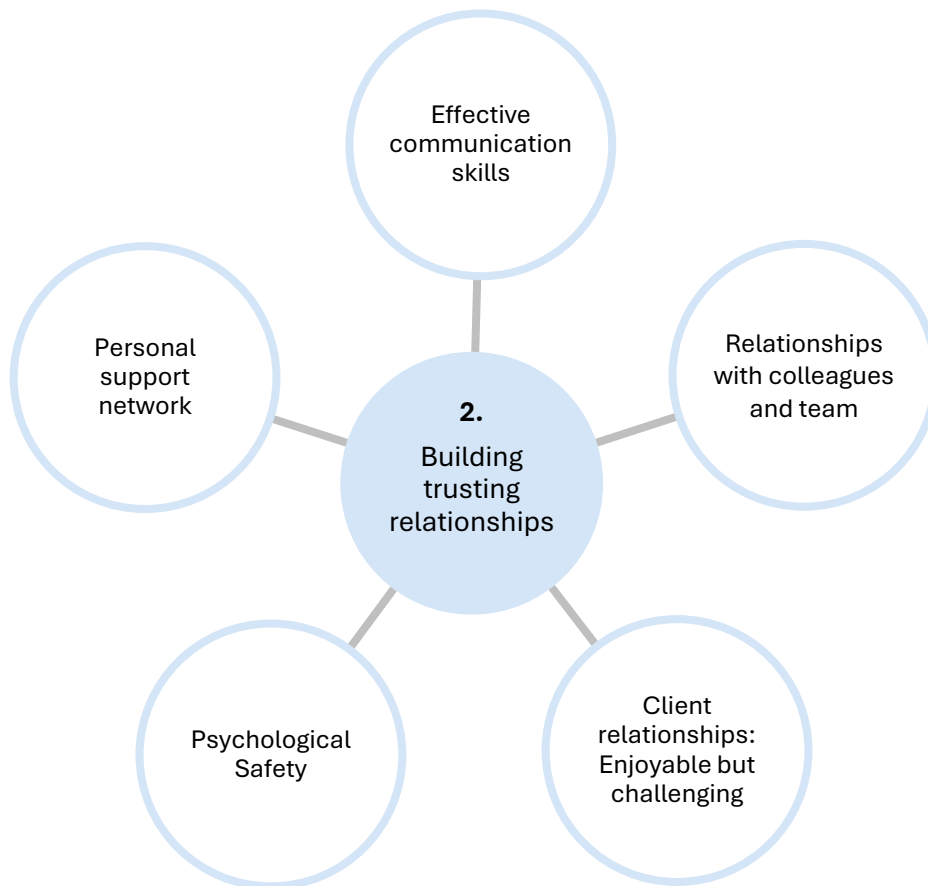
These authentic conversations helped normalise vulnerability and encouraged reflective learning.

#### 5.4.4 Theme 2: Building trusting relationships

Building positive, trusting relationships was a crucial component in supporting new graduates to thrive in clinical practice. Healthy workplace relationships fostered a collaborative, supportive, and safe environment, which enhanced open communication, teamwork, and a sense of belonging for new graduates. Additionally, strong personal relationships, such as those with friends and family, provided emotional support and guidance. This second theme, building trusting relationships, was underpinned by five sub-themes: Effective communication skills, relationships with colleagues and team, client relationships are enjoyable but challenging, psychologically safe team, and personal support networks (Figure 5.3).

**Figure 5.3**

*Theme 2: Building trusting relationships and its five associated sub-themes*



#### *5.4.4.1 Effective communication skills*

The sub-theme, effective communication skills, referred to new graduates' recognition that working in clinical veterinary practice is a very people-focused job. Participants expressed that effective communication skills were essential for developing trusting relationships with colleagues, team members, clients, and their personal support networks.

Some new graduates explained how they applied the professional skills training they learnt during their veterinary training to effectively navigate intra-clinic relationships and manage challenging conversations. Others described how they built rapport with clients by simplifying complex medical concepts, actively listening to clients' concerns, and showing that they cared. Some participants enjoyed communicating with clients and viewed it as a good challenge:

*...It really makes you think; how would I explain this to someone who has no idea about it [...] You've got all these science terms and thoughts in your head and trying to convey a treatment plan. (NG2)*

Participants shared their experiences of communication skills education during veterinary school, reflecting on its impact and relevance to their clinical practice. Many admitted that, as students, they did not initially see the value of this training and were more focused on developing technical clinical skills. However, after graduation, most participants noticed a change in their perception of the professional skills training they had received at university. They agreed that it had prepared them well for real-life client interactions and building relationships with the team in clinical practice. Some participants mentioned having a “toolbox” of useful communication techniques, which increased their confidence during consultations:

*A lot of the time at University, I sort of wondered why we were doing all of this work with paid actors. But the reality is, you get some interesting clients. It's been really useful having that experience, even just kind of psyching yourself up to go into a room, and give your little spiel, and use the techniques that they told us about – the sort of chunking and checking and all of that definitely comes in handy, and is really beneficial. (NG22)*

#### 5.4.4.2 Relationships with colleagues and the team

This referred to new graduates developing trusting relationships with team members at work, which was crucial for their well-being, job satisfaction, and sense of belonging. Some participants went as far as saying that the team was the “*make or break*” (NG13) factor for their transition to clinical practice:

*I love the team here; they're so great. They're so supportive, and it's so fun coming to work every day. (NG17)*

Working in a supportive, friendly, and effective team where the new graduates felt a sense of belonging was critical to their transition to, and thriving in, clinical practice. Participants emphasised the importance of working in an inclusive and respectful team, finding that building positive relationships fostered a sense of belonging in the workplace:

*The team here is so great, because of the interpersonal skills we have; we're not just colleagues – we're friends even outside of work. (NG14)*

This sub-theme had three minor associated themes: 1. Teamwork, 2. Support from non-veterinary team members and 3. Social media chat groups.

##### 5.4.4.2.1 Teamwork

Participants emphasised the importance of being part of a supportive and collaborative team. Teamwork fostered collegiality, mutual support, and a sense of belonging, especially during

challenging situations. New graduates in this study felt reassured knowing they could rely on their colleagues and appreciated the reciprocal nature of this support:

*We all get on outside of work, and I know I can call anyone anytime, whether they're on-call or not, and it goes both ways, which goes a long way. (NG16)*

Many participants described working as part of an effective team as one of the most rewarding aspects of clinical practice. As NG20 noted, the team was the “*best part*” of being a veterinarian. Several new graduates recalled the pleasure of effective teamwork:

*There was just so much collaborative teamwork in that moment. It was just amazing. There was no yelling, no negativity. It was just all positive. Everyone wanted this foal to live. It was amazing; we resuscitated it, that was an amazing moment for me. (NG2)*

Experiences like this highlighted how positive teamwork and collaboration fostered a sense of shared purpose among team members and contributed to engagement and thriving of new graduates in clinical practice.

#### 5.4.4.2.2 Support from non-veterinary team members

Developing positive, trusting relationships with non-veterinarian team members, such as nurses, large animal veterinary technicians (LAVTs), and reception staff played a significant role in supporting new graduates. These team members were often not considered formal mentors but were praised by participants for helping them have a good start in clinical practice. Participants particularly spoke of the trust, respect, and appreciation they had for the nurses:

*The nurses are just massive, and they're just so critical – [...] they are really good, and really experienced, and just super-great and helpful. (NG9)*

Many participants highlighted how the non-veterinarian members of staff were central to their support system, especially in the first few weeks when they were unsure and lacked confidence. Nurses helped participants to charge properly, admit patients, understand clinic protocols and were, “*great and such a support*” (NG20). The nurses and LAVTs offered new graduates both practical help and emotional support in what participants described as a non-intimidating and kind way:

*I love the nurses here. [...] I had a patient die the other day; I came back into the room, and I was a bit upset, and the nurses just quietly supported me. (NG8)*

Participants found it easy to ask the nurses questions about the clinic systems, which was helpful during their transition to practice. Others appreciated the nurses' support around case

prioritisation, such as when an emergency was admitted and routine calls needed to be rescheduled:

*When you're a baby vet, you're too scared to make those decisions; that's when having a senior nurse to be like, okay – let's focus on this. (NG3)*

Receptionists and administrative staff, especially those with an interest in personal well-being, played a crucial role in the support system for new graduates. Participants commented on the receptionist's ability to recognise their clinical abilities when booking in calls, so they were not overwhelmed. One new graduate mentioned an “*amazing*” receptionist who did all her bookings:

*...she really eased me in and looked after me in my first year, and I felt very grateful to have had her because the receptionist can change your day quite a lot. (NG5)*

Front-of-house staff who noticed when new graduates were running behind or struggling helped participants manage their schedules and prevented them from getting swamped. One participant described how some reception staff really looked after their well-being and made them feel cared for:

*We have a receptionist who is the most mum figure you could imagine. So, yeah, she was like, eat your lunch and go home early, because you started early – do this – do that. Just really looked after me, which I found helpful...she was brilliant. (NG18)*

#### 5.4.4.2.3 Social media chat groups with the team

Social media team chat groups, such as WhatsApp and Facebook, provided new graduates with valuable support, collegiality, and a “*team feeling*” (NG16), which contributed to creating an open communication environment and a safe clinic atmosphere. These social media groups also supported learning, as group members could openly ask questions at any time and share interesting cases, as well as celebrate successes. The chat groups were helpful for new graduates working away from the clinic on farm calls, enabling them to share cases and seek advice. They noted that colleagues of all experience levels contributed to the chat groups, and everyone shared both successes and problems, which made them feel safe: “*Even the experienced vets will put in questions like, ‘What do you guys think about this?’*” (NG20). Another participant (NG13) agreed that this open and honest approach made her feel “*never feel silly*” when she admitted that she did not know what to do.

#### 5.4.4.3 *Client relationships are both enjoyable and challenging*

This sub-theme referred to the importance that new graduates placed on building strong client connections and navigating difficult conversations.

While many new graduates admitted that they had pursued veterinary medicine because of their “love of animals”, they realised, after working in clinical practice, that it was the positive relationships with the clients that contributed significantly to their engagement and motivation:

*I'm interested in the case, the clinical side of things, and the animal, but I think working with the client has been my biggest motivator and has engaged me the most. (NG19)*

Participants emphasised the importance of effective communication and interpersonal skills and felt that their understanding of the human-animal bond between owners and their pets helped them build rapport. New graduates who considered the needs of both the animal and the client developed positive relationships:

*I really want to do well for the animal and for the client. You see how emotionally attached they are. (NG5)*

Building positive relationships with farming clients was also rewarding for participants in large animal practice and noted by NG8 as “*probably one of the highlights*” of the job. New graduates from farming backgrounds felt more confident chatting about farm-related issues. For example, one participant who was brought up on a dairy farm reported:

*I love going out and just having a yarn, see what's going on, how their day is going? (NG7)*

Participants from urban backgrounds found it more challenging to establish relationships with farmers than with owners of companion animals. Nevertheless, if they were well-supported by senior veterinarians and farmers gained confidence in their abilities, they were able to develop trusting relationships with farming clients. Two minor themes underpinned this sub-theme: 1. Managing difficult conversations, and 2. Managing ethically challenging situations.

##### 5.4.4.3.1 *Managing difficult conversations*

New graduates acknowledged both the positives and the challenges inherent in client relationships. However, several participants found satisfaction in managing difficult conversations with clients and achieving positive outcomes:

*I think 100% client communication is the worst aspect and the best but even having a difficult client and just getting them onboard... that's satisfying. (NG20)*

Participants agreed that difficult conversations with clients were an inevitable part of their role as clinical veterinarians and mentioned various strategies to manage them. They discussed a range of challenging situations they had encountered, often stemming from clients' financial difficulties, unexpected outcomes, and mistakes that occurred. Many participants reported that they “*struggle talking to people about money*” (NG8), and others mentioned challenges when cases did not go well, and clients were upset.

Participants discussed the importance of being patient and maintaining emotional control when clients became angry and frustrated. One participant described the benefit of concentrating on her breathing when facing challenging clients. She noted how active listening and showing understanding also helped her to defuse challenging behaviour. This approach not only de-escalated tension but also transformed a difficult situation into a satisfying one.

Participants agreed that using their communication skills, combined with guidance and support from senior veterinarians, helped them cope with difficult situations:

*I offered for her to chat to one of the senior vets about what had happened. So, I guess, knowing that you've got that kind of support around you is really useful, and then, just all those communication techniques – listening to the client, being understanding, reflective listening. (NG5)*

#### 5.4.4.3.2 Managing ethically challenging situations

Some new graduates in this study developed approaches and received support to manage ethically challenging situations. Moral stress arose when graduates were unable to provide a level of veterinary care that conformed to their own ethical standards. They mentioned potentially stressful ethical dilemmas such as financial issues, animal welfare, and client expectations that challenged their values. However, some participants managed these moral challenges by reframing the situation as an “*enjoyable problem to solve*” (NG1). By adopting a growth mindset, new graduates were able to perceive potentially stressful situations as opportunities for growth rather than as difficulties. For example, one participant described a situation in which a client could not afford the gold-standard care for their unwell family dog, and he felt comfortable offering a spectrum of care approach to diagnostics and treatment options. Participants found it satisfying to find an option that was affordable and met the animals' needs, which reduced the negative impact of moral stress:

*It's not just about me helping the animal but also helping the family when there is a [financial] challenge in finding a treatment that allows the animal to recover from an illness without all the bells and whistles and all the diagnostic tests. That's fun. (NG1)*

#### 5.4.4.4 Psychologically safe team environment.

This sub-theme referred to building trusting relationships with managers, colleagues, and team members and was a critical factor for new graduates' sense of well-being. Participants described a safe team as one in which they could communicate openly and honestly without feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed to ask questions. As NG14 explained, it meant, "*having that safe space to discuss your frustrations where you're actually being heard*". This sub-theme was associated with three minor themes: 1. Walking the talk, 2. Sharing concerns, 3. New Graduate days.

##### 5.4.4.4.1 Walking the talk

Participants appreciated colleagues, team members, and managers who were not only approachable and good listeners but also followed through on their promises. New graduates valued colleagues and managers who made supportive offers and followed through with actions that backed up the claims:

*Honestly, you can tell her about anything, and you know she'll do something about it or try her best to do so. I do feel they actually do walk the talk. So, it's not just an empty offer.*  
(NG19)

This consistency, reliability, and integrity helped build trust and reassured participants that they were genuinely supported.

##### 5.4.4.4.2 Sharing concerns

Many new graduates initially experienced self-doubt but felt that being part of a psychologically safe team empowered them to speak up and share their concerns. These honest conversations with trusted, empathetic colleagues, who were often open about their own issues, reassured new graduates and helped them to process challenges constructively:

*If I've had a shit call, I can come back to the clinic and talk to people about it.* (NG8)

This prevented them from dwelling on things and often strengthened relationships and built trust:

*I panicked and went to one of the other vets; the first thing she did was give me a big hug, and then we talked about it. There was a lot of chewing the fat and sharing stuff we'd done. There were definitely some things we'd had a good laugh about, as well, that you probably couldn't laugh about anywhere else.* (NG16)

Having a safe space to share problems provided new graduates with essential emotional support. Psychologically safe teams enabled them to process their experiences, learn from them, and move forward.

#### 5.4.4.4.3 New graduate days

Some participants were part of formal new graduate programmes that included one or two-day seminars facilitated by experienced veterinarians. These sessions, often combined with other local clinics, focused on both education and social interaction. These programmes provided a psychologically safe space for new and recent graduates to share their personal experiences in clinical practice. Participants felt that these programmes provided an opportunity to build trusting relationships with their peers and senior team members, encouraging open communication and honesty. They particularly enjoyed meeting new graduates from different practices and sharing their highs and lows, as this made them feel less alone:

*We have something called a Moa and Mouse, and it's fantastic. So, you discuss your moments of awesomeness, which is a Moa, and your moments of uselessness, which is the Mouse. Everybody's just there. I feel like when you listen to other people's struggles, whether it's team dynamics or complicated cases they've had, or patients they've lost, or whatever, it makes your problems seem a lot smaller. (NG14)*

#### 5.4.4.5 Personal support networks

The sub-theme 'personal support networks' encompassed a range of non-work relationships, including family and partners, veterinary friends, non-veterinary friends, and the community. This sub-theme was linked to two minor themes: 1. Veterinary friends, and 2. Non-veterinary friends and family.

##### 5.4.4.5.1 Veterinary friends

Veterinary friends and classmates were an important part of the new graduates' personal support networks. Many participants found it enjoyable and helpful to share their experiences with friends who understood the challenges and pleasures of being a new graduate in clinical practice:

*You can give them a call and just vent, and they know exactly what you're talking about. (NG15)*

Participants maintained regular contact with their classmates and veterinary friends and agreed that the peer support they received from classmates was beneficial to their well-being:

*My best friend is a mixed vet. We talk most days and always send each other interesting cases. We're always talking about vet stuff and provide a lot of support for each other, it's so nice to have someone to talk to who's a new grad as well. (NG2)*

Some participants talked about the benefits of sharing a house with other recent graduates who worked at the same or nearby practices:

*It's been really helpful debriefing with my flatmates, who are also vets – to talk through things that would otherwise probably weigh on my mind or kind of fester has been awesome. (NG19)*

Participants whose partners were veterinarians spoke of the mutual support they provided each other due to a shared understanding of the joys and frustrations of clinical practice. They appreciated discussing both clinical and interpersonal workplace issues with their partners:

*We often go home, debrief, and then it's done. So, it's nice being able to unload it all, because you do sometimes need to talk about it, and then we move on. (NG13)*

#### 5.4.4.5.2 Non-veterinary friends and family

Most new and recent graduates emphasised the significance of maintaining relationships outside the veterinary profession. For many participants, non-veterinary friendships were often established before university and provided them with valuable, loyal support:

*I've grown up with them, and they've been there with me since I decided to go to Vet School, me not getting in, me going across to Australia for five years. They've always been there for me. (NG10)*

Additionally, these non-veterinary friends brought fresh perspectives from different professions and lives, which provided participants with a broader outlook on life. Some participants appreciated flatting with non-veterinarians who provided more personal support. One participant shared the intergenerational support she received from her non-veterinary flatmate:

*I live with someone older – she has a kid – she has a lot of life experience and she owns the house, and a dog, and a cat; she's more of a friend figure, – yeah, I like where I live [...] if I'm having a hard time – when I was breaking up with my partner, it was nice to be able to talk to her about it, because she had an adult view of it that wasn't clouded by being my parent so it's been very helpful. (NG12)*

Several participants mentioned having a social network within the community, especially through a common interest such as a sports team, a young farmers group, or a church. Community

connections helped provide a sense of balance and support beyond participants' professional roles:

*I've got heaps of awesome friends through hockey, which is nice, having that outlet, not just hanging out with vets. (NG5)*

Many of the new graduates valued receiving family support. Family members played a large part in participants' support networks, particularly those with close relationships with their parents. Talking to trusted family members about challenging or sad situations at work was a helpful way to manage their emotions. These supportive conversations helped participants acknowledge and validate their feelings, which enabled some to move forward and avoid rumination:

*If it's a particularly sad case, I'll just explain it to my family that this is how I'm feeling – or sometimes I'll just have a good old cry, and I'll feel better about it. (NG10)*

Participants' partners provided them with significant support, especially during challenging times:

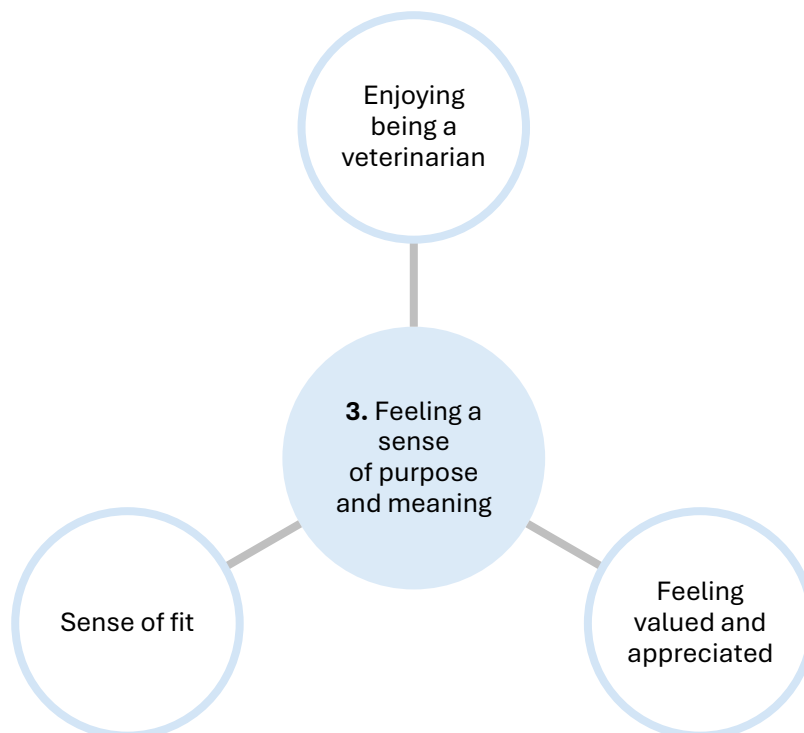
*There have been hard days when I go home, and I've talked to my partner about it, she's always very supportive, which is really good. (NG21)*

### 5.4.5 Theme 3: Feeling a sense of purpose and meaning

The third theme captured how participants derived a sense of purpose and meaning in their work. The theme, Feeling a sense of purpose and meaning, was supported by three sub-themes: enjoying being a veterinarian, feeling valued by colleagues and clients, and a sense of fit, as shown in Figure 5.4.

**Figure 5.4**

*Theme 3: Feeling a sense of purpose and meaning with its three nested sub-themes*



#### 5.4.5.1 *Enjoying being a veterinarian*

This sub-theme referred to the aspects of clinical veterinary work that new graduates enjoyed. Despite the challenges and demands of clinical practice, many participants reported feeling engaged, motivated, and enjoying their work. This sentiment was reflected by one participant, who expressed, *“I really do love being a vet”* (NG14)

They appreciated the job variety and stimulation of complex clinical cases as well as the satisfaction of mastering more routine tasks. Participants were motivated by clinical successes and enjoyed making a difference in the lives of people and animals. This sub-theme was underpinned by two minor themes: 1. Variety of clinical work, and 2. Clinical success and making a difference.

#### 5.4.5.1.1 Variety of clinical work

Participants talked enthusiastically about the wide variety of clinical work they experienced. Several participants felt that working in mixed practice provided them with immense satisfaction. They felt able to apply the full range of skills developed at university and took satisfaction in knowing they were doing their job well:

*I'm living the dream. I'm living the mixed vet dream. Got to de-velvet stags the other day, I'm like, oh, this is cool. Getting the first few spays done, and those are going well; you celebrate that. Yeah, getting your first few positive client interactions is really cool, too – particularly in smallies when they say; 'Oh, will you be here?' I'm like, why do you want to see me – I'm just a new grad! (NG19)*

Participants enjoyed the wide range of clinical situations that they encountered every day. From individual patient care to managing wider health issues, which they found motivating, thrilling and challenging:

*No day's the same. I love that. I love getting up and being like; I don't know what's going to happen today, but let's bring it on. I love the excitement of what could come in or what could happen. (NG2)*

Others enjoyed the more routine aspects of veterinary work, which provided them with a day-to-day sense of accomplishment. These more routine jobs enabled relationship building with clients and embedded participants in the community, especially when on the farm, which provided job commitment:

*Our routine stuff is still pretty cool [...] I think we just need to remind ourselves of that. I hope to stay in clinical practice for a long time. (NG16)*

#### 5.4.5.1.2 Clinical success and making a difference

New graduates were all highly motivated by clinical successes, which boosted their self-efficacy in their clinical abilities. When cases worked out well, they felt that they had contributed to the patient, the client and the practice:

*I love it when a case has a good outcome, the owner's happy, the pet's happy; it's just such a good feeling. (NG11)*

Feeling that they could make a difference early in their careers also provided memorable highlights:

*I'm changing that animal's life, but by changing that animal's life, I'm affecting all the people that are related to that animal, and that's such a difference you can make. It really satisfies me. (NG10)*

Participants described various situations that brought them satisfaction and made them appreciate their job. These included: working with an experienced nursing team to save a patient (NG2), performing their first cow caesarean with assistance (NG16), and saving a family pet (NG20). *Others working in production animal practice valued working outdoors:*

*I have a profound appreciation for my job, driving out and helping animals, but also being surrounded by this beautiful countryside. (NG15)*

#### 5.4.5.2 *Feeling valued and appreciated*

This sub-theme captured new graduates' experiences of thriving in their roles. The participants discussed the importance of feeling appreciated and valued by managers, colleagues, and clients. Acknowledgement of their achievements and efforts increased participants' confidence and satisfaction, and contributed to their sense of purpose and, as one participant put it, “*goes a long way to making your day*” (NG22). This sub-theme was connected to two minor themes: 1. Appreciated by clients, and 2. Valued by colleagues.

##### 5.4.5.2.1 *Appreciated by clients*

Grateful clients contributed to the new graduates' sense of purpose and meaning in their work. Participants described feeling validated and their self-confidence boosted when a client specifically requested their services:

*The client was very grateful and then asked for me specifically [...] That made me feel really good about myself. (NG21)*

Although euthanising animals was recognised as a potential source of stress amongst some new graduates, many viewed it as a compassionate and satisfying part of their role. Participants explained that they felt privileged to be able to end an animal's suffering, and the owners were often very grateful:

*I don't mind putting an animal down, if we can't fix something. I still feel that's a treatment, and that's ending suffering [...], and that's one really nice thing that we can do. (NG20)*

This helped give their work a sense of purpose, especially when they were able to connect with and support clients through the loss of a pet:

*I've had some really touching, heart-warming euthanasias. (NG3)*

Many participants described various gestures of appreciation they had received from clients, such as hugs, home-baking, flowers, and cards, after caring for their animals.

#### 5.4.5.2.2 Valued by colleagues

Recognition, trust and respect from colleagues also played a vital role in fostering a sense of value and belonging amongst new graduates. Some participants felt valued when more experienced veterinarians sought their opinions on cases and trusted them to perform more complex tasks. Participants also felt motivated and engaged when colleagues recognised their hard work and achievements. One participant stated that trust, “*speaks volumes, just the confidence that they have in you to go and do new things*” (NG5). Feeling that other veterinarians valued and respected the new graduate’s knowledge made them feel like a valued team member. Receiving positive feedback from managers, mentors, and colleagues boosted participants’ confidence, helped reduce the common feelings of self-doubt and made them feel valued:

*Just hearing – actually, you’re doing great – we’re really happy with your progress. Yeah – getting that positive feedback has been really nice. (NG19)*

Some new graduates mentioned struggling with their inner critic at times; however, receiving positive feedback from senior veterinarians in the clinic was very reassuring for them.

#### 5.4.5.3 Sense of fit

Participants agreed that finding a good fit within a practice was crucial, especially in the early stages of their careers. When new graduates’ personal attributes, skills, interests, and values aligned with their job, they felt they ‘fitted in’. Fitting in was strongly influenced by team dynamics, which had a substantial impact on the new graduates’ experiences in clinical practice.

Having a good ‘team fit’ and enjoying their colleagues’ company helped new graduates cope with the inevitable challenges of clinical practice, providing purpose and enjoyment in their work. Many new graduates who experienced a ‘good fit’ in their first job talked about a positive start to their careers. Participants emphasised the importance of establishing a sense of fit before taking a job:

*So, in terms of finding the right fit, I think that’s really important; knowing what fit is right, before you’re in it, because those first few months are make or break to how your first year is going to go, and then it builds from there. (NG18)*

This sub-theme was linked to two minor themes described below: 1. Student placements: a great way to find a good job fit, and 2. Meeting expectations.

#### 5.4.5.3.1 Student placements: A great way to find a good job fit

Understanding team dynamics and the practice culture was essential for assessing whether the clinic would be a good fit for new graduates. Many participants highlighted the importance of spending time in a veterinary practice, often during student placements. This enabled them to gain insights into the clinic environment, which helped them make informed decisions about future employment:

*Seeing practice somewhere is really getting as much of a picture as you can as to how the team works and how you might fit in. (NG19)*

Following a trial week at the clinic, another participant recognised that, despite the role appearing ideal, she did not feel a sense of belonging within the team. She subsequently accepted a different position where she felt happy and fitted in well.

When participants found a clinic where they had a strong sense of fit, they felt they belonged and were motivated in their work:

*I think we all shared common values...and we all practise very similarly...and we work very cohesively as a team. (NG11)*

Feeling part of a collaborative, supportive, and friendly team that shared values, mutual respect, and communicated openly was considered the most important factor for new graduates' sense of fit in a clinic, enabling them to thrive.

#### 5.4.5.3.2 Meeting expectations

Job fit was also dependent on matching the clinical expectations of new graduates and the needs of the practice. Many participants chose not to focus on a single area of clinical practice in their first job, instead opting for mixed practice roles to gain clinical skills across different species. However, others were motivated to work in species-specific clinics. For some participants, geographic location was also a component of the 'job fit'. Personal circumstances, proximity to family, hobbies, and lifestyle influenced decision-making for some new graduates.

Most participants in this study felt that their experience of working in clinical practice was what they had expected or better. Some expected to have a negative experience but found the opposite to be true:

*I found coming into practice wasn't as bad as I thought. I kind of had this scary feeling about how my first year was going to be, but I'm very fortunate that I have a really good job, with a really good support network. (NG3)*

Most participants felt that the technical aspects of working in clinical practice met their expectations. However, some found the non-technical aspects of their work, such as managing interpersonal relationships and the challenges associated with client communication, more difficult than they anticipated.

Some participants expected a more varied case exposure in mixed practice and felt disappointed that they were primarily doing companion animal consults and far fewer production animal calls. However, they acknowledged that it was sensible to start in the companion animal side of the practice as there was easier access to support from the clinic team. Many appreciated the opportunity to take specific cases “out the back” to the treatment room for advice and help.

New graduates agreed that they only fully understood what the job entailed once they started working in clinical practice. Some felt that they were not prepared for “*how tired or sometimes emotionally draining it can be*” (NG13) working in a full-time clinical role. However, most found working in clinical practice very satisfying:

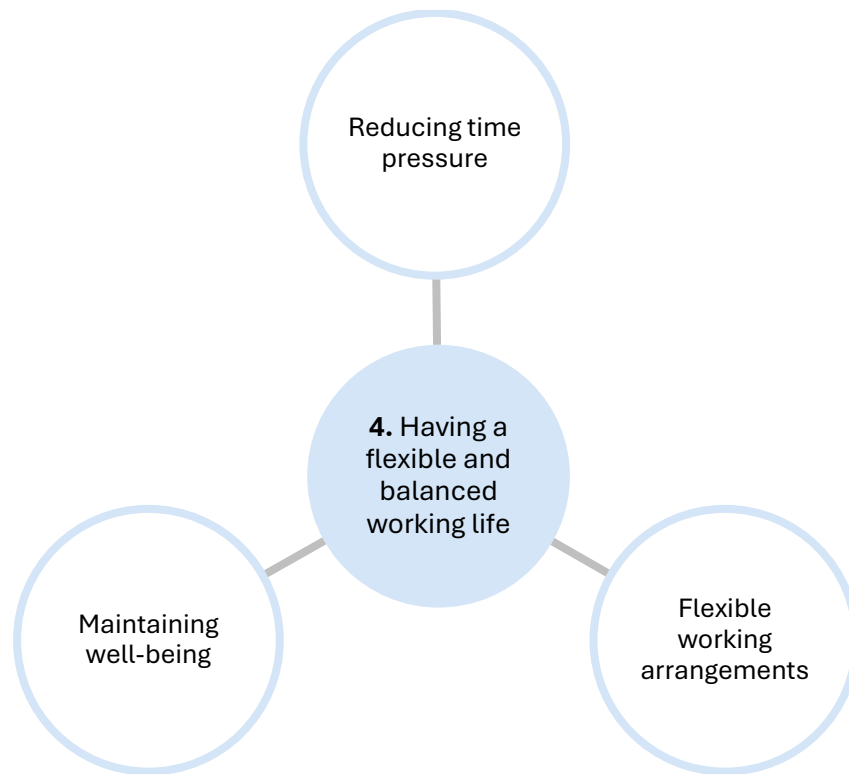
*So, for me, working in practice, beyond words could describe, exceeded my expectations. And it wasn't until I was actually working that I realised how amazing our job is and how much I enjoyed being a vet. (NG1)*

#### 5.4.6 Theme 4: Having a flexible and balanced working life

This theme referred to new graduates' experiences of managing the demands of clinical veterinary work while allowing time for other important non-work activities. Participants acknowledged the need to strike a balance between their work and personal lives. They explained the well-being benefits of incorporating enjoyable activities into their workweek. These activities included spending time with friends and family, going to the gym, engaging in social sports, and volunteering in the community. For participants, a healthy work-life balance was closely tied to the three sub-themes: reduced time pressure, flexible working arrangements and maintaining well-being, as shown in Figure 5.5. It was noteworthy that a healthy work-life balance looked different for each participant, highlighting the fact that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to this concept.

**Figure 5.5**

*Theme 4: Having a flexible and balanced working life with its three nested sub-themes*



#### *5.4.6.1 Reducing time pressure*

New graduates in this study valued the support of managers and leaders who reduced time pressure for them. They described having extended consultation times and scheduled time outside of clinical duties for administrative tasks, such as writing up clinical records and returning phone calls.

Extended consultation times were particularly appreciated by participants during their early months of practice, helping them build clinical confidence and reduce stress. Many reported standard consults of 30 minutes, with some clinics allowing up to 40 or 60 minutes for more complex cases. This extra time allowed them to thoroughly examine cases, ask questions, and build rapport with clients without feeling rushed. The benefits of this support were still noted by some participants even 2 years after graduation.

Participants commented on the benefits of having a scheduled break between consultations and time between farm calls, which allowed them to research cases and catch up on notes and phone calls without feeling pressured and worried about falling behind:

*I have my half-hour consult but then I have like 30 minutes, they wouldn't book an appointment there, so I would have an hour essentially, to do that first consult, which was helpful. (NG11)*

Having time set aside at work to complete paperwork meant that participants were less likely to become overwhelmed. By not taking work home, they could enjoy out-of-work activities and have a healthier work-life balance.

#### 5.4.6.2 Flexible working arrangements

Flexible working hours were also important for participants' well-being and work-life balance. Most participants were employed on a full-time basis. However, some were supported to work part-time for personal reasons, and others had extended periods away from work to accommodate health issues. Participants working full-time hours mentioned other flexible work arrangements. An example of this was working compressed hours. This involved working four 10-hour days and enjoying one free day each week:

*It was much more manageable having that extra day off just to get errands and personal appointments and everything like that. So, I think that's actually a great way to do it: the four-day work week. (NG11)*

Others appreciated having time off in lieu of recognition of their after-hours work. Some participants felt that, without the flexibility to work part-time or adjust their hours to accommodate a health issue, their clinical careers might have ended prematurely:

*They supported me through it. I ended up having to actually take six weeks off work and then went back to work part-time smallies [companion animals]. I'm fine now, but that could have just been the end of my career. (NG16)*

Some interviewees in mixed/predominantly dairy practices mentioned having a half-day off weekly as a bonus added to their contract if they were on the after-hours roster. Having a weekly scheduled half-day off was considered very helpful for fitting in "life admin" personal appointments and commitments, especially when there was flexibility to choose different half-days off.

#### 5.4.6.3 Maintaining well-being

Within this sub-theme, participants expressed the view that maintaining well-being was a shared responsibility. On the one hand, the workplace played a key role by providing support and a manageable workload, and by encouraging a healthy work-life balance. On the other hand,

individual veterinarians were responsible for actively looking after their own well-being, including setting boundaries and practising self-care. Five minor themes informed this sub-theme: 1. Acknowledging well-being at work, 2. Establishing boundaries, 3. Personal well-being strategies, 4. Focus on the positives: a growth mindset, and 5. Emotional intelligence: Self-awareness and self-compassion.

#### 5.4.6.3.1 Acknowledging well-being at work

The new graduates recognised the value of team meetings that embraced well-being. They found these meetings helpful for discussing daily tasks, addressing potential challenges, recognising successes, and checking in on everyone's well-being. For example, one participant talked about the introduction of a well-being "colour system" during their team meetings. This initiative provided a respectful understanding of how individuals were feeling:

*...what colour are you today? So, green for good, orange for could be better - and then red for please don't talk to me or give me anything more on my plate than I already have -you say what colour you are, but there's no expectation to say, I'm red because.... It's just that you're red, and people respect that you're not the person to go to with the extra stuff. I find that really helpful. (NG12)*

#### 5.4.6.3.2 Establishing boundaries

New graduates discussed the importance of establishing boundaries between their work and home life. Participants consistently appreciated managers and senior team members who role-modelled healthy work-home boundaries.

Many discovered that working in clinical practice created emotional challenges and sometimes blurred the boundaries between work and personal life. Some participants recalled cases that had stuck in their minds and admitted that they found it challenging to avoid "*thinking or talking about cases*" (NG15) at home. Such rumination about work led to overthinking and second-guessing their decisions. The ability of new graduates to cope effectively with the pressure of practice and maintain a healthy life balance appeared to be a learned skill that developed over time:

*Switching off from work is hard. I've realised that it's gotten easier over the years. (NG14)*

Others also noted that their ability to integrate work and personal life improved over the first 2 years in practice.

#### 5.4.6.3.3 Personal well-being strategies

Participants highlighted the importance of prioritising their self-care, which sometimes meant saying no to additional commitments. They discussed things they enjoyed doing outside of work, and noted that limiting work-related contact outside of working hours led to improvements in their well-being over time:

*Setting boundaries is very important. Not feeling guilty for saying no, taking care of yourself and having a life outside of work. [...] I have my horse, my friends, hiking and kayaking.[...] turning phone notifications off. When I'm off, I like to be completely off. (NG11)*

Many participants proactively adopted strategies to help them disconnect from work, which enabled them to develop clearer boundaries:

*When I leave work, I've hopefully left it. (NG8)*

Many participants enjoyed outdoor activities like running, fishing, surfing, biking, and walking. Others highlighted the benefits of gym classes or team sports, such as netball and hockey. Others noted that social football and touch rugby were “fun” and a great way to get involved in the community. Some described more passive activities to relax and disconnect from work, such as listening to music, reading, watching television, and spending time with their own animals, family, and friends.

#### 5.4.6.3.4 Emotional intelligence

Several new graduates also emphasised the importance of EI, including self-compassion and self-awareness. They also discussed the importance of focusing on the positives and embracing a growth mindset as essential tools for overall well-being. Recognising early signs of work-related stress and taking action to address them were mentioned by several new graduates as crucial for maintaining mental health. Some participants shared an ability to accept themselves and be kind to themselves:

*For me being able to recognise my triggers and take a step back, whether that's just been taking time off, that's been invaluable. (NG1)*

Participants who were self-aware and self-compassionate developed resilience and established a realistic outlook on clinical practice. Although participants wanted to do a good job and had high expectations of themselves, many were realistic and kind to themselves when things did not go as planned. They reported that understanding their own thoughts and emotions helped them avoid getting into a negative cycle of overthinking, which can contribute to anxiety and stress.

Participants recognised that poor outcomes occur in clinical practice, and it was important not to dwell on them too long:

*I don't tend to ponder on things too long, or ruminate too much, but I'm quite aware of my feelings, and why I felt something, [...] well maybe this didn't go too well, but you can't be perfect, so next time you know better. I don't tend to be too hard on myself. which is funny because I was such a perfectionist. (NG20)*

Being honest with themselves and others was an important part of participants' self-awareness. Many acknowledged the importance of being truthful about their knowledge and abilities as new graduate veterinarians. Participants noted that being transparent with clients when things did not go as planned often helped to resolve issues, and others mentioned being honest with clients when they were unsure and needed help.

*When dealing with a challenging case or an unfamiliar problem, having the confidence to say I don't actually know off the top of my head but I'll consult some colleagues who might know and do some reading [...], maybe I've just been lucky, but most people are very reasonable. (NG1)*

Many participants recognised that there would always be aspects of the job that they did not enjoy. However, by focusing on the positive aspects of their working life rather than dwelling on the negatives, participants felt happier and more grateful. This mindset enabled them to embrace challenges and view mistakes or poor outcomes as opportunities for learning. Practising gratitude was seen as a helpful strategy for maintaining perspective, with one participant feeling “*very blessed and grateful*” (NG6) to work as a clinical veterinarian. Others made a habit of reflecting on small positive moments in their day:

*I have a little gratitude journal where I write [...] a really cool reflective tool, just to think back on a day. The fact that I've gone for the positives; I've actively done that, because I think it's easy to have one negative thing happen in the day, and that be the thing that you focus on, but there's always something positive in the day – even if it's been the gloomiest day. (NG10)*

## 5.5 Discussion

This study was designed to gain a deeper understanding of the factors that support new and recently graduated veterinarians transitioning into and thriving within clinical veterinary practice in New Zealand.

It has been well reported in the literature that younger and more recently graduated veterinarians experience higher levels of stress and compromised psychological well-being (Gardner & Hini, 2006), and the transition to clinical practice is recognised as a particularly challenging period (Gilling & Parkinson, 2009). This can result in an increased risk of clinical errors if there is inadequate support offered (Mellanby & Herrtage, 2004).

A key finding was that a supportive workplace environment was a critical factor for thriving amongst new graduates.

### 5.5.1 Developing proficiency and confidence in technical and non-technical skills

Most new and recent veterinary graduates in this study reported being highly motivated to learn, eager to gain practical experience, and often set high expectations for themselves. Developing technical and clinical confidence and competence was a primary focus for them. They also recognised the importance of improving their non-technical skills to develop strong relationships with the team and effectively communicate with clients. It was clear that new graduates required several factors to grow proficiency and confidence in clinical practice. These included personal attributes, learning from mistakes, effective mentorship, receiving constructive feedback and tailored support.

#### 5.5.1.1 *Personal attributes*

The successful transition of new graduates from university to clinical practice in this study was influenced by the interaction between a positive workplace environment and the personal attributes of the new graduates. Personal attributes that contributed to a successful transition included curiosity and a love of learning, along with EI, encompassing self-awareness, self-compassion, proactive behaviour, and a growth mindset, which supported reflective learning. These findings are similar to those of Mastenbroek (2017), who used the job demands-resources model (JD-R) and found that both the job and personal resources promoted engagement among young veterinary professionals in the Netherlands. The study highlighted that being proactive, reflective, and having self-efficacy were positively linked to engagement. These qualities could be increased by implementing a year-long personal resources development programme (Mastenbroek et al., 2015). In a recent study, Kittisiam (2025) found that EI in early-career veterinarians in Canada was enhanced with social support. The authors showed that high levels of EI were associated with positive well-being and thriving of recent graduates in clinical practice. New graduates in the present study who focused on the positive aspects rather than dwelling on

poor outcomes developed a sense of gratitude. This approach has been shown to increase positive emotions and well-being, aligning with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing.

The current research demonstrated the influence of effective mentorship and collegial support in the development of new graduates' personal resources. Some participants experienced feelings of self-doubt and a fear of making mistakes. This is not surprising as, according to Mellanby and Herrtage (2004), 78% of new graduates make clinical errors early in their careers, which could negatively impact their psychological well-being. However, new graduates in this research who had effective mentor support, embraced self-compassion, and reflected on situations, were able to manage their self-doubt and develop a growth mindset. This helped them grow into independent veterinarians. This was consistent with the findings of Mastenbroek et al. (2015) who reported that reflective practice was critical for continuing personal development, as well as improved job performance and engagement.

#### *5.5.1.2 Effective support and mentorship*

Effective mentorship was critical for new graduates' smooth transition to practice, and this finding agreed with an earlier New Zealand study (Gilling & Parkinson, 2009) reporting that new graduates need a supportive environment to build confidence. More recently, Gates et al. (2020) reported that a lack of appropriate support was a significant contributing factor that could result in recent graduates leaving their jobs.

Effective mentorship in this study included a combination of both formal and informal support. Mentorship was primarily provided by senior veterinarians or, in some instances, by junior veterinarians who had graduated more recently and worked at the same clinic as the participant. New graduates appreciated tailored support that matched their learning needs and abilities. They highlighted the importance of a mentor who provided feedback, communicated openly and was accessible. They valued a supportive mentor who was passionate about the profession, cared about their well-being, and created a safe space for discussing their concerns. These findings concur with those of Eller et al. (2014), who reported that mentees appreciated mentors who provided constructive feedback and were available, approachable, and non-judgmental. The need for a safe mentoring environment was demonstrated by Niehoff et al. (2005) in a survey of mentoring relationships among veterinary practitioners in the USA. The authors highlighted the benefits of mentors who provided veterinarians with both psychosocial support and professional growth.

Participants in the present study described successful mentor–mentee relations as a partnership. This relationship was shaped not only by the mentor’s support but also by the new graduate’s enthusiasm, proactivity, and commitment. Trust emerged as a fundamental element of effective mentorship, developing gradually over time, consistent with previous findings (Niehoff et al., 2005). Some participants in this study referred to their mentors as ‘friends’ when describing a meaningful mentorship bond and presumed this was a reciprocal feeling with their mentors. Previous research in the nursing profession has found that while mentees often described mentorship as a ‘friendship’, their mentors sometimes did not, suggesting a discrepancy in how the relationship is perceived (Eller et al., 2014).

New graduates in the current study were generally proactive and comfortable asking mentors and senior veterinarians for help. In contrast, Freeman et al. (2022b) reported that veterinary students found that asking for help was a barrier to effective mentorship. This highlighted the need to equip new graduates with the mentee skills required for their transition into practice. To address this issue, a mentee-skill training programme was developed and integrated into the Canadian veterinary undergraduate curriculum, focusing on enhancing self-directed learning skills (Hodgson et al., 2022). This initiative had a positive impact on the transition of new graduates to practice, highlighting the importance of mentees understanding their role in the process and actively engaging in their own learning and development (Freeman et al., 2022b).

The present study highlighted the benefits of non-compulsory new graduate programmes provided by veterinary practices. Participants appreciated the collegiality and professional growth they experienced through participation in the programmes. They particularly enjoyed the “new grad days”, which were facilitated educational and social get-togethers of new and recent graduates within and between veterinary clinics. These meetings allowed participants to share experiences with other new graduates, engage in discussions with experienced veterinarians, and learn and build relationships in a psychologically safe environment. Interestingly, a recent survey of recent graduates in New Zealand found that most were not supportive of introducing compulsory new graduate programmes, although they did identify the need for better support (Gates et al., 2020). In contrast, New Zealand veterinarians who were employers and acted as mentors generally supported some components of formal new graduate support programmes, such as regular meetings to discuss performance and well-being, and non-compulsory checklists (Gates, McLachlan, et al., 2021).

The results of the present study indicated that a smooth transition to practice depended on effective mentorship and the development of trusting relationships. Those who reported receiving

holistic wraparound support from the wider veterinary team in a psychologically safe environment experienced a positive start to their careers.

## 5.5.2 Developing trusting relationships

Although developing clinical proficiency was a priority, new graduates in the present study recognised the need for good communication skills to build trusting relationships with clients and colleagues. This finding is consistent with Bell et al. (2019), who identified that communication with clients and team members was consistently highlighted by both employers and new graduate employees as critical for employability, for navigating the transition phase, and for career longevity.

The new graduates in the present study were surprised by the level of communication skills they required in clinical practice and appreciated the professional skills training they received as students. Similarly, Rhind et al. (2011) found that recent graduates developed a greater appreciation for non-technical skills during the transition to clinical practice compared to final-year students who prioritised clinical knowledge.

### 5.5.2.1 *Client relationships: Enjoyable but challenging*

Many participants highly valued the positive relationships they had with clients. Although helping animals was important, they recognised that working with people was one of the most satisfying aspects of being a veterinarian. The emphasis on the human side of veterinary work as a source of satisfaction for recent graduates differs from previous studies, which reported that working with animals was the most significant motivator for new graduates (M Cake et al., 2019; Figley & Roop, 2006). Many participants in the present study found that communicating with clients was a highlight of their job despite its challenges. They felt confident in simplifying veterinary terminology and building rapport with clients. However, managing conflict and discussing treatment options with clients who had limited financial resources proved more challenging. Likewise, a Canadian study found that veterinary students mostly lacked confidence in managing clients who were angry, discussing financial issues and breaking bad news about a pet's condition (Meehan & Menniti, 2014). Participants who received effective support in these situations gained confidence over time, and some even described how managing challenging interactions became a particularly satisfying aspect of their job. This is consistent with the development of a 'challenge-focused identity' (Armitage-Chan & May, 2018), where client engagement and overcoming challenges brought new graduates satisfaction rather than frustration and a higher degree of well-being.

Identity formation is central to Cake and colleagues' (2021) employability framework. New graduates in the present study who received support from their workplace in developing an appropriate professional identity were better able to manage the various challenges of clinical work. Some participants enjoyed navigating difficult conversations when resources were limited. They described how they had to deviate from the 'gold standard' of veterinary care but felt comfortable offering an appropriate, alternative plan of action. This aligns with the spectrum of care (SoC) approach, which provides a practical sliding scale of treatment options from the expensive gold standard to more affordable alternatives (Stull et al., 2018). Moving away from using the term 'gold-standard care' (which implies providing advanced technology and intensive treatment) and adopting a contextualised or SoC approach has been suggested as a more appropriate way to provide optimal care for patients (Skipper et al., 2021). Furthermore, embracing the SoC approach could help new graduates develop a challenge-focused identity where their priorities include client relationships and managing ethically challenging situations (Armitage-Chan & May, 2018). New graduates who feel confident navigating the complexities of clinical practice are more likely to find satisfaction and thrive in their work, even when faced with the financial constraints of their clients (Warman et al., 2023).

The present study adds weight to the existing evidence supporting the development of a professional identity among new graduates suited to general practice. As such, a professional reasoning framework has been incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum in the UK (Armitage-Chan, 2020a). However, getting students to engage in such intangible concepts at veterinary school could be a challenge, and it may be more realistic for new graduates to develop their professional identity during the first years of clinical practice.

#### *5.5.2.2 Belonging to a supportive team*

Positive relationships with team members significantly influenced graduates' job satisfaction, sense of belonging, and well-being. This finding is consistent with a previous study that demonstrated the positive influence of effective teams on psychosocial health and work satisfaction in veterinary practice (Moore et al., 2014). Furthermore, new graduates in the current study thrived when working collaboratively within teams toward shared goals. This aligns with a recent study by Blokland et al. (2025), which found that veterinary employees who experienced relational coordination within their teams reported a more positive psychosocial work environment along with increased job satisfaction and commitment. Relational coordination is defined as "a mutually reinforcing process of interaction between communication and relationships carried out for the purpose of task integration" (Gittell, 2002, p. 301). It involves

effective and timely communication, mutual respect, and the sharing of knowledge between team members, and has been shown to increase team performance and improve patient care in healthcare settings (Gittell, 2002). Carmeli and Gittell (2009) demonstrated an association between the high-quality relationships identified in relational coordination and team psychological safety, which enables learning from mistakes and is discussed below.

New graduates in the present study acknowledged the support and mentorship they received from veterinarians. However, they also deeply valued the wraparound support and guidance they received from their non-veterinarian team members. Experienced veterinary nurses and LAVTs played a crucial role in participants' support networks. These non-veterinarian team members frequently demonstrated strong teamwork skills, a finding that aligns with the observations of P. Clarke et al. (2019). Participants in the present study described some nurses and LAVTs as inclusive, knowledgeable, empathetic, flexible, and easily accessible, providing them with essential day-to-day practical and emotional support. However, the valuable contributions of these non-veterinary team members to new graduates' transition into practice are not widely recognised in the literature. Greater utilisation and recognition of veterinary nurses and LAVTs as mentors for new graduates could improve their motivation, engagement, job satisfaction and overall performance; a stance supported by previous research (Brown, 2023; Moore et al., 2014). In turn, this recognition may improve the support these valuable non-veterinarian team members provide to new graduates during their transition to practice.

### *5.5.2.3 Psychological safety*

Psychological safety refers to individual team members feeling comfortable speaking up, asking questions, admitting mistakes, and offering ideas without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or punishment (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety was a critical factor in shaping a positive work environment in the present study.

The concept of psychological safety has recently gained attention in the veterinary context due to its positive impact on workplace culture, job satisfaction, employee well-being, and retention (McKay & Vaisman, 2023). Similar benefits have been observed in the human health sector, where it has been linked to improved team well-being (Jamal et al., 2023), job satisfaction (Moin et al., 2021), staff retention (Rangachari & Woods, 2020), and better patient health outcomes (Jamal et al., 2023). Moreover, psychological safety develops gradually but can quickly erode when trust is compromised. When it is present, however, it promotes learning from mistakes (Carmeli & Gittell, 2009). The results of the present study strongly suggest that psychological safety is a key factor enabling thriving amongst new veterinary graduates

New graduates in this study felt safe when they belonged to a supportive, collaborative, and trusting team, where they felt comfortable speaking up about work concerns, admitting mistakes, and asking for support without fear of judgment. Unfortunately, the stigma surrounding poor psychological well-being amongst veterinarians can lead to feelings of shame when seeking help, creating a significant barrier to help-seeking. In response to this issue, Allister (2020) suggested that regulators and professional bodies should promote the image of a “good vet” as one who is confident in asking for help, encouraging a more supportive professional culture. This emphasises the importance of creating a psychologically safe environment where new graduates feel comfortable speaking up and asking for help.

Participants reported that having colleagues who demonstrated vulnerability was important to developing trusting relationships and a safe environment. They particularly valued the reassurance they felt when senior veterinarians talked openly about their own mistakes and failures during their veterinary careers. This is in agreement with Vaisman (2022), who reported that veterinary leaders who share their vulnerabilities can play a significant role in fostering a culture of trust and collaboration.

### 5.5.3 Feeling a sense of purpose and meaning

Participants reported that good clinical outcomes and making a difference to animals and clients provided them with job satisfaction and a sense of purpose in their work. This aligns with Morabito et al. (2025), who found that early-career Canadian veterinarians derived meaning from their clinical work when they felt they were making a difference, connecting with animals, and problem-solving. Earlier research has also shown that positive outcomes are a key source of satisfaction for veterinarians (Bartram, Yadegarfar, et al., 2009; Clise et al., 2021). Feeling valued, appreciated and receiving acknowledgement from clients and colleagues contributed to participants’ sense of purpose. These experiences also positively influenced new graduates’ self-efficacy, satisfaction, and sense of well-being. Receiving specific, authentic, and positive feedback, as well as being thanked by clients and colleagues, boosted participants’ confidence and contributed to their motivation. These findings align with Brun and Dugas’s (2008) review of employee recognition, demonstrating its importance and value in the workplace. Furthermore, acknowledgement and appreciation have also been cited as a source of pleasure in veterinary work (Clise et al., 2021). Enhancing new graduates’ sense of purpose and meaning in their work by fostering positive relationships, promoting personal growth, and offering recognition and support is likely to improve their overall well-being and ability to thrive in clinical practice.

### *5.5.3.1 Job-person fit: The core of professional satisfaction and success*

When new graduates' unique capabilities, personalities, core values, and beliefs aligned with those of the practice, they experienced a strong 'job-person fit', which led to a sense of purpose, job satisfaction, and commitment. The concept of 'job-person fit' is part of the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), which refers to the alignment between an individual's values, skills, and personality with the demands and culture of their job. The findings of this study support this theory, which postulates that a strong person-organisation fit has a positive influence on job satisfaction and retention. The results of the present study also align with earlier research by Judge (1994), which found that employees who experience good job fit tend to be more satisfied at work, perform better, and are less likely to consider leaving.

The veterinary literature also supports the importance of job fit. Viner (2010) suggested that career success in clinical practice requires alignment of workplace and personal values. Cake et al. (2021) proposed "finding fit" as a critical part of employability, dependent on personal and contextual alignment. The authors suggested that focusing on job-person fit, rather than a narrower view of competency, may lead to improved early-career success for veterinarians.

New graduates in this study entered the workforce with a professional identity shaped by their expectations of support, ethical standards (particularly concerning animal care and welfare), professional development, and work-life balance. Matching their expectations with those of the practice was an important element of job-person fit. Participants whose expectations were met or exceeded and who felt their work aligned with their personal and professional aspirations experienced a good fit with their workplaces. They described a smooth transition and a positive start to their careers, and some expressed a long-term commitment to clinical practice. Conversely, a mismatch of values and needs can lead to stress, burnout, and a potential departure from clinical practice (Gates et al., 2020).

Finding a good fit often required more than a job interview; it required understanding the interpersonal dynamics within the workplace and the new graduate's personality. Many participants in this study had completed placements as students at the practices where they later worked and reported that this allowed the student and the clinic team to get to know each other, evaluate the potential for a good job-person fit, and make decisions accordingly.

New graduates identified positive team relationships as a key factor in their early-career success. Feeling part of the team extended beyond professional alignment and included fitting in with the social fabric of the practice. Those who built strong working relationships and friendships within

their team experienced a deep sense of belonging and embeddedness in their workplace. The concept of “job embeddedness” was introduced by Mitchell et al. (2001), who showed that the more embedded and connected a person is to their team and community, the stronger their job-person links and the greater the perceived sacrifice of leaving. This concept appeared to hold true for new graduates in this study. When new graduates were deeply embedded in their jobs through strong team relationships and community connections, such as social sports, family, friends and clients, especially in rural practice, they had a sense of belonging and positive well-being.

#### 5.5.4 Having a flexible, balanced working life

Having a flexible work environment that enabled new graduates to ease into clinical practice, manage their personal well-being, and maintain a good work-life balance was highly beneficial. These findings align with Bell et al. (2019), who reported that a good work-life balance was an important factor in new graduates’ transition to practice. On the other hand, Hagen et al. (2022) cited poor work-life balance as the most common reason for leaving the veterinary profession, highlighting the need to support new graduates in achieving a work-life balance without the added stress of time pressure.

Participants felt less overwhelmed and more engaged when they had less time pressure. In a survey of mistakes made by recent graduates, Mellanby and Herrtage (2004) reported that respondents felt that lack of time and experience were contributory factors to their mistakes. The results of the present study found that flexible scheduling, such as extended consultation times and organised periods during the workday to complete notes and make follow-up phone calls, contributed to the well-being and confidence of new graduates.

Other flexible work arrangements reported in the present study included a compressed four-day workweek and flexible time off in lieu of after-hours work. Additionally, providing a flexible, supportive working environment was crucial for new graduates to balance their work with personal needs, such as holidays, leisure activities, and health-related leave when required. Kersebohm et al. (2017) identified holidays and leisure time as critical factors that provided job satisfaction among German veterinarians. Similarly, work-life balance, schedule flexibility, and a shorter workweek were significant factors for retention in a recent study of early-career veterinarians working in a clinical university role (Fletcher et al., 2024). While the demands on veterinarians working in an academic setting may differ from those in private practice, this still highlights the need to address work-life balance and flexibility across various clinical situations.

### 5.5.5 Summary

New graduates transition to, and early-career in, clinical veterinary practice can be framed as an exciting period of rapid growth and development. A successful transition was influenced by factors that created a supportive work environment, as well as the participant's personal attributes, such as curiosity, proactive behaviour, self-awareness, and self-compassion. Key factors included support and constructive feedback from caring, accessible mentors, as well as from veterinary colleagues and non-veterinarian team members. Productive, trust-based mentoring partnerships require commitment from both mentors and mentees who share the same values. Good communication skills and the development of a professional identity suited to general practice were essential for new graduates' ability to build relationships with colleagues and clients and to manage challenging conversations.

Trusting relationships and shared information about mistakes and vulnerabilities were necessary for creating a psychologically safe environment that enabled new graduates to learn from their mistakes, feel reassured and thrive. A good job-person fit was a critical factor in new graduates' success and depended on the alignment of personal and workplace values, often established during student placements. Other important factors included belonging to a supportive team, achieving a work-life balance, flexible scheduling, and reducing time pressure. When these factors were in place, the new graduates in this study experienced a heightened sense of satisfaction and professional growth, which facilitated their successful transition into clinical practice and an enjoyable start to their careers.

A good start in clinical practice can have a profoundly positive impact on how new graduates feel about their career and can lead to early-career success. Conversely, a poor early experience increases the risk of them leaving a job or the profession. This highlights the importance of strong support in the first few years in practice to enable young veterinarians to thrive in their roles.

## Chapter 6: Study 3

# Insights from employee veterinarians on well-being interventions in clinical practice

### 6.1 Overview

This chapter examines the measures implemented by veterinary clinics to support their employees to experience positive well-being and thrive. It addresses my third research question, which had two elements:

1. What initiatives do veterinarians believe their workplace has implemented to support employee well-being and professional growth?
2. What do veterinarians feel supports their personal well-being and ability to thrive at work?

The chapter starts with a brief introduction to the literature on workplace well-being initiatives in clinical veterinary practice. It then describes the methods specific to this study, in particular, participant selection, interview processes, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The results section is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides an overview of the measures veterinary practices were taking to support employee well-being, and part 2 presents an in-depth analysis of initiatives that were perceived to be making a positive impact for veterinarians working in clinical practice.

### 6.2 Introduction

As discussed in Chapter 2, the well-being and psychological health of veterinarians have received growing attention over the past two decades. The increasing body of veterinary well-being research has highlighted the challenges facing the profession, prompting greater awareness of the importance of supporting veterinary teams in clinical practice. In response, many veterinary businesses have recognised that prioritising employee well-being is not only a moral obligation but also provides financial and organisational benefits.

Recent research has shown that veterinarians perceive that poor mental health and stress negatively impact clinical outcomes and team effectiveness in clinical practice (Campbell et al., 2023). Similarly, depression among doctors has been linked to higher medical errors (Fahrenkopf et al., 2008). On the other hand, research also shows the important benefits of positive veterinary well-being, including career satisfaction (Wallace, 2019), intention to stay in clinical practice (Begeny et al., 2018), and the ability to provide better patient care (Campbell et al., 2023). Good

veterinary leadership and a psychologically safe team environment have recently been shown to reduce adverse events, which improved veterinarians' psychological well-being (Kogan et al., 2025). Additionally, improved well-being has been reported to increase team effectiveness and have financial benefits for businesses (Paton et al., 2024). It has, therefore, been suggested that the creation of healthy workplaces that encourage positive well-being is an important way to enhance veterinary performance and increase productivity in veterinary practice (Campbell et al., 2023; Oxtoby et al., 2015). Practice owners and leaders are beginning to see the value of creating workplaces with the well-being of the people at the centre (Paton et al., 2024).

Much of the focus within the veterinary profession has been on developing solutions to address the complex issue of poor mental health. However, many of the reported well-being interventions focus on individual-level solutions to reducing stress. Examples include developing coping skills, reducing barriers to help-seeking (Hilton et al., 2023), providing educational support on mental health and mindfulness-based approaches (Rohlf, 2018), and building personal resources and resilience (Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Scherpbier, et al., 2014). This focus on the individual overlooks the strong evidence that veterinary well-being is a dual responsibility of the individual and the workplace (Bartram et al., 2010; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020; Reinhard, 2023a). Hilton et al. (2023) note that initiatives aimed at improving individuals' resilience remain valuable. However, they also acknowledge that broader workplace interventions may offer a more straightforward way to enhance the psychological well-being of veterinary clinic employees.

In their review of veterinarians' psychological well-being, Moir and Van den Brink (2020) suggested that system-level factors, such as high workloads, being on call, and long working hours, should be addressed alongside building individual resilience. Similarly, a survey by Connolly et al. (2022) found that workplace stressors in veterinary practice are best managed through a combination of individual and organisational strategies. This twofold approach to well-being was highlighted in earlier research by Bartram et al. (2010) and echoed in a recent Australian qualitative study conducted by van Gelderen et al. (2025). Bartram et al. (2010) recommended interventions that increased autonomy and support, encouraging individuals' help-seeking behaviour. The authors also suggested implementing formal procedures to identify (and mitigate) psychosocial risks to create psychologically safe workplaces. Additionally, Mudry et al. (2025) developed and validated a tool to measure workplace stressors in the veterinary environment. Their Veterinary Stressor Questionnaire (Vet-SQ) has been a positive step in the identification of psychosocial risks in veterinary practice.

Psychological safety has been defined by Edmondson (1999) as a critical component of a positive workplace culture, which increases the efficiency and performance of teams. Mistakes and errors in clinical practice are not uncommon, especially among new and recent graduates, and can significantly impact veterinarians' well-being (Mellanby & Herrtage, 2004). However, when employees feel psychologically safe discussing challenges, asking for help, and viewing mistakes as opportunities for learning rather than failures, their well-being improves (Newman et al., 2017). Consequently, Reinhard (2023a) has suggested that employers focus on developing psychological safety in the workplace as a key strategy to support early-career veterinarians.

Several veterinary organisations worldwide have recently encouraged programmes that promote psychological safety in veterinary clinics and improve workplace culture (AVA, 2025; BVA, 2024; McKay & Vaisman, 2023). These initiatives include bespoke psychological safety and mental health awareness training sessions, as well as recommendations for creating sustainable and healthy work environments. Volk et al. (2024) highlighted the link between a positive, psychologically safe environment in veterinary clinics and positive well-being and lower burnout among veterinarians. They identified key aspects of a positive clinic culture, including team belonging, high trust and open, honest communication, which they suggested may reduce the stigma associated with poor psychological well-being and encourage veterinarians to ask for help.

Maintaining a sustainable work-life balance has been reported as an important factor for positive mental health in veterinarians (Robinson et al., 2019). Furthermore, a healthy work-life balance has been identified as a key driver for veterinarians' intention to remain working in clinical practice (Begeny et al., 2018). Flexibility at work is an initiative that employers can provide to enable veterinarians to manage their work-life balance, and has been reported to be an important factor in veterinarian retention (AAHA, 2024). In addition, a recent white paper survey report of the New Zealand veterinary profession showed that flexible work hours were the most influential initiative that reduced stress among veterinarians (Fitzpatrick, 2024).

The effectiveness of well-being initiatives used in clinical veterinary practice is not widely reported. While previous studies demonstrated the importance of developing healthy, supportive work environments to sustain the veterinary profession, there has been a lack of detail on how this could be implemented in clinical practice. The present study addresses this gap by exploring veterinarians' perceptions of their clinic's efforts to support well-being, engagement and thriving, as well as how well these initiatives are seen to meet their specific needs.

## 6.3 Methods

### 6.3.1 Ethics approval

The ethical issues considered in this study included potential conflict of interest, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, data storage, and sharing of research findings. My approach to these ethical issues has been covered in detail in Chapter 3.

This study was reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 24/11, (Appendix 6A).

### 6.3.2 Participant selection

Purposive selection and convenience sampling (see Chapter 3 for more details) were used to select participants for this study. All participants for this study met the following selection criteria:

- Clinical veterinarians who graduated more than 3 years ago.
- Employed by their current practice for more than 1 year.
- Not an owner, shareholder or senior leader of the practice.

Participants were recruited through my professional networks by contacting practice owners and managers. Veterinarians were approached from a diverse range of practices in New Zealand, including rural mixed and production practices, urban companion animal practices, specialised after-hours practices, and equine practices. The practices varied in type, including privately owned clinics, club practices, multi-clinic businesses, and large corporate practices. The study's aims were explained to practice owners and managers over the phone, and this initial contact was followed up with an email (Appendix 6B) containing further details and an invitation to participate in the interviews. Practice owners and managers agreed to circulate the invitation amongst the veterinarians employed by the business.

Responding veterinarians were sent a personal email (Appendix 6C) with an information sheet (Appendix 6D) detailing the interview process, participants' rights, and support options. The interviews were coordinated directly with each participant via email and phone to arrange a suitable venue, date and time.

### 6.3.3 The interview process

Before commencing the interviews, participants were given a copy of the information sheet to review again and were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix 6E). The interview process is described in more detail in Chapter 3.

An interview guide (Appendix 6F) was developed in collaboration with my supervisors and tested in pilot interviews with two veterinarians. The pilot interviews followed the study procedure, obtaining participants' informed consent before recording and transcribing them. No major revisions were made to the interview guide, so, with the interviewee's consent, one of the pilot interviews was included in the study data due to its valuable insights.

All interviews began with a friendly conversation before the recording started. The interview guide was followed, starting with general demographic questions and then proceeding to open-ended questions. During the interview, I probed for further information on specific initiatives, being careful not to lead the conversation down a particular avenue. I encouraged the participants to share their stories freely, especially during the second part, which asked how their workplace supported them personally. I concluded all the interviews by asking if there was anything else they wanted to add about their experiences of well-being support in veterinary practice that had not been covered. Participants were thanked for their time, and the recording stopped.

Twenty-two interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location of the participant's choice, six were conducted online using video technology, and one was undertaken by telephone due to Wi-Fi issues. Most participants chose to meet in a quiet room at their workplace, such as a meeting room or office; three preferred to conduct the interview at their home, and two opted for a quiet café. The large distance between the interviewer and the participant, or isolation due to COVID-19 in one case, resulted in seven interviews being conducted remotely using online technology. Most interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

### 6.3.4 Preparation of transcripts

The recordings were downloaded onto my password-protected computer and transcribed *verbatim* by me or by a professional transcriber who had signed a confidentiality agreement (Appendix 6G). The transcripts were de-identified when checked for accuracy against the recordings. Veterinarians were assigned unique identifiers such as VE1, VE2, and VE3, representing veterinary employees 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Also, any names of places or people mentioned in the interviews that might identify the participants or other parties were replaced by pseudonyms or numbers. Participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts,

allowing them to check the transcripts for accuracy. Participants who requested to view their transcripts did not make any edits; however, one participant did add some further information in a separate email, which was incorporated into the data for analysis. The de-identified transcripts were imported into NVivo (QSR International, Melbourne, Australia, Version 14).

### 6.3.5 Data analysis

The flexible capacity of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b) was considered well suited for this study, which comprised two distinct parts. Firstly, an exploration of participants' perceptions of workplace well-being initiatives, followed by an in-depth interpretive analysis of their experiences with initiatives that benefited their personal well-being and engagement in clinical practice. The analysis process started with data familiarisation and note-taking before carrying out the six-phase thematic analysis approach as described by Braun and Clarke (2021b) and detailed in Chapter 3.

#### 6.3.5.1 Analysis for part 1

The analysis for part 1 aimed to generate an overview of the clinic's well-being initiatives as perceived by participant veterinarians. It therefore addressed the first part of the research question: *What initiatives do veterinarians perceive their workplace has implemented to support employee well-being and professional growth?* This was not intended to be a comprehensive inventory of initiatives implemented by clinics in New Zealand, but rather a representation of the participants' perceptions.

Reflexive TA provided the flexibility to develop semantic codes that captured the surface-level meaning of responses. This approach ensured that the analysis remained descriptive, focusing on what participants said about the various well-being initiatives at their clinics rather than interpreting underlying assumptions. The data was initially examined at a semantic level to generate initial codes. The codes represented labelled text segments where participants described workplace well-being initiatives, and similar codes were grouped into broader categories. These categories were then refined into four main themes, resulting in an organised grouping of well-being initiatives.

This structured yet flexible approach provided a clear and systematic summary of the well-being initiatives described by participants. The findings are presented in a summary table and reported in a descriptive format, with direct quotes included to support and illustrate each category.

### 6.3.5.2 Analysis for part 2

The second part of the interview aimed to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' feelings towards the initiatives and addressed the second part of the research question: *What do veterinarians feel supports their well-being and ability to thrive at work?* This stage involved an in-depth analysis of what specifically contributed to participants' personal well-being. Summarising the main concepts from each transcript using NVivo memos helped focus initial ideas and concepts before the analysis phase. Analysis was carried out using the six phases of TA as described by Braun and Clarke (2021b, p. 35), involving an iterative process of coding, developing sub-themes and identifying central themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021b) as described in Chapter 3.

To ensure depth and validity, I reviewed the coding and theme development process with three supervisors and revisited the transcripts to refine interpretations and theme definitions. Reflective notes were taken throughout the study process to document my thought process and record interesting findings. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and were provided with a copy of the findings to ensure that they accurately represented their experiences.

## 6.4 Results

### 6.4.1 Participant description

A total of 29 veterinarians from rural and urban veterinary practices across New Zealand took part in this study. Participants worked across a diverse range of species, including eight in mixed animal practice, eight in production animal practice, 12 in companion animal practice, and one in equine practice. Eighteen participating veterinarians had graduated between four and 12 years prior, while 11 had graduated more than 12 years prior. Eight veterinarians identified as male, and 21 identified as female. Participants were from various practice types, including 11 from privately owned practices, six from club practices, ten from large multi-practice veterinary businesses, and two from emergency after-hours practices (Appendix 6H). These practices were spread across both the North and South Islands of New Zealand (Appendix 6I).

### 6.4.2 Part 1: Initiatives implemented by veterinary clinics in New Zealand to support staff well-being as perceived by employee veterinarians

Participants described various initiatives that their practices implemented to support staff. However, many struggled to clearly remember specific initiatives unless they had actively

engaged with them. This lack of clarity was particularly evident regarding Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), with several participants unsure about the service provider or the number of available sessions. Well-being programmes and workshops were also poorly remembered by some participants.

Despite these challenges in recall, veterinarians collectively reported a range of initiatives that they perceived as supportive of staff well-being. Notably, their perception of well-being extended beyond the concept of providing mental health and well-being support to encompass initiatives that encouraged career development and professional growth, promoted effective teamwork, accommodated work flexibility, and nurtured a realistic work-life balance. These initiatives were grouped into four main categories, each with underlying sub-categories as shown in Table 6.1.

**Table 6.1**

*Participants' description of the well-being initiatives that veterinary clinics provide*

	<b>Category 1</b>	<b>Category 2</b>	<b>Category 3</b>	<b>Category 4</b>	
	<b>Mental health and well-being initiatives</b>	<b>Promotion of team collaboration</b>	<b>Support for work-life balance and flexibility</b>	<b>Career development and professional growth opportunities</b>	
<b>Sub-categories</b>	<b>1</b>	Access to counselling services	Informal social gatherings	Flexible work hours and part-time	Formal appraisals and feedback
	<b>2</b>	Mental health & well-being workshops and education	Team-building initiatives	Scheduled admin time and breaks	CPD budget
	<b>3</b>	Clinic wellness meetings	Recognition and appreciation of team members	Longer consultation times	In-house CPD
	<b>4</b>	Well-being champions	Formal and informal team meetings	Supportive leave policies	New graduate programmes
	<b>5</b>	Newsletters focused on well-being		After-hours compensation and fatigue management	
	<b>6</b>	Providing food at the clinic			
	<b>7</b>	Well-being allowances			
	<b>8</b>	Personal well-being initiatives			

#### 6.4.2.1 Category 1: Mental health and well-being initiatives

This theme encompasses initiatives implemented to support the mental health and well-being of staff and is underpinned by seven sub-categories:

##### 6.4.2.1.1 Access to counselling services

Access to counselling services provided confidential support for team members during challenging times. All participants had access to professional counselling services, primarily through a free EAP funded by the NZVA and VCNZ. Larger corporate practices often contracted their own EAP provider. Some participants arranged private counselling, with their practice contributing to the cost:

*We get free counselling support through our work, three sessions per problem. (VE17)*

*If someone's doing it hard and needs help, the clinic will pay for a couple of sessions with a private counsellor of their choice. (VE24)*

##### 6.4.2.1.2 Mental health and well-being workshops and education

Mental health workshops, programmes, and education raised awareness and aimed to equip staff with coping strategies:

*Our clinic is usually pretty good at allowing non-clinical training, and they run a mental health literacy course called Good Yarn. (VE21)*

Several participants reported that their clinics offered structured educational programmes focused on building mental health awareness, promoting self-care, and fostering resilience among staff members. External professionals often facilitated these programmes, with clinic staff sometimes trained as in-house facilitators. By adopting peer-led, internal delivery, clinics could regularly run workshops throughout the year and offer them to all employees. The sessions typically took place during work hours, and some well-being programmes extended over several weeks, providing ongoing support and engagement for the team. Other courses were offered online with self-directed content that could be worked on individually or in groups. Some participants mentioned that their clinic supported education evenings run by local health professionals about mental health and the impact of menopause, and others valued NZVA webinars around menopause in the workplace:

*She's leading some education in our area on menopause. I went to a night, and there were other people from our clinic there, as well – vets, as well as support staff, and HR, on their own journeys, but we all sort of said, this is a real thing – we've got to address it. (VE21)*

*We do our internally-run, seven-week course on recharging your batteries and resilience in the workplace. (VE1)*

Some clinics held “Languages of Appreciation” workshops that focused on understanding how team members prefer to receive recognition through words of affirmation, quality time, acts of service, or tangible gifts:

*One of the positive things we’ve all gone through is the Languages of Appreciation course. (VE26)*

#### 6.4.2.1.3 Clinic wellness meetings

Participants reported clinic wellness meetings as initiatives that encouraged well-being practices and fostered open discussions about well-being. Some clinics organised wellness meetings with external speakers. Others integrated well-being sessions into daily morning “toolbox” meetings, where the first part was focused on planning the day and the remaining time was dedicated to wellness. The clinic generally minimised disruptions during these meetings to enable staff to focus on their well-being activities or team-building activities before the day began:

*Each morning at 8 am, we have a 30-minute meeting – the first 10 minutes is just sort of a daily plan, and then 20 minutes is dedicated to wellness. So, as a team, we decide whether we want to do something active or passive; active would be yoga – and something passive would be meditation [...] We’ve also trained the clients; from 8–8:30, we’re in a team meeting, and this is our time for the team. (VE17)*

#### 6.4.2.1.4 Well-being champions

Some participants reported that their clinic had well-being champions or team members interested in mental health and well-being. Well-being champions were often from the human resources or health and safety team. These champions promoted clinic well-being and social initiatives, often serving as the primary point of contact for team members with any wellness-related questions or concerns:

*We actually have a health and safety person to specifically look after well-being, and she’s awesome; you can ring her anytime and talk to her. (VE13)*

#### 6.4.2.1.5 Newsletters and email updates focused on well-being

Several participants noted that clinic newsletters and group email messages were used to share updates on clinic activities, celebrate staff members’ successes, and offer well-being tips and

advice. These newsletters helped keep staff informed, fostered a sense of community and recognition within the clinic, and aimed to promote positive well-being and boost team spirits:

*We do a team newsletter on how to look after our well-being, like taking five minutes to breathe. There's usually always an article in there about well-being. (VE 1)*

#### 6.4.2.1.6 Providing food at the clinic

Participants noted that providing food at the clinic was a common practice. During the busy seasons, some clinics offered hot soup in the winter and sandwiches in the summer. Snacks, such as fresh fruit, chocolate, and muesli bars, were often available in the tearoom. Other initiatives included providing pizza during some meetings, offering complimentary access to a high-quality coffee machine, and offering morning and afternoon teas:

*One thing they've always done is provide food in the busy season, so come scanning time, calving time, repro time, when we're quite busy...there will be a warm soup or something in the kitchen that you can help yourself to, and in the summer, sandwiches that you can sort of take on the road. (VE11)*

#### 6.4.2.1.7 Well-being allowances

Participants spoke about well-being allowances. These allowances were paid out of their clinic's well-being fund, providing a yearly allowance for full-time employees and a proportional amount for part-time staff. This money could be used at the discretion of the staff member for activities that supported their mental or physical well-being, such as gym memberships, massages, or hobbies:

*The clinic gives us a well-being allowance. So, everyone gets \$500 a year to put towards something that would help their mental health. (VE29)*

#### 6.4.2.1.8 Personal well-being initiatives

Participants mentioned numerous well-being activities that they engaged in through their own initiative. They appreciated the clinic's support in achieving a healthy work-life balance, which enabled them to engage in various activities of their choice. For example, many were proactive about engaging in physical activities such as walking, running, biking, gym workouts, and team sports. Others mentioned mindful well-being initiatives, such as yoga and meditation. Others enjoyed relaxing pastimes such as cooking, reading, and music:

*I love running, so I'll often – if I've got a gap in the day, I'll go for a run. (VE14)*

*I get up an hour before everybody else, at home, and use the Calm app, and do 10 minutes of meditation, and I journal, and I do some affirmations. (VE21)*

#### 6.4.2.2 Category 2: Promoting team collaboration

Promotion of team collaboration aimed to foster strong team dynamics, which in turn supported the well-being of staff.

##### 6.4.2.2.1 Informal social gatherings

All participants discussed how informal social gatherings, supported by their clinics, helped strengthen relationships and foster a sense of camaraderie among staff members. These included after-work drinks and snacks at the clinic or pub, often at the end of the week. Some clinics provided monthly team lunches or Friday barbecues. Other social gatherings were also mentioned, such as team dinners to celebrate the completion of projects or the end of seasonal work. Morning and afternoon teas, as well as shared lunches, were frequently held, especially to farewell staff members. Clinics often celebrated team members' birthdays with cakes, and clinic Christmas parties were highlighted as major social events of the year:

*We always do little break-up dinners after any big season. So, if we do scanning, we'll have a scanning break-up dinner for the team. We just came through teat sealing, so we had like a pizza lunch for everyone and had a little chat and that kind of thing. (VE10)*

*Friday drinks at the clinic after work this is actually a really good way of finishing the week – even if you've had tension during the week, you can finish on a good note, and then it's the weekend, and you start afresh the next week. (VE6)*

##### 6.4.2.2.2 Team-building initiatives

Veterinarians described various team-building activities implemented at their clinics that aimed to foster stronger team connections and build trust among team members. Some clinics had social clubs with a budget for activities such as wine and cheese nights, quiz nights, and outings like mini-golf or bowling. Others organised clinic social sports teams, such as touch rugby, indoor netball, or volleyball, as well as community-focused projects like tree planting and fundraising events. Physical activities like nature walks, team sports, and group runs were common. Weekend getaways were also mentioned as opportunities for teams to bond and build a sense of togetherness:

*So, our clinic has a budget, and we could decide what we wanted to do with it. So, we went bowling and out for dinner. (VE18)*

*We do things socially outside of work, too – as a team. Some of us are going to one of our receptionists' bachs [holiday house] for the weekend. (VE17)*

#### 6.4.2.2.3 Recognition and appreciation of team members

Participants shared how their clinics appreciated the hard work of their team members. Recognition and appreciation initiatives, such as celebrating achievements and expressing gratitude, enhanced team morale and motivated individuals. Some encouraged team members to express appreciation for one another by anonymously writing about what they value in a colleague as part of team-building activities:

*The business does a monthly thing where all the clinics nominate people who have done something great that month, and it goes out in an email to the whole company. (VE10)*

#### 6.4.2.2.4 Team meetings

Participants described both formal and informal meetings that promoted open communication, problem-solving, and shared decision-making. These meetings helped foster a supportive environment where everyone had a voice, providing participants with a sense of collegiality and belonging.

Informal meetings, such as daily huddles or spontaneous discussions, served as valuable touchpoints that fostered connections in a safe environment. They enabled quick problem-solving, aligned team members on daily tasks and patient care, and promoted team collaboration:

*We go out the back and have a 15-minute breakdown about the day, how they're planning surgery to go ahead, and what we're expecting in consults. (VE13)*

Formal meetings were held regularly, typically on a monthly or quarterly basis. They involved all clinic staff and covered operational updates, team goals, and health and safety. These meetings tended to have an agenda and were usually chaired by the practice manager. Some clinics held case rounds to review successes and discuss challenging cases. In production animal practices, pre- and post-season meetings ensured teams were informed of updates and protocols:

*We have monthly to two-monthly meetings, so we might talk about protocols and things like that. So, I'll be giving a presentation next week about updating our CPR protocol. (VE17)*

### 6.4.2.3 Category 3: Support for work-life balance and flexibility

Participants described various initiatives that supported work-life balance and flexibility. Five sub-categories underpinned this category.

#### 6.4.2.3.1 Flexible work hours and part-time

Several participants discussed the flexibility offered by their clinics to support staff members who were juggling family commitments or personal challenges. This included part-time work, compressed workweeks (e.g., four 10-hour days), and shift swapping, which supported a better work-life balance. Clinics that allowed staff to adjust their schedules, start late, or leave early to manage personal issues helped promote staff well-being:

*I'll cover her Wednesday; she'll cover my Friday. So, there's a lot of scope, I think, it's a testament to the business that they provide flexibility to staff. (VE20)*

#### 6.4.2.3.2 Scheduled admin time and breaks

Participants also discussed the value of blocking out time for admin tasks every day to ensure notes and phone calls were up to date, and others appreciated getting regular breaks throughout the day:

*We have scheduled admin time. I have a couple of hours allocated to phoning clients, doing my notes, following up things. (VE17)*

*Having a little bit of time-out to breathe, catch up on notes, and socialise – our clinic aims to have a window in the middle of the day when consulting finishes. (VE9)*

#### 6.4.2.3.3 Longer consultation times

Some participants noted that their clinic's initiative to increase the time allocated for consultations reduced time pressure and stress. This improved veterinarians' well-being, and they felt it also enhanced the quality of care they provided. Some clinics extended consultation times specifically for more complex cases:

*So, they give 20 minutes or half an hour. They give us enough time to deal with the more complex cases because that's what it needs – so consult time is a big thing in terms of supporting the vets. (VE6)*

#### 6.4.2.3.4 Supportive leave policies

Additional support that participants mentioned included encouraging staff to use annual leave, offering generous sick leave, and supporting time off for family events or emergencies. Some clinics provided a day off for a birthday, or others had a day's leave for "Christmas shopping".

#### 6.4.2.3.5 After-hours compensation and fatigue management

Some participants reported that their clinics offered reasonable after-hours compensation, such as time off in lieu of weekend on-call shifts or half-days off for veterinarians scheduled on the duty rota. Flexibility in taking time off after an on-call shift and measures to manage fatigue, such as delayed start times after busy on-call nights, supported work-life balance. Some clinics also offered financial bonuses or higher hourly rates for after-hours work, making the work more rewarding and ensuring that veterinarians felt valued and fairly compensated:

*Every vet that does after-hours gets a half-day off a week. (VE10)*

*So, if we get a call-out on the weekend, you'll get \$75 for every call you do out-of-hours, so where you're driving an hour – it's 3 hours, basically – all up, you get \$300. So, it's really good having the money incentive. (VE14)*

#### 6.4.2.4 Category 4: Career development and professional growth opportunities

Career development and professional growth opportunities, such as appraisals, reviews, continuing professional development (CPD) budgets, in-house CPD, and new graduate programmes, were key initiatives that supported veterinarians' well-being, motivation, and engagement. This category was underpinned by three sub-categories:

##### 6.4.2.4.1 Formal appraisals and feedback

Participants reported receiving regular formal performance reviews every 3–12 months, and more frequent, informal check-ins were also common. The appraisal meetings were generally held with the veterinarian's direct manager and focused on reflecting on work experiences and discussing future goals. They also helped participants identify strengths and areas for development to support career growth. The process served as an opportunity for open discussions about progress, upcoming challenges, and professional development:

*We get quarterly catchups, regular sort of check-ins between you and your manager, it's a chat about how things have been going, what is upcoming that we want to sort of develop, and work on [...] and working towards a long-term goal. (VE15)*

#### 6.4.2.4.2 Continuing professional development budget

Participants mentioned having an annual budget for various relevant CPD activities. The yearly budget covered both clinical and non-technical education, such as communication or leadership courses. Veterinarians often met with their manager once or twice a year to discuss their learning goals and review the available CPD options. Some stated their clinics were flexible if CPD costs exceeded their budget, and the budget included paid time to attend conferences and workshops.

#### 6.4.2.4.3 In-house CPD

Participants shared how their clinics frequently offered in-house CPD sessions. External speakers on both technical and non-technical topics sometimes presented at these educational events:

*It's during work time, and it's usually structured. So, the last one, we went through some of the things they learned about at the conference. (VE13)*

Some participants and their teams were enrolled in self-directed, non-technical competency development courses delivered online. Veterinarians described how they worked through the modules both independently and as a team in the clinic when possible.

In-house education and training were often provided by veterinarians and staff members within the team who had expertise in specific areas.

In addition, team members often shared updates from conferences and presented interesting cases. These sessions were typically held in the clinic, offering a relaxed and social atmosphere, with the clinic providing snacks, dinner, and drinks:

*I like the [in-house] CPD nights, and the fact that work puts on dinner. (VE3)*

Larger corporate veterinary businesses often provided extensive in-house technical and non-technical CPD programmes to meet the needs of their veterinary staff.

#### 6.4.2.4.4 New graduate programmes

Several participants mentioned that their clinics ran comprehensive programmes for new graduates. These programmes included assigned mentors and regular meetings to evaluate the progress of the new graduates. Some clinics provided structured new graduate symposia during the graduate's first 2 years. These symposia were often held in collaboration with other businesses, aiming to foster connections between new graduates and senior veterinarians within a supportive environment. They included clinical presentations, non-clinical sessions on financial and stress management, social activities, and discussions on well-being and professional growth.

Additionally, some clinics offered monthly hands-on clinical educational sessions to support the early-career development of their staff:

*They do a new-grad programme in combination with another practice getting together with peers, and kind of just discussing things. (VE1)*

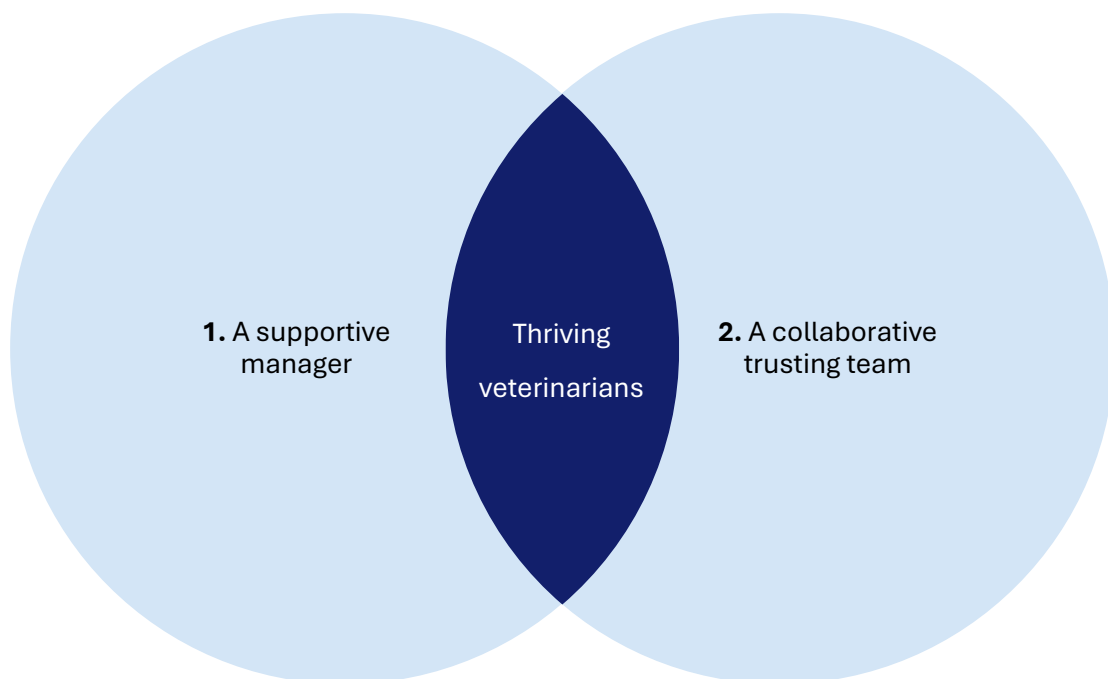
### 6.4.3 Part 2: Workplace initiatives that supported veterinarians' personal well-being, motivation and engagement.

This section describes the themes that were generated after thematic analysis in response to the second part of the research question: *What workplace well-being initiatives support veterinarians' personal well-being, motivation and engagement?*

Two main themes were generated - having a supportive manager, and being part of a collaborative team, as shown in Figure 6.1.

#### Figure 6.1

*Two main themes — A supportive manager and a collaborative, trusting team — central to veterinarians' ability to thrive in clinical practice*



### 6.4.3.1 Theme 1: A supportive manager

Veterinarians in this study reported that having a supportive manager was critical to their well-being, job satisfaction, and ability to thrive in clinical practice. Participants described managers who provided support not only in their professional lives but also in their personal lives. Supportive managers acknowledged participants' efforts, advocated for, and encouraged professional growth. These actions fostered genuine connections, which made participants feel that their manager cared about them. Figure 6.2 illustrates the eight sub-themes related to having a supportive manager.

**Figure 6.2**

*Theme 1: A supportive manager and its related sub-themes*



#### 6.4.3.1.1 Feeling cared for

One veterinarian valued the emotional support as well as the technical support she received from her experienced veterinary manager:

*My boss cares about me [...] I feel like we're cared for as people, not just vets. (VE24)*

Caring about participants' personal lives was highlighted by participants. Veterinarians appreciated the manager's support during personal challenges such as relationship struggles with their partner. Managers who were empathetic, accessible, and easy to talk to about a variety of issues fostered a culture of trust:

*Yes, I like the culture; there's really good communication from management, and they're all very accessible and easy to talk to. [...] if you're needing vet help or generally non-vet related problems. (VE16)*

Participants also valued managers who regularly checked in on them and supported their well-being. One participant noted that his manager's simple gesture of regularly asking how he felt significantly strengthened their connection. Veterinarians emphasised the importance of managers who were accessible and responded promptly to concerns. One participant described the supportive actions of their veterinary manager, who provided clinical assistance on-farm when needed or quickly found someone who could help. This responsive behaviour built trust and a culture of reliability. Participants noted that managers who prioritised open communication, fairness and collaboration earned their trust and developed strong workplace relationships:

*What I like about her (manager) is that she's unflappable and reliable. So, if I need to get a hold of her, I can [...]. She creates opportunities [...] Yeah, she's very fair and impartial, which I think, for me, is a good sign. (VE3)*

#### 6.4.3.1.2 Building trusting relationships

Building trust with managers was recognised as critical for fostering open communication and psychological safety, which contributed positively to job satisfaction and well-being:

*When you have a connection with the person you're reporting to, you can have a sit-down and have a talk, and there is that safety of talking, there are no barriers, I think that's crucial for me. (VE2)*

While some veterinarians felt an immediate connection with their manager, most agreed that a trusting relationship developed gradually and was a two-way process. Trust was built by managers who participants respected, were accessible, listened non-judgmentally, showed empathy, and genuinely cared. Veterinarians valued managers who helped them solve problems on time and followed up on their promises:

*He's our boss, and he's great. It's just the type of person he is - nothing's a problem, everything's fixable. If you go to him with a problem, he will listen. He's very understanding. (VE5)*

Veterinarians emphasised that feeling trusted and respected by managers was a crucial factor in establishing effective relationships. One participant shared how being trusted by his manager to lead a major project boosted his confidence and strengthened their relationship. Others felt respected when their manager valued their opinion. A trust-centred relationship enabled participants to feel safe speaking up about issues and problems:

*I feel like I could go to my manager and say, ‘This is working for me’, or ‘This isn’t working for me’ – and I’m heard and understood. I’m often asked for my opinion [...] I guess I’ve found myself in a nice position where we respect and trust each other. (VE8)*

By fostering trusting relationships, supportive managers encouraged veterinarians to step out of their comfort zones, take on challenges, and grow personally and professionally.

#### 6.4.3.1.3 Feeling recognised and appreciated

Managers who acknowledged and celebrated participants’ specific achievements and provided positive feedback made them feel appreciated, valued, and motivated:

*If you’ve a good manager who recognises effort and good work, that is a major positive driver for me. (VE23)*

Participants described various ways in which they felt appreciated by their managers. For example, VE17 described receiving a handwritten thank you card from their boss that, “*actually made me cry; it made me feel very valued*”.

Many participants agreed that the simple act of saying thank you was very powerful, particularly after working long hours or in challenging situations. Indeed, being thanked and recognised by managers was often valued more highly than a financial bonus. Participants’ self-esteem and confidence were boosted when they received words of affirmation:

*When she [the manager] explicitly tells me she’s happy with how I’m going [...] that gives me a really good feeling. (VE16)*

Some participants appreciated managers who implemented clinic initiatives that openly acknowledged team members’ successes in the clinic:

*All the clinics nominate people who have done something great that month, and it goes out in an email to the whole company. (VE10)*

Showcasing individuals’ efforts across the business demonstrated that each person’s contributions mattered, which helped develop a positive workplace environment. Veterinarians

in this study emphasised the importance of acknowledging and focusing on positive outcomes in clinical practice, rather than dwelling on the negative. This approach was perceived as beneficial to well-being:

*Celebrating case success is important. We will unpick a case that went wrong for hours, with other vets or on our own, but really, celebrating cases that have gone well and telling people about them is important; remembering that there are lots of things that have gone really well. (VE16)*

Having extra perks, such as an allowance to cover expenses for well-being, clinic-supplied food, and in-house yoga sessions, made some participants feel cared for and valued. However, many commented that these initiatives, although nice to have, were the icing on the cake rather than significant influencers of participants' well-being.

Fundamental to the veterinarian's sense of self-worth was having a fair work contract with appropriate remuneration and adequate compensation for after-hours duty. Having extra bonuses, such as life insurance paid for by the practice and ample sick leave, were also recognised by participants as beneficial initiatives that made a difference for some. One participant appreciated the extra sick days provided by his new employer and described feeling very lucky to work at that clinic.

#### 6.4.3.1.4 Opportunities for professional growth

Managers who supported participants' professional growth positively impacted their motivation and engagement at work. Gaining skills in a specific area of clinical practice supported participants' career development, provided a sense of mastery, increased confidence, and contributed to their well-being. Participants agreed that supportive managers provided them with an adequate CPD budget and paid time away from clinical duties to attend conferences and workshops:

*I have fantastic managers to report to and to work with. They've supported me in my development – technical development that I had an interest in [...] to do any kind of CPD, it's been really good. (VE2)*

Other participants reported being supported by managers to have study time during work hours. This support allowed them to participate in different forms of professional development, such as online courses and postgraduate qualifications, that helped them develop a specific area of interest or niche.

Most participants agreed that being supported to develop an area of interest within a practice increased their confidence, made them feel valued by clients and colleagues, and provided them with direction and purpose in their clinical career:

*So, you can develop your niche, which I think is really important – for me, anyway – having something that I feel I have good self-esteem in. I can talk at a level with anyone and feel valued. (VE23)*

Participants reported feeling empowered and motivated when their managers actively encouraged them to develop a specific niche within the clinic. Many agreed that this encouragement not only validated their special interests but also provided a sense of autonomy and commitment to their roles:

*I've been facilitated to move that way [...] I've not just been allowed to do it, I've been encouraged to do it, and I think those are two quite different things. So, it's not just that I've been given permission; they say, 'Yeah, absolutely. Go do it!' The encouragement is a key part of that, yeah. (VE10)*

Managers who enabled veterinarians to concentrate on their strengths empowered them and reduced their stress and anxiety levels. One participant, who found small animal surgery challenging and stressful, was fully supported by her clinic manager to focus on consultations, which improved her well-being and engagement at work. Being supported to focus on her clinical strengths rather than struggling with things she found stressful was hugely beneficial:

*I got put off surgery at my last clinic and then my manager said; why, if you don't enjoy surgery, do you do it? I was like, okay. I have anxiety, and I used to worry about all the things that could go wrong [...] So, I would have just kept struggling and stressing about it forever, and he was like, just do consults. So, now I just do consults, which I love. (VE11)*

#### 6.4.3.1.5 Support for work-life balance

Having a supportive manager who enabled participants to have a healthy work-life balance was critical to participants' well-being and job satisfaction. Veterinarians highlighted the importance of maintaining this balance to manage the demands of working in clinical practice:

*Yeah, ultimately it is about balance; there's a lot of pressures on all of us, but what makes me happy is when my world is balanced – if I'm not balanced, I can't do it. (VE9)*

Participants valued managers who were attentive to their personal needs, encouraged them to leave work on time when possible, and actively supported regular breaks. One veterinarian explained how her weekly Pilates class represented an essential part of her well-being, and she

was supported to leave work 20 minutes early to attend her classes. This flexible approach made her feel valued and appreciated. Many were encouraged to use their lunch breaks as an opportunity to get out of the clinic for a walk, a run, or to attend to personal errands, which helped them refresh before the afternoon clinical work. Some participants considered a flexible return-to-work policy after illness or injury to be important. They noted that being allowed to start work a bit later or leave work a bit earlier when not feeling “100%” helped their recovery. This initiative meant they did not feel pressured to work full days (presenteeism) or to take more sick leave.

Some participants valued managers who provided flexibility and support for extended leave for personal reasons, while still guaranteeing their job security upon return. One veterinarian appreciated the flexibility provided for extended leave to visit an unwell family member overseas. This support reinforced her loyalty and intention to stay in the practice:

*I'm not going anywhere because I really respect how they looked after me. (VE14)*

Veterinarians could become fatigued when they worked long hours, especially over busy seasons or when clinics are short-staffed. However, participants reflected positively on managers who encouraged and supported them to take time off from work for holidays or, in some cases, longer sabbaticals. One veterinarian described how she was supported in taking 6 months away from work to travel overseas on holiday, which made her feel very valued and increased her commitment to the practice. Having time away from work to rest, recharge, and manage personal tasks helped veterinarians maintain a healthy work-life balance and experience better well-being.

#### 6.4.3.1.6 Flexible work hours and time management

Participants juggling family responsibilities alongside their clinical work appreciated managers who supported flexibility. They felt ‘grateful’ for flexible work options, such as part-time hours, shorter shifts, and reduced out-of-hours work. Clinic managers who had children themselves were particularly understanding and supportive of veterinarians’ family responsibilities:

*He [the manager] really gets it when you've got sick kids. (VE5)*

Some participants shared their feelings of “mum guilt” when juggling their clinical work around their children and noted being very appreciative of managers who provided them with the flexibility to manage their busy lives:

*I feel incredibly grateful on a daily basis that I have a job a) that I love, but b) that I can go back to in the capacity that I want to, that works for me, and I'm not forced to go back full-time, I'm very grateful to have a job that's that flexible around being a mum. (VE5)*

Participants who worked part-time mainly did so to manage childcare, but for a few, it was a lifestyle choice. Whatever the reason, most veterinarians agreed that part-time hours increased their job satisfaction and potentially contributed to their retention in clinical practice:

*I work part-time, and I enjoy the time I'm at work because I'm not overwhelmed, and it's rewarding. So, if I was working full-time – who knows – would I still be doing this? (VE19)*

Having support from managers to work reduced hours but still being respected as an essential member of the team was very important for many participants who worked a variety of part-time hours:

*I appreciate the flexibility of part-time work, not being questioned, feeling valued, and certainly not being made to feel like a part-timer. I feel like a full-time part of the business, and I feel as included as everyone else. (VE5)*

Participants valued other flexible work options, such as a compressed 4-day week or a 9-day fortnight, which allowed them extra time to recover from work demands. This led to reduced stress and greater job satisfaction. Veterinarians also felt this approach enabled them to provide better patient care, as they were able to recharge when away from work and make more informed clinical decisions without feeling fatigued.

Some participants also highlighted personal challenges such as managing their own mental health issues alongside the demands of full-time work. Having support to take time off or reduce their hours was beneficial:

*When I was really struggling, I dropped down to four days a week; I had every Monday off for a period [...] so allowing me to do that was really helpful. (VE1)*

Having a manager who supported participants in having enough time in their day to complete jobs without undue pressure helped them avoid feeling overwhelmed and maintain their well-being. Many participants mentioned that they valued manager support to schedule longer consultation times if they felt it was necessary, especially for more complex cases. Participants reported that longer consult times allowed them to provide better patient care, strengthened client relationships, and reduced stress by allowing them to work without feeling rushed. Having the autonomy to extend consult time was particularly valued.

Having designated time for administrative tasks was a significant intervention that helped reduce stress and promote well-being among participants. Many appreciated being allowed one- or two-hour time slots to complete notes, write reports, and make follow-up phone calls during work

hours. Some participants were supported to do their paperwork in an office away from the clinic area or even at home, which helped to prevent distraction:

*I come home for lunch every day and do my admin at home. So, I have a two-hour chunk in the middle of the day where I'm home unless there is an emergency [...]. So, that's played a massive role in keeping my stress levels in check. (VE25)*

#### 6.4.3.1.7 Give and take approach

Participants noted that if they put in extra hours, their efforts would be recognised and balanced by equal flexibility from the business in the future. This mutual understanding highlighted a balanced “give-and-take” approach, cultivating a culture of trust, respect, and practicality on both sides:

*It's give-and-take, and I give them 110 per cent because I know they'll always give back and support me. (VE27)*

Veterinarians in this study emphasised that managing the demands of clinical practice required flexibility of the manager, the team, and the individual veterinarian. Participants mostly recognised that it wasn't always possible for their business to provide continuous flexibility for well-being and work-life balance, especially during busy periods or when the team was short-staffed. However, they valued managers who communicated clearly and honestly when requests for flexibility or time off had to be declined.

Participants recognised that effective flexible working required open communication and was a shared responsibility between the individual and the employer. They agreed that flexibility worked best when both parties were adaptable. For example, participants who took on additional duties during busy periods or staff shortages felt their efforts were recognised through future flexible work opportunities.

*It's a win-win – I'm happy to be flexible, and I'm like, yeah – I'll cover – that's no big deal. You know? It's give-and-take. (VE4)*

#### 6.4.3.1.8 Experiencing a positive clinic culture

Veterinarians described how clinic managers played an important role in establishing the clinic culture:

*My manager plays a huge part in maintaining a really positive environment at the clinic – he is very approachable, and it's a safe environment to ask questions, and I'm never made to feel stupid. (VE5)*

Participants agreed that a culture of low hierarchy, equality, and mutual respect between staff contributed to developing a strong team dynamic:

*There's not really a hierarchy at the clinic– it's one of those places where you are as important as anybody. It's very team focused. (VE2)*

Veterinarians who perceived their managers as equals rather than as figures of authority were comfortable communicating openly and felt psychologically safe:

*So, I have a really good relationship with my manager [...] I can talk to him about anything. I don't feel like there are levels between us. I feel like we are just colleagues or friends, and we can just have a chat. (VE18)*

Another participant (VE20) described how the senior leaders of the business, whom he referred to as “*the big dogs*,” embraced open communication and made him feel safe discussing a mental health concern. He felt genuinely heard and supported, which developed trust. Furthermore, participants perceived that managers who demonstrated vulnerability by sharing their own mistakes and challenges earned respect and encouraged others to speak up:

*It's a very open environment where everyone talks about their mistakes, including the bosses, which is good because it shows that everyone makes mistakes which makes you feel not so bad. (VE10)*

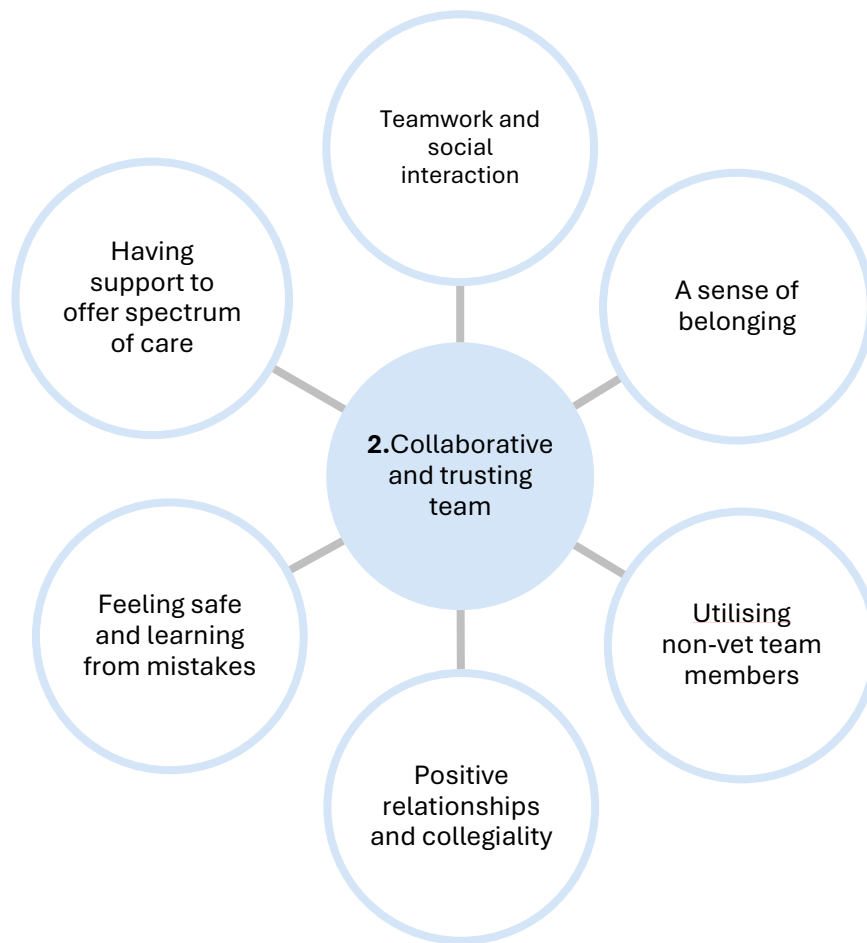
Supportive managers played a central role in promoting a positive and psychologically safe clinic culture in this study. By being accessible, empathetic, and trustworthy, clinic managers fostered open communication and strong relationships, which contributed to veterinarians' well-being and professional growth.

#### **6.4.3.2 Theme 2: A collaborative and trusting team**

The second main theme, a collaborative and trusting team, highlighted the importance of working in a supportive environment. A team that fostered trust and provided a sense of belonging promoted positive daily interactions among colleagues, and this was crucial for participant motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. Most participants felt that trust among team members was cultivated through a ‘culture’ of mutual respect and support and was strongly influenced by positive managers and leaders. Figure 6.3 shows the six sub-themes related to this theme.

**Figure 6.3**

*Theme 2: A collaborative and trusting team and the six related sub-themes*



#### 6.4.3.2.1 Teamwork and social interaction

Participants agreed that building work relationships through day-to-day interactions, clinic social events, team-building activities, and connections outside work fostered trust, friendships, and stronger teams. However, they emphasised that trust was earned gradually through consistent teamwork and daily collaboration:

*So, I think the trust has been great, and probably it's just grown, I guess, over the years, and it's developed the way it has. So, yeah, I think all the team-building stuff they do is really good and important for our team, and I guess, for me to feel like I've got a great team here. (VE21)*

Informal social activities implemented by clinics, such as shared lunches, outings, social sporting teams, team dinners, Christmas parties, and after-work drinks, were recognised by participants as valuable ways for team members to connect and understand each other's personal

backgrounds. Many participants noted that these informal social events created an opportunity where, “*We don’t talk about work – we mainly talk about personal life*” (VE28).

Social connection was seen as a key contributor to strengthening team relationships, creating a more enjoyable workplace atmosphere, and promoting a supportive team culture. Some participants described these informal gatherings as the “grease” that kept the team running smoothly, noting their role in fostering positive interpersonal relationships. Additionally, clinic initiatives such as group hikes, team sports, or even team-building games, were viewed as effective in developing trust and cohesion. These activities helped build a sense of unity and contributed to a more collaborative environment:

*[Team-building activities] help us build rapport and trust among each other, whether between the vets, nurses or front-of-house – all those dynamics; if we build those relationships and trust among ourselves, we don’t feel scared to speak up.* (VE17)

#### 6.4.3.2.2 Positive relationships and collegiality

Clear, open communication helped develop trusting relationships between team members, and participants often referred to their valued team members as friends:

*I would say our team is very good at the communication side of things, [...], so there’s a lot of case discussions, and that kind of thing that we chat about, and just having that phone-a-friend option is quite nice, within the team.* (VE15)

Participants described having mutual confidence in their team members, knowing they would support each other. This created an environment where participants felt safe to be themselves, be vulnerable, look out for one another, and have fun. One veterinarian noted that her team, “*trusts each other and has each other’s backs*” (VE7).

Participants felt that trusting relationships with team members enabled them to be honest when they were unsure about something at work, to discuss personal issues at home that were troubling them, and to ask for help when needed. One participant described how she struggled with perfectionism and overworking, but her team supported her to create a healthier work-life balance:

*So, having that support group around you is really important [...]. That comes down to the people around you, a good team who genuinely care.* (VE7)

Collegial support was identified as a crucial component of support networks in clinical practice. Participants valued being able to reach out to colleagues for support in a team where

personalities did not thwart curiosity and learning. Thus, trusting relationships with colleagues made participants feel very much part of the team and fostered a safe environment where individuals could learn and perform well:

*Collegial – yeah, that’s what has been so refreshing, coming to this practice- not once have I been made to feel like I’m stupid or that I’m lesser than. [...] None of us have egos; we own our muck-ups, and it’s kind of a growth mindset that we all want everyone to succeed. We want everyone to do well. So, we just support each other. (VE17)*

This collegiality made participants feel very close and connected with their team members, and some used emotive language when describing their colleagues. For instance, one veterinarian referred to her team as “*phenomenal*” and “*the best colleagues I could ever have dreamt of*” (VE2).

When participants were happy working with their teams, they reported positive well-being and enjoyed their jobs. Many felt that it was the good relationships with colleagues that enabled them to not just like *but*, “*really love my job, and I love telling people why I love my job*” (VE16).

Participants with family commitments appreciated the way their team supported one another, especially during unexpected situations such as a sick child.

#### 6.4.3.2.3 Feeling a sense of belonging

Having a sense of belonging to the team was important for participants’ sense of fit in the workplace. It was important for individuals’ well-being and effective teamwork. When participants described being part of a collaborative team, they highlighted a strong sense of inclusion, support, and shared purpose. Participants claimed that having a shared sense of purpose within a supportive team increased their motivation and boosted their confidence levels at work. They described how this fostered a team environment focused on working together rather than as individuals. As VE10 stated: “*One person’s success is, to a degree, the team’s success*”.

Participants felt that members of supportive teams shared values, goals, and cared about each other. This fostered a sense of belonging:

*It’s nice having a team that really supports each other. Everyone wants to do the best for the patients, and everyone understands when you’ve had a bad day or the clients are getting a bit grumpy. So, we all kind of support each other through that. (VE13)*

Creating a safe environment where team members could be themselves was especially important for neurodiverse veterinarians. One participant often found it stressful navigating the pressure of

meeting unrealistic identity expectations and appreciated belonging to a team where she could be herself:

*This is the first place I've ever worked where I don't feel like I have to wear a mask and be someone I'm not, just to please others. So, I feel like I can be my own true, authentic self and not be fearful that I won't be liked or that how I am is a problem. (VE17)*

Participants who experienced challenges during perimenopause while working in clinical practice highlighted the importance of having a supportive and inclusive workplace culture. Feeling a sense of belonging and being able to speak openly about menopause with team members was considered crucial. Having support and advice around women's health issues was considered important at different life stages. Veterinarians also emphasised the need for greater awareness and understanding of menopause, and women's health more generally, at both the clinic and profession-wide levels. Having access to educational resources and mental health support around these often-taboo topics was considered an important step in normalising conversations and fostering a sense of belonging to a caring team:

*I think the topic of menopause needs to be talked about, more – a lot more. I think that's huge. I shared a webinar that the NZVA did on menopause recently and I sent it around everybody [...] It's been hard for me, mostly on the mental side of it; overwhelm, anxiety. [...]. So, I think that's important that people become more aware of it, so I'm passionate about that. (VE21)*

#### 6.4.3.2.4 Utilising non-veterinary members of the team

Participants emphasised that an important aspect of working in a collaborative team was making effective use of veterinary nurses and large animal veterinary technicians (LAVTs). Veterinarians reported that non-veterinary team members were essential to their positive experience in clinical practice as they decreased veterinarians' workload and improved client service:

*Our clinic wouldn't function without techs. Essentially, our routine work runs on the backs of our technicians, and without them, we wouldn't be able to get a lot of our non-routine clinical work done. So yeah, they are super key parts of what we do and how our clinic functions. (VE10)*

Veterinary nurses were regarded as a highly valued part of the companion animal team. Participants described relying heavily on nurses to ease pressure on the veterinary team, noting that their support helped reduce workload and improve client service. This was especially evident in emergency after-hours clinics, where veterinarians expressed appreciation for nurses who worked independently:

*Having a night nurse on has just transformed it, really, for me. It means that if you've an animal that requires regular checking, you can share the load so that the other person can get some sleep. (VE23)*

#### 6.4.3.2.5 Feeling safe and learning from mistakes

Working in a safe team environment where participants felt they could discuss and learn from errors was crucial to participants' professional growth and well-being. Participants described how sharing their mistakes openly with the team and their manager helped them be more self-compassionate and embrace their mistakes as learning opportunities. A "no-blame atmosphere", where unexpected outcomes and mistakes were openly discussed with the team, was critical for growth and improvement. Participants agreed that compassionate and open discussion helped them to understand what went wrong and how to improve things in the future. They felt that this was beneficial for their professional growth:

*If we have the death of an animal, we go through the case and say, okay – how did we manage that – is that something that we can learn from – is there something that we could do differently? That actually helps a lot. (VE27)*

Trusting teams fostered psychological safety, enabling participants to discuss issues with colleagues openly, admit to mistakes, and ensure that errors were not repeated:

*You don't get into a habit of hiding something that's going wrong. We've already talked about it and identified a potential issue in taking steps to rectify it, before it even becomes a problem. It's a good way to bounce ideas, and come up with better ways to do things, and reflect back on what has been done and how it could have been done better. Yeah, I find that wonderful. (VE16)*

Participants emphasised the importance of belonging to a trusting team where they felt safe speaking up and asking for help or advice. This safe team environment fostered a sense of belonging, where participants felt validated and could learn from their own and other people's mistakes:

*It's very acceptable to say, 'I made a mistake here; what should I do next time?' That's really important for me to have an open environment where everyone talks about their mistakes, which is good because everyone makes mistakes. (VE10)*

A positive and safe workplace culture was fundamental to the engagement and motivation of veterinarians working in clinical practice. Participants' perceptions of the clinic culture were shaped by their personal experiences, and the behaviours of managers and the team strongly influenced their feelings.

#### 6.4.3.2.6 Having support to offer a spectrum of care

Veterinarians in this study recognised the importance of having team support to provide a wide spectrum of diagnostic and treatment options for patients, tailored to the client's resources and the animal's welfare needs. Having this contextual flexibility around patient care options helped reduce moral stress among participants:

*I truly believe that feeling compelled to offer the gold standard of care is doing more harm in some situations than good, and the spectrum of care is much more appropriate. The spectrum is the high-end for the people who can afford it and the clinics that have it, but it's no shame to dial it back to what the people can afford and what the clinic can offer.* (VE9)

Clearly, veterinarians struggled when there was a mismatch of values around standards of care within teams. One participant noted feeling uncomfortable about a veterinarian who was very inflexible with her treatment options, as it did not match his values:

*She offers the gold standard, and I don't think she lets anyone choose anything other than the gold standard. So people have to spend a lot of money, which can be hard. I operate in a different way from her.* (VE20)

This highlights the importance veterinarians placed on working in a collaborative team that practised in accordance with their clinical standards. Having support from the workplace to offer a range of appropriate diagnostic and treatment options contributed to the health and well-being of the participants, who were able to meet the needs of their patients and clients.

## 6.5 Discussion

The findings from part 1 of this study reflect participants' descriptions of well-being strategies implemented by clinical veterinary businesses in New Zealand. While participants acknowledged the benefits of fostering well-being in the workplace, their awareness of specific initiatives was often restricted to those that directly affected them. Many struggled to remember initiatives that had not influenced them personally, suggesting low awareness and limited engagement. This finding is consistent with a New Zealand study, which was part of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) programme (Lombard, 2023). Busy clinical workloads often made it difficult for veterinarians to participate in some well-being initiatives, reducing the uptake of available resources. This highlighted the need for veterinary practices to provide a range of well-being initiatives targeted at individual needs.

Many of the mental health and well-being initiatives reported in part 1 of this study concentrated on supporting individuals' mental health and boosting employees' well-being and resilience. These initiatives include the provision of counselling services, mental health education, resilience workshops, and well-being allowances. This concurred with the extant literature's predominant focus on the individual as a means to address poor mental health in the veterinary profession. Strategies such as building individual resilience (McArthur & Matthew, 2018; Moffett et al., 2015) and providing training to manage work-related anxiety (Fritschi et al., 2009) are examples of well-being initiatives focused at the individual level in veterinary practice. Other initiatives include mindfulness-based stress reduction (Djokovic, 2020) and psycho-educational programmes designed to reduce work-related stress (Hamilton, 2016). In addition, Allison et al. (2016) described a combined wellness toolkit aimed at fostering self-care, as well as promoting workplace initiatives such as wellness huddles, regular check-ins, and appointment of a wellness champion; initiatives that align with the findings from the current study. More recently, an online veterinary well-being programme focusing on individual-centric veterinary well-being approaches (VetThrive, 2025) has been launched in New Zealand and was mentioned by some participants in this study.

While enhancing individual resilience can help veterinarians manage stress (Perret et al., 2020a) and is an important area for intervention, even the most resilient veterinarian will struggle under unfavourable workplace conditions (Hilton et al., 2023). Thus, the benefits of individual-level initiatives may well be limited if the organisational systems and culture remain unchanged. In contrast to the focus on personal initiatives and individual factors, Hilton et al. (2023) found that improving workplace factors was a more effective strategy to enhance well-being.

Optimising veterinarians' well-being is now accepted as a shared responsibility between the organisation and the individual (Bartram et al., 2010; Moir & Van den Brink, 2020). Similarly, a dual approach has been reported as effective for supporting well-being and managing burnout of physicians (Panagioti et al., 2017; Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017). These authors highlighted the importance of interventions that addressed issues at both a systems level (providing a manageable workload and flexibility and enabling a life balance) and an individual level (personal well-being strategies). As a result, veterinary organisations worldwide have developed programmes to promote healthy workplaces where well-being is a priority (AVMA, 2025b; AVA, 2025; BVA, 2020).

Inviting feedback from veterinarians on existing well-being initiatives and their own well-being needs might provide valuable insights for veterinary businesses. This information could help

support the development of tailored initiatives, helping to improve both awareness and engagement of veterinarians and other clinic staff.

Part 2 of this study examined the factors that veterinarians reported as supporting their own well-being, motivation, and engagement at work. The two themes identified were: having a supportive manager, and a collaborative and trusting team. These two themes were significantly interrelated as the supportive manager influenced the team. Furthermore, both the manager and the team significantly influenced the workplace culture, a crucial factor in the well-being, engagement, and thriving of veterinarians in clinical veterinary practice. Interestingly, the responses in part 2 focused on personal attributes of other team members (particularly the manager) and the culture within the clinic rather than any of the initiatives or programmes that were offered or implemented. It was clear that having a supportive manager and team was crucial, and that money spent on 'well-being initiatives' meant very little in the absence of a supportive environment.

### 6.5.1 A supportive manager

The most important factor for veterinarians to thrive was a supportive clinic manager who genuinely cared about them. Such managers were empathetic, vulnerable, motivating, approachable, good listeners, and shared their knowledge. These characteristics are consistent with leaders who demonstrate high emotional intelligence (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022; Sadri, 2012). Supportive managers positively influenced practice systems, which, in turn, impacted veterinarians' job satisfaction and work well-being. They provided support for professional growth, well-being, and work-life balance, as well as flexible work hours and effective time management. These findings align with a recent study of equine veterinarians, which identified that manager relationships and workplace culture significantly influenced veterinarians' engagement and job satisfaction (Elte et al., 2023).

#### 6.5.1.1 *Trusting relationships*

Veterinarians who had a trusting relationship with their direct manager felt safe to talk openly and honestly about mistakes, problems and challenges. Developing such a relationship was a two-way process dependent on mutual respect and trust.

In this study, participants' direct clinic managers were often veterinarians who juggled multiple responsibilities. These included overseeing the daily operation of the clinic, performing clinical work, and demonstrating leadership that shaped the workplace culture.

Although participants generally respected and appreciated their managers' clinical skills, they felt that non-technical skills were more important for good leadership. Open communication, compassion, trustworthiness, and vulnerability were highlighted as key manager attributes that supported a positive workplace culture. Participants described supportive managers as those who were self-aware, had effective emotional regulation, and were aware of how others might feel, especially when things went wrong. Thus, EI was an important quality for effective leadership among clinic managers, a finding echoed by Melita Prati et al. (2003). These authors noted that leaders with high EI enhanced team function by empowering members and fostering a culture of continuous improvement. Veterinarians in the present study who developed strong, genuine relationships with their managers reported feeling comfortable and were not constrained by a rigid hierarchical clinic structure. This concurs with Elwood's (2022) proposal that a healthy veterinary clinic culture is strongly influenced by day-to-day interactions with a supportive manager in a non-hierarchical environment. Participants in the current study shared that an inclusive culture provided a sense of safety, belonging, and work satisfaction, aligning with Volk et al. (2022), who found that team belonging, trust, and open communication were key to veterinary well-being.

Effective leadership has been identified as important for veterinarians working in different clinical settings. Kogan et al. (2023) reported that good leadership supported job retention and satisfaction amongst emergency veterinarians. Adam et al. (2019) found that the decision to stay or leave production animal practice was frequently related to management issues. Elte et al. (2023) reported that workplace culture and manager relationships influenced work engagement and satisfaction in equine veterinarians. In a large recent survey from the USA, Kogan et al. (2025) showed that effective leadership fostered psychologically safe teams and improved patient safety. Although these survey-based studies captured data from large samples of veterinarians, they did not report what veterinarians felt about their managers.

In contrast, the qualitative interviews used in the current research provided rich, nuanced insights into participants' perceptions of what supports their well-being. Participants revealed that they thrived under positive and kind leadership, which is consistent with a substantial body of literature that demonstrates the impact of leadership and management on employees' well-being and engagement (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Schaufeli, 2015; Van Tuin et al., 2021).

The role of managers and supervisors in the well-being of the medical profession has been shown to be significant. In a survey of 2,800 doctors in the USA, Shanafelt et al. (2015) demonstrated that a 1-point increase in the leadership score was correlated to an increase in job satisfaction and

reduced the chance of burnout for individual doctors. In a more recent study, Hyman and Doolittle (2022) reported a direct link between good leadership and positive well-being amongst resident doctors. The authors demonstrated that leaders who were responsive to doctors' concerns, fostered a supportive culture, and promoted professional growth enhanced well-being, which concurs with the present study.

Participants in the current study described positive clinic leaders as those who prioritised intrinsic business values (caring for the people) rather than focusing on extrinsic business values (financial growth). This empathetic leadership style aligns with the concept of engaging leadership, described by Schaufeli (2015). Engaging leadership draws on the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) by fulfilling veterinarians' basic psychological needs. Van Tuin et al. (2021) demonstrated that engaging leaders, who prioritised intrinsic values such as care, contribution, challenge, and growth, satisfied employees' psychological needs and enhanced workplace engagement. Similarly, in the present study, managers who aligned with veterinarians' values and met their psychological needs fostered positive well-being and engagement.

#### *6.5.1.2 Recognition and appreciation*

Recognition and informal positive feedback from managers and colleagues were important contributors to veterinarians' self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and positive well-being. Although veterinarians in the present study appreciated financial rewards and bonuses, many found words of appreciation and gratitude more meaningful, aligning with previous veterinary research (Clise et al., 2021).

Grawitch et al. (2006) proposed that recognition at work is one of the main characteristics of a healthy workplace. The current study also found that recognition from managers and colleagues played a key role in employee engagement, motivation and performance. According to Herzberg's (1959) two-factor theory, intrinsic factors such as recognition are essential for motivating employees. In addition, Ryan and Deci (2000) highlight intrinsic motivation as a key predictor of organisational performance. Veterinarians in the present study valued managers who acknowledged their achievements, efforts, progress, development and dedication to their roles. This is consistent with Brun and Dugas (2008), who outlined four categories of employee recognition: personal recognition, recognition of job results, recognition of work ability, and recognition of job commitment. The authors have argued that recognition is not only a basic employee need but also a powerful management tool. By acknowledging contributions, leaders can foster optimism and increased self-esteem amongst employees (Burns & Gunderman, 2008). The promotion of optimism, self-esteem, and self-efficacy among veterinarians by managers,

through acknowledging work achievements, can improve the engagement, motivation, and well-being of veterinarians in clinical practice (Mastenbroek et al., 2015).

#### *6.5.1.3 Career development and professional growth*

Participants perceived support for career development and professional growth as a critical initiative for well-being and self-efficacy. This is similar to previous research, such as Clise et al. (2021), who found professional expertise, developed through lifelong learning and scholarship, to be the top source of pleasure for veterinarians. Furthermore, Cake et al. (2015) showed that continuous learning contributed to eudaimonic well-being, while Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Demerouti, et al. (2014) identified that professional development and skills discretion (development and use of skills on the job) were job resources positively related to work engagement.

Veterinarians in the present study who felt supported in their professional development reported greater job satisfaction, engagement, and enjoyment in their work. A notable finding, not previously recognised in the veterinary literature, was the positive impact on veterinarians' job satisfaction and well-being when they developed an area of expertise or their own 'niche' within the practice. Developing a niche in clinical practice is a form of job crafting, an approach where employees proactively shape their roles to better align with their skills, knowledge, and preferences (Tims & Bakker, 2010). This process enhanced participants' sense of purpose, boosted their self-efficacy, and made them feel highly valued by clients and colleagues. Veterinarians who crafted a niche also reported positive well-being consistent with previous research in non-veterinary settings (Tims et al., 2013). Supporting veterinarians in job crafting and developing a niche through mentorship and tailored educational opportunities may increase job satisfaction and enhance their role within the clinic. Thus, maintaining a focus on developing veterinarians' expertise in clinical practice is a workplace initiative likely to benefit both the individuals' well-being and the practice.

#### *6.5.1.4 Work-life balance, well-being, and flexible work*

The present study reinforces the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance for the well-being of veterinarians in clinical practice. Extant research has identified poor work-life balance as a significant stressor (Kogan et al., 2023), and Hagen et al. (2020) cited it as a major contributor to veterinarians' attrition from clinical practice. However, a British survey found that some veterinarians who endorsed a culture of long work hours were more likely to stay in clinical

practice (Begeny et al., 2018). Perhaps these veterinarians did not perceive long hours as a burden, suggesting that perceptions of work-life balance are individual and context-dependent.

In the current study, participants emphasised that supportive managers who promoted flexible work arrangements, regular breaks, and leaving work on time were key to enabling a healthy work-life balance. However, veterinarians acknowledged it was their own responsibility to set boundaries, make time to relax, engage in physical activity, and take advantage of clinic well-being initiatives. This aligns with Reinhard's (2023a) finding that self-care and boundary setting were essential for the well-being of early-career veterinarians. Similar findings have been reported in other helping professions. Wendt et al. (2011), for example, found that clear personal-professional boundaries enhanced social workers' well-being. Together, these findings reinforce the importance of shared responsibility between individuals and the organisation for veterinarians' well-being in clinical practice.

Many veterinarians in this study maintained a balanced working life by engaging in a wide variety of physical, mind-body, creative, and social activities. They also adopted healthy lifestyle choices to support their physical and mental well-being. This personal approach to better well-being is well-recognised in the veterinary literature (Paton et al., 2024). Several participants specifically noted the benefits of mindfulness, consistent with previous research involving veterinarians (Djokovic, 2020) and doctors (Sabir et al., 2018). Mindfulness and self-compassion are known to reduce anxiety, improve mental health and foster personal resources such as EI and optimism (Homan, 2016; Neff & Germer, 2013). These activities may be valuable additions to veterinarians' personal well-being plans.

While personal strategies were essential, participants also highlighted the influence of workplace factors on well-being. This supports the work of Hilton et al. (2023), who found that managing workload and improving the work environment were more effective for veterinarians' well-being than focusing solely on individual factors.

Participants in the present study considered flexible work arrangements, such as part-time hours, compressed four-day weeks, and adjustable start and end times to workdays as effective well-being interventions. Veterinarians reported that these flexible approaches to work supported their mental health, enhanced their engagement, and contributed to their job commitment. Flexibility and work-life balance were identified as key drivers of well-being and engagement (Shanafelt & Noseworthy, 2017). In the present study, flexibility helped veterinarians maintain a healthy work-life balance, which was particularly important for those managing childcare responsibilities.

Similarly, recent research conducted by Volk et al. (2024) found that a balanced life and flexible hours were significant factors in reducing burnout and improving well-being among veterinarians.

In addition to flexible working hours, the present study found that workload management initiatives (e.g., autonomy to extend consultation times and scheduled administrative time) supported their well-being, enhanced job satisfaction and loyalty. Likewise, Kogan et al. (2023) demonstrated that thoughtful, flexible scheduling for veterinarians promoted well-being, and a recent survey of companion animal veterinarians emphasised that flexibility in the workplace was a reason to stay in a job (AAHA, 2024). Additionally, reducing time pressure on veterinarians could decrease the risk of errors in clinical practice and improve patient care.

#### *6.5.1.5 Mental health support*

Participants assumed that their workplaces offered mental health support, such as EAPs. However, many had never used these services and lacked awareness of how to access them. This likely posed an additional barrier for veterinarians seeking professional help, compounding the perceived stigma surrounding mental illness (Bartram & Baldwin, 2010). Poor help-seeking behaviour among veterinarians in Australia and New Zealand has been reported to be driven by perceived stigma as well as practical barriers such as the need for time off work (to attend appointments) and counselling costs (Connolly et al., 2022). The authors also noted that symptoms such as fatigue and stress are often normalised in clinical practice, contributing to presenteeism and pressure to work while unwell. However, in a recent Norwegian study, 93% of veterinarians agreed that professional support was helpful for those suffering from psychological illness, and 50% agreed that colleagues were generally kind and caring to those suffering from mental health issues (Dalum et al., 2022). Thus, increasing veterinarians' awareness of EAP and other services offered through the business, as well as providing veterinarians time away from work to attend counselling sessions, may help encourage early intervention.

Participants in this study who had experienced past mental health challenges valued psychologically safe workplaces where they felt comfortable talking about their problems. Trusting relationships with managers, team members, or well-being champions encouraged positive coping strategies and facilitated access to professional help if needed. Therefore, a trusted person, such as a well-being champion, could serve as the first point of contact for veterinarians facing challenges. This may improve help-seeking behaviour and early intervention for mental health issues.

Previous research has shown that well-being champions in a workplace improved commitment to well-being programmes and increased employee satisfaction (Ellis et al., 2021). These champions are recommended as part of a veterinary wellness tool (Allison et al., 2016) and should be considered as a potential initiative for veterinary clinics.

### 6.5.2 A collaborative, trusting team and a psychologically safe culture

For veterinarians in this study, the team was an important factor in their job satisfaction, well-being, and commitment to clinical practice. Similarly, Hagen et al. (2020) reported that the team was cited as the main reason for staying in a clinical job, and Moore et al. (2014) found that a positive veterinary team environment was associated with engagement, professional efficacy, and satisfaction. However, participants believed that developing collaborative teams depended on effective communication, building trust, and mutual respect, which required input and effort from all team members. This reflects Gittell's (2002) concept of relational coordination, where effective communication and relationships reinforce each other. Participants in the present study valued communication that was honest, timely, and solution-focused, which helped build relationships based on shared understanding and respect. These findings align with recent research from Canada (Blokland et al., 2025), which found that high levels of relational coordination in veterinary teams were associated with a positive workplace culture, positive well-being, job satisfaction, and a reduced intention to leave clinical practice.

Being part of a collaborative, trusting team contributed to participants' sense of achievement and positive well-being. Similarly, Moore et al. (2014) demonstrated that a coordinated veterinary team was positively linked to professional productivity and a reduced risk of burnout. Likewise, House et al. (2022) found that relational coordination in healthcare teams was linked to improved well-being, psychological safety, learning, engagement, and job satisfaction, as well as decreased levels of burnout.

Veterinarians in the present study often relied on the collective effort of team members to achieve a successful outcome. This concurs with Elwood (2022), who stated that an effective veterinary team "can achieve together what would not be possible alone" (p. 132). Participants believed that working towards a common goal fostered team cohesion and helped maintain positive attitudes. Striking a balance between giving and taking was an essential element of a collaborative team in this study. Likewise, Hungerford et al. (2024), showed that cohesiveness in nursing teams relied on a complex balance of give and take. Participants in the present study who were prepared to work extra hours and/or help colleagues were rewarded in the long-term with flexibility and accommodation of their own needs. The act of giving and helping others has been shown to

develop strong relationships, foster collaborative teams, and is associated with positive well-being (Grant, 2014; Hungerford et al., 2024).

Veterinarians in the current study appreciated supportive teams that enabled them to offer context-appropriate care. Some felt the term “gold standard” was unhelpful when it did not reflect real-world constraints, a concern also raised by Skipper et al. (2021). The costs of veterinary care can limit clients’ access to veterinary services and create stress for veterinarians trying to meet patient needs (Williams, 2024). A contextualised or spectrum of care approach (SoC) helps address this issue by offering evidence-based options that meet clinical standards while also considering client expectations and financial limitations. This approach makes veterinary care more accessible across socioeconomic groups (Fingland et al., 2021). The results of the present study highlighted the need for veterinary practices to support veterinarians to offer a SoC approach in their daily clinical work, which aligns with recent research (Williams, 2024).

The present study found that good leadership and the individual’s sense of fit (belonging) were critical for the development of trusting, safe teams, which concurs with previous literature (Edmondson, 1999; Elwood, 2022; McKay & Vaisman, 2023; Moore et al., 2014). In the present study, trust was viewed as an element of relationships rather than a personal trait, as described by Schoorman et al. (2007) in their model of organisational trust. Participants described trust between team members as collective trust (Bunjak et al., 2021), which is a shared belief between team members regarding reliability, honesty, support, and aligned values.

A trusting and supportive team environment was beneficial for participants who experienced the challenges of menopause in their professional lives. Women’s health issues and menopause are often viewed as sensitive topics that are avoided in the workplace. This study highlighted the need to raise awareness and understanding of women’s health and menopause through education and to foster a safe, supportive team culture that helps normalise conversations about these issues. Previous research in both the veterinary (Barton & Judson, 2020) and the medical profession (British Medical Association, 2020) highlighted the benefits of open dialogue, flexible working arrangements, and targeted education around women’s health and menopause. This increased awareness may be beneficial for male colleagues, managers, and younger team members in helping them better understand and support those facing the challenges of menopause.

A unique finding of this study was the value that participants placed on clinic social initiatives and team-building activities in building collective trust. These activities helped develop strong relationships, foster friendships among team members, and strengthen the teams over time. Participants also emphasised the value of fostering trusting relationships with non-veterinarian

members of the team, as well as the better utilisation of LAVTs and nurses, which helped manage workloads. This aligns with recent research in New Zealand that highlighted the benefits of veterinary nurses (Brown & Ma, 2023) and LAVTs (Brown, 2023) for individual veterinarians, the team, clients and animals.

Trust emerged as a key factor in this study, supporting collaboration, strong relationships, a sense of belonging, well-being and job loyalty, findings consistent with previous research (Elwood, 2022; Li, 2015). In the present study, veterinarians who worked in a collaborative team underpinned by collective trust and psychological safety were more likely to thrive and remain committed to their roles despite job-related challenges. Participants viewed a psychologically safe team where they felt safe to speak up, make mistakes, and be themselves as a critical job resource (Edmondson, 1999). This mirrors Elwood's (2022) identification of psychological safety as one of the six components of an effective veterinary team. Furthermore, Bunjak et al. (2021) showed how collective trust was a job resource that offset the demands of work across multiple industries. Professional growth was also enhanced when veterinarians felt safe to learn from mistakes. Those who developed a growth mindset fostered shared purpose within their teams and reframed challenges as opportunities, reflecting a challenge-focused identity that supports well-being in clinical practice (Armitage-Chan & May, 2018).

### 6.5.3 Conclusion

This study explored the workplace well-being initiatives that support veterinarians' mental health and ability to thrive in clinical practice. While participants mentioned a variety of formal well-being programmes and interventions, their impact was reported as mixed. However, the most consistently valued factor for participants' well-being was not specific initiatives but having a supportive clinic manager and belonging to a collaborative, trusting team.

This study showed that well-being is fostered through trust and support from managers and teams, alongside a psychologically safe workplace culture (Figure 6.4). Rather than relying on quick-fix programmes, the key to workplace well-being lies in emotionally intelligent leadership that promotes teamwork, trust, learning, and professional growth. These elements form the central hub of the well-being wheel. In contrast, formal well-being initiatives function more as the grease that keeps the wheel turning; enhancing well-being and engagement when the core is strong, but ineffective when the hub is lacking. It is the daily actions of kind, effective managers—those who foster trust and support—that create a culture where veterinarians can genuinely thrive.

This study also highlighted that well-being in clinical practice is a shared responsibility between the individual and the workplace. Personal strategies or formal workplace well-being initiatives are unlikely to be effective in a ‘toxic’ clinic environment or under poor management and unsustainable workloads. On the other hand, even in a supportive workplace, veterinarians who neglect self-care and do not take up available opportunities may still experience stress and poor mental health. While positive workplace culture and effective leadership are essential for veterinary well-being, individuals’ efforts also play a crucial role. Therefore, sustaining veterinarians’ well-being in clinical practice requires both organisational support and personal responsibility.

**Figure 6.4**

*The intricate relationship between trusting teams, supportive management and the development of a psychologically safe workplace culture*



# Chapter 7: General discussion

## The three Ps of veterinary thriving

### 7.1 Introduction

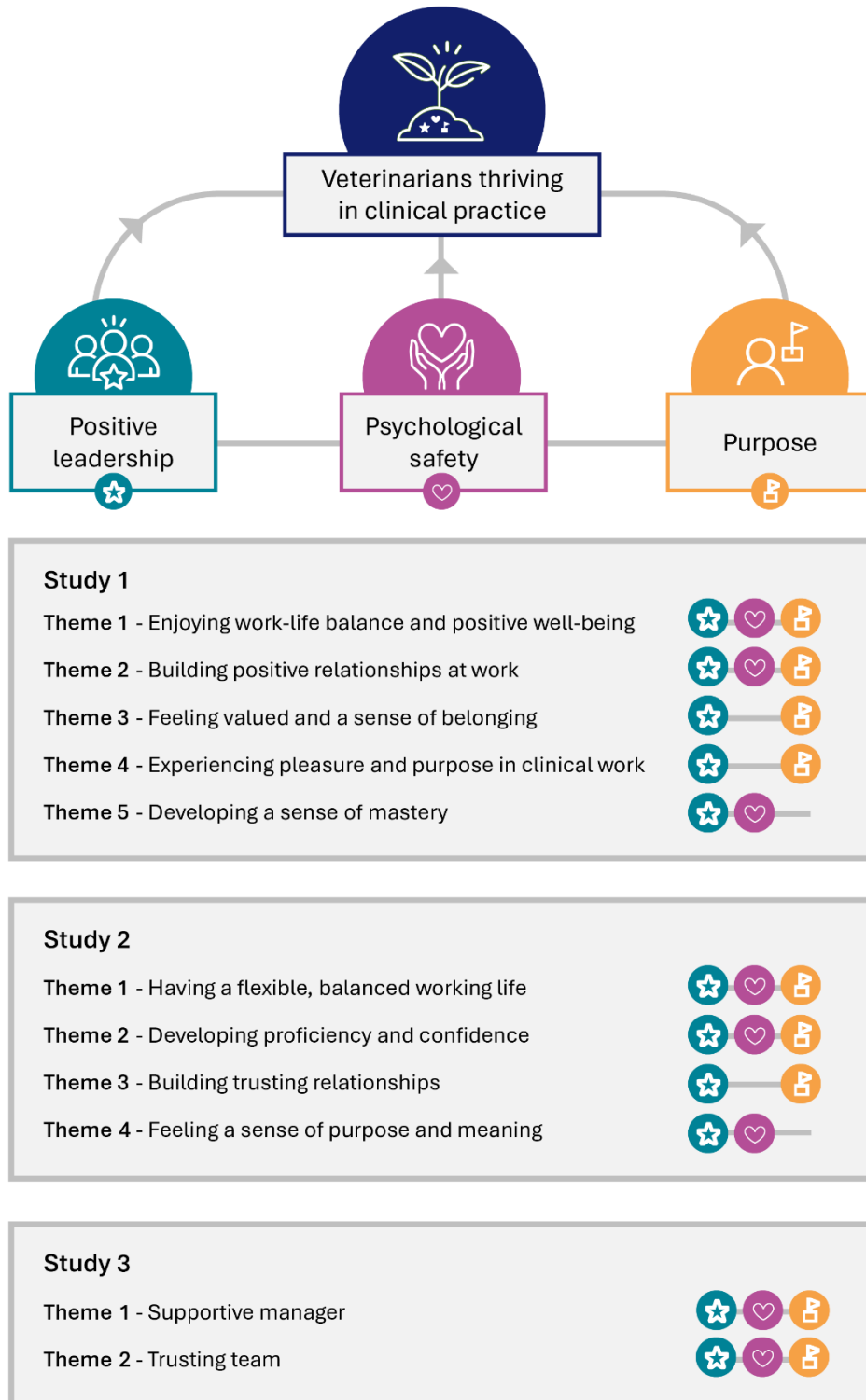
This research project, which comprised three distinct studies, addressed the question: “What factors support veterinarians to thrive and have sustainable, enjoyable careers in clinical practice in New Zealand?” While there is much published research on stress, burnout, and compassion fatigue associated with veterinary work, these studies were conducted to provide a deeper understanding of the positive impacts of a clinical career on veterinarians’ well-being and what helps them thrive in clinical practice.

Study 1 examined the factors that enable clinical veterinarians to thrive and remain in practice over the long term (Chapter 4). Study 2 investigated what recent graduates need to have a positive start in clinical practice (Chapter 5), and Study 3 collated information about what businesses do to support veterinarians’ positive well-being and thriving in clinical practice and what is actually valued by the veterinarian team members (Chapter 6). Understanding the factors that contribute to thriving at different career stages is essential when considering practical interventions that support positive well-being and retention in clinical practice. Interventions that enable veterinarians to thrive in clinical veterinary practice may have significant benefits for individual veterinarians, veterinary businesses, clients, society, animals, and the future of the veterinary profession.

This chapter brings together the findings from the three studies and offers an overarching interpretation, organised around three final key concepts that underpin thriving in clinical veterinary practice (Figure 7.1). Figure 7.1 also illustrates how similar themes emerged across all three studies, leading to the development of the final key concepts: positive leadership, psychological safety, and purpose. Each final concept is discussed based on the research findings, their interpretation, positioning within the existing literature, and potential impacts on the New Zealand veterinary workforce. The chapter concludes with an outline of the research’s strengths and limitations and proposes some areas for future investigation.

**Figure 7.1**

*Integration of the themes from the three studies to generate the three final key concepts and how they influence thriving in clinical practice*



## 7.2 Final key concept one: Positive leadership

Managers have a critical influence on veterinarians' ability to thrive in clinical practice. In New Zealand, the decline of small private practices and the growth of large, multi-clinic businesses have introduced new challenges, particularly related to practice culture and leadership. Large veterinary businesses now employ an increasing number of clinical veterinarians; this is similar to other countries (Kogan & Rishniw, 2023a). Clinic managers, often veterinarians themselves, are responsible for day-to-day operations, staff support, and maintaining clinic culture. Furthermore, clinic managers' access to resources may be limited by senior management, to whom they are often accountable. Veterinarians in this study consistently identified that middle managers have the most significant impact on their ability to thrive, emphasising that it was leadership style rather than management skills that mattered most.

### 7.2.1 Qualities of positive leaders

Positive leadership emerged as a central theme across all three studies and was critical in supporting veterinarians to thrive at different career stages. Positive leadership enabled experienced veterinarians to develop a sense of mastery, enjoy a healthy work-life balance, feel valued and experience purpose in their work. For new and recent graduates, positive leadership was particularly important in their development of proficiency and confidence through mentorship and support. Furthermore, positive leadership also played a vital role in fostering a psychologically safe environment, which influenced the clinic culture and contributed to veterinarians' ability to thrive.

In this research, the term 'positive leadership' encompassed the key attributes that participants identified in managers, leaders, and colleagues who contributed to their well-being, job satisfaction, and thriving. These individuals were described as supportive, inclusive, trustworthy, and having high integrity. Positive leaders demonstrated high levels of emotional intelligence (EI). They listened without judgment, displayed empathy, communicated openly, and demonstrated vulnerability by sharing their challenges. Participants valued managers who actively prioritised veterinarians' intrinsic needs and followed through on promises. Recent research has highlighted the importance of active listening as an effective strategy that fosters a supportive clinical environment and helps veterinarians manage the negative impacts of incivility on well-being and job satisfaction (Irwin et al., 2025). Managers who involved team members in decision-making promoted a sense of belonging and purpose, creating a work environment where veterinarians felt recognised, appreciated, and genuinely cared for.

## 7.2.2 Understanding positive leadership

As discussed in Chapter 2, positive leadership is characterised by traits such as optimism, a “can-do” attitude, altruism, trustworthiness, and fairness (Malinga et al., 2019). Positive leaders also build trust, promote teamwork, encourage open communication, and recognise strengths and achievements. These behaviours are associated with enhanced employee well-being, engagement, performance, and organisational commitment.

The present study supports Vaisman’s (2023a) model of positive veterinary leadership. Vaisman’s model suggests that leadership that fosters psychological safety, a sense of purpose, career pathways, and partnership enhances well-being and thriving in clinical practice. The findings from the current research also align with broader healthcare research showing that leadership is most effective when it prioritises collaboration and staff well-being (Shanafelt et al., 2015). In the current study, such leadership enhanced veterinarians’ motivation, engagement, and well-being. Participants felt they mattered when their core psychological needs for autonomy (decision latitude), competence (personal development) and relatedness (sense of belonging) were supported, aligning with the self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Participants described positive veterinary leaders as managers who demonstrated a blend of transformational, servant, and inclusive leadership styles. As transformational leaders, they inspired and motivated participants (Carasco-Saul et al., 2015; Moss, 2009); as servant leaders, they prioritised well-being and personal growth (Greenleaf, 2013); and as inclusive leaders, they empowered others and fostered psychological safety through shared decision-making (Carmeli et al., 2010). This integrated leadership approach aligns with the “engaging leadership” model, which has been shown to promote work engagement (Schaufeli, 2015; Van Tuin et al., 2021). Similar to participants’ reports in the present research, Van Tuin et al. (2021) found that engaging leaders who prioritised intrinsic values, such as employee well-being and personal growth, enhanced team motivation and work engagement. In contrast, leaders focused on extrinsic goals, including financial performance, were less effective at motivating staff.

While there is a lack of research on veterinary leadership, there is a growing recognition of its importance and the need to implement programmes to enhance veterinary leadership skills (Lloyd et al., 2005). The present research provides valuable insights into what effective veterinary leadership looks like in practice and reinforces the importance of developing leadership capabilities within the veterinary profession. These findings concur with Kogan et al. (2025), who suggested promoting transformational leadership training programmes and psychological safety in clinical settings to support well-being, improve performance and enhance patient safety. The

development of leadership approaches that foster psychological safety and help veterinarians feel valued, supported, and empowered is essential for enabling veterinarians to thrive. Figure 7.2 outlines the qualities of positive leaders identified in the present research, and each factor is discussed in more detail below.

**Figure 7.2**

*Qualities of positive leadership identified in this research*



#### *7.2.2.1 Positive leaders have high emotional intelligence*

Emotional intelligence is considered an essential feature of leadership, as noted by Melita Prati et al. (2003): “Emotional intelligence reflects the ability to read and understand others in social contexts, to detect the nuances of emotional reactions, and to utilise such knowledge to influence others through emotional regulation and control” (p. 21). As such, it represents a critically important competency for effective leadership and team performance in organisations today.

The findings of the present study suggest that positive leaders who display high EI strengthen team effectiveness and cohesion. Participants emphasised the importance of EI leadership in cultivating a psychologically safe clinic culture. Consistent with findings from leadership research

in schools (Gómez-Leal et al., 2022), veterinarians valued leaders who demonstrated self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and strong social skills. These qualities enabled leaders to foster a clinic environment that accepted imperfection, reduced fear of failure, and encouraged continuous learning. This was particularly valuable for new graduates transitioning into practice. Positive leaders in the present study were reported to demonstrate EI by openly sharing their own challenges and mistakes, modelling vulnerability, and reducing hierarchical barriers. This openness built trust, normalised learning from errors, and helped new graduates gain confidence by showing that even experienced veterinarians make mistakes. Leaders who communicated with empathy and authenticity were central to creating a safe environment where veterinarians felt supported in their development and encouraged a growth mindset centred on progress over perfection, which further enhanced well-being and supported veterinarians to thrive in practice.

#### *7.2.2.2 Positive leaders foster psychologically safe teams*

Veterinarians in this study reported that clinic managers who demonstrated positive leadership qualities created a healthy culture of safety. This finding supports a recent survey of veterinarians that found an association between positive leadership and psychological safety (McKay & Vaisman, 2023). Consistent with Edmondson (1999), participants in this study felt safe discussing poor patient outcomes and mistakes with trusted managers who were open about their own challenges. Feeling psychologically safe at work enabled veterinarians to learn from their errors and improve practice policies, which in turn increased team effectiveness. In 2012, Google launched “Project Aristotle” to understand the key to high-performing, effective teams (Pretty, 2024). The project found that psychological safety was strongly linked to team performance, collaboration and innovation, and was the single most important factor in team success. Psychological safety in teams has been shown to increase performance by enhancing collective intelligence. This refers to a team’s ability to collaborate and coordinate effectively, which has a stronger influence on performance than the cognitive ability of individual team members (Glikson et al., 2016). Therefore, fostering psychological safety in clinical veterinary settings may lead to more effective and productive teams, resulting in improved patient outcomes.

Participants in this research also reported that clinic managers who demonstrated positive leadership made them feel trusted and empowered to work autonomously and flexibly. This trust created an environment that provided opportunities for learning and growth, where errors were viewed as learning opportunities in a no-blame environment. Thus, autonomy in a psychologically safe climate enabled development and learning without fear of criticism, even when mistakes and errors occurred. Similarly, Frazier et al. (2017) showed that being trusted to make important

decisions at work (autonomy) nurtured psychological safety and increased the engagement of employees. This emphasises the importance of autonomy and shared decision-making within teams as an antecedent to high-functioning, safe teams.

The present study suggests that clinic managers should model behaviours that foster psychological safety by openly sharing challenges, promoting autonomy, encouraging honest input, and actively listening to staff concerns. Additionally, acknowledging and appreciating team members who speak up promotes inclusive communication. Regularly debriefing after stressful events and openly discussing challenges and errors in team meetings may further support a culture of openness.

#### *7.2.2.3 Positive leaders empower others*

Effective leadership in veterinary teams was not restricted to formal, hierarchical roles often categorised as big “L” leadership (Turmel, 2007). Rather, the findings of the present study suggested that positive leadership promoted a more informal, inclusive, shared approach. This style, referred to as little “l” or shared leadership (Carson et al., 2007), involved all team members contributing to decision-making, collaboration, and psychological safety. Veterinarians valued this less hierarchical, shared responsibility style, which supported engagement and more effective problem-solving in clinical practice. These findings concur with Bohmer (2010), who highlighted the importance of everyday little “l” clinical leadership in human health to improve hospital team performance and patient outcomes. The present research also supports Bohmer’s (2010) call for leadership reform in the health sector, shifting the focus from solely big “L” leadership to inclusive team-based little “l” leadership. Based on these insights, the current research findings suggest that practices should consider offering leadership development opportunities for all team members to encourage leadership at every level.

#### *7.2.2.4 Positive leaders support work-life balance and well-being*

Positive leaders supported veterinarians’ work-life balance and well-being by creating a culture that valued individuals’ needs and offered flexibility. Participants in this research reported greater job satisfaction and overall well-being when clinic managers showed genuine care and understanding. This was especially true when managers showed concern for the participants’ personal circumstances, such as support for family commitments, health issues, holidays, and out-of-work activities. These findings align with recent research identifying work-life balance as critical to well-being and burnout prevention among veterinarians (Volk et al., 2024). Similarly, a good work atmosphere and support for holidays were among the top sources of job satisfaction

in German veterinarians (Kersebohm et al., 2017). Previous research suggests that achieving a healthy work-life balance is a shared responsibility between individuals, as well as the organisation and the manager (Hilton et al., 2023). The results of the current research reinforced this view, showing that managers who demonstrated positive leadership helped participants maintain a healthy work-life balance. The current findings also align with recent Canadian research by Kittisiam (2025), who demonstrated that factors associated with thriving in recent graduates are present at both the individual and workplace levels. Participants in this research reported that positive leaders supported well-being by enabling flexibility and promoting a healthy work-life balance through thoughtful scheduling and workload management. At the same time, individuals took responsibility by setting boundaries and engaging in personal well-being practices, such as regular exercise, a balanced diet, sleep hygiene, and participating in enjoyable activities outside of work. This highlights the critical role of both leadership and individual strategies in sustaining veterinarians' well-being in clinical practice.

Additionally, clinic managers in the present research who modelled healthy work-life balance and prioritised their well-being demonstrated that such behaviours were acceptable and encouraged. This supported veterinarians in setting boundaries or seeking support, and normalised conversations about stress and mental health. By modelling these positive behaviours, leaders built trusting relationships with participants, an essential component of psychological safety. Thus, a recommendation from this study is that leaders should model healthy work-life balance and self-care, reinforcing the importance of well-being across the team.

#### *7.2.2.5 Positive leaders support flexible work arrangements*

Clinic managers who supported flexible work arrangements and flexible scheduling helped participants establish healthy boundaries between their personal and professional lives. While some participants preferred a clear separation between work and personal life, others were happy when friendships with clients or team members blurred the boundaries between work and home life. This finding concurs with those of Shanafelt and Noseworthy (2017), who reported that work-life integration, rather than strict work and home life separation, was key to engagement and well-being in physicians.

Furthermore, veterinarians in the present study who built strong relationships both at work and in the community felt a deep sense of belonging. These findings resonate with the concept of job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001), which explains how strong workplace and community ties can improve retention. Although not widely applied in veterinary contexts, this theory provides a useful lens for understanding how strong links support positive work-life integration and

contribute to a veterinarian's decision to stay in a job. Thus, this study highlights the need for clinic managers to support veterinarians in having a healthy work-life balance while respecting individual preferences for work and personal boundaries. In addition, encouraging community involvement may increase veterinarians' well-being, job embeddedness, and retention.

Flexible working arrangements, such as part-time roles and compressed hours (in companion animal practice), were crucial for veterinarians managing family, health, or lifestyle commitments. Most veterinarians in this research reported some form of flexible work, which supported their work-life balance, well-being, and commitment to their clinical role. New graduates also highlighted the importance of flexibility and support for maintaining a healthy work-life balance. This reflects findings from previous research conducted by Bell et al. (2019), who also demonstrated that support for work-life balance was a vital factor in success among early-career veterinarians.

Flexible working in this study extended beyond reduced hours. Veterinarians, especially new graduates, valued support from positive leaders for other types of flexibility in their work schedule, such as extended consultation times and time dedicated to administrative tasks. Time pressure is a recognised stressor in veterinary practice (Paton et al., 2024), linked to increased errors among new graduates (Mellanby & Herrtage, 2004) and more experienced veterinarians (Kinnison et al., 2015; Oxtoby et al., 2015). Reducing time pressure helped veterinarians in this study manage stress, stay on top of their workload, and improve their mental health and work-life balance. Participants felt they could provide better patient care, learn more effectively, and potentially reduce the risk of mistakes. Indeed, Campbell et al. (2023) found that veterinarians' mental health influenced patient care, and suggested that improving well-being could enhance the quality of veterinary care. The current research identified interventions that reduced time pressure as an important, yet previously underreported, factor in supporting veterinarians' well-being which may, in turn, have a positive influence on patient care. Furthermore, extended consultation times and scheduled times for writing clinical notes were particularly important for the new graduates' successful transition into practice. These findings highlight the individual and potential business benefits of reducing time pressure on veterinarians.

Despite the pressures of clinical practice, positive leaders adopted a "give and take" approach, offering flexibility, when possible, in recognition of veterinarians' contributions during busy periods or when short-staffed. Even when flexibility could not be granted, transparent and respectful communication from positive leaders built trust and respect. While the findings of the present research align with a recent study that showed flexibility to be a reason why veterinarians

stayed in a clinical job (AAHA, 2024), the productivity benefits of flexible working are not widely documented in the veterinary profession. However, non-veterinary studies have reported business advantages of flexible work, including reduced absenteeism, increased retention, and productivity (Willott, 2024). Furthermore, recent New Zealand research found that supporting employees' work-life balance can enhance business productivity and success (Quinlan, 2024). The author showed this finding applied across a range of different sectors, from small privately owned businesses to large companies.

#### *7.2.2.6 Positive leaders encourage personal growth and development*

Veterinarians in this research reported intrinsic curiosity and a love of learning, a characteristic that has been documented as a career motivator in previous veterinary research (M Cake et al., 2019). The findings of the present study suggest that veterinarians' professional growth and development of mastery were not just outcomes but fundamental drivers of thriving in veterinary practice. Veterinarians who were proactive in their learning identified educational opportunities that aligned with their career ambitions and felt valued when managers supported their personal growth. As participants developed their skills and expanded their knowledge, they felt a sense of fulfilment and engagement in their work. This aligns with the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000), which recognises competence as a core psychological need underpinning motivation and well-being. It also aligns closely with Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which suggests that human flourishing is dependent on accomplishment, one of the five pillars of the model described in Chapter 2. Thus, opportunities for personal growth contribute to the elements of achievement, engagement, and meaning in work. Similarly, previous research found that providing learning opportunities in clinical practice was a key factor in veterinarians' engagement and satisfaction (Elte et al., 2023).

Constructive feedback, career opportunities, and support to develop a niche and become the "go-to expert" contributed to participants' positive experiences in clinical practice. This aligns with the concept of job crafting (Tims et al., 2013), where individuals proactively shape their roles to better fit their strengths and interests. Developing a niche not only boosted veterinarians' confidence but also led to increased recognition from colleagues and clients. This, in turn, positively impacted veterinarians' well-being and added value to the business. This concurs with the research of Bandura (2023), who emphasised "enablement through guided mastery" (p. 186) and the role of support, encouragement and timely feedback in strengthening self-efficacy. In summary, the present study's findings suggest that encouraging and supporting veterinarians' strengths and interests may help them develop mastery and craft a niche within the business.

This, in turn, may improve their self-efficacy, motivation, engagement and sense of purpose in their role.

#### 7.2.2.6.1 Positive leaders provide effective mentorship

Mentoring is widely recognised as a key factor in supporting new graduates' transition to clinical practice (Freeman et al., 2022a). The results of Study 2 reinforced the importance of effective mentoring for new graduates, echoing previous studies. For example, inadequate supervision and time pressure have been shown to increase the risk of mistakes and mental health challenges in recent veterinary graduates (Mellanby & Herrtage, 2004). Furthermore, in New Zealand, a lack of mentoring support and toxic practice environments has contributed to recent graduate attrition from clinical veterinary practice (Gates et al., 2020).

Positive leaders played a crucial role in providing mentorship that helped build the confidence, self-efficacy, and engagement of new graduates. Participants who experienced emotionally challenging situations found that compassionate and kind mentorship was especially valuable. Support extended beyond formal mentorship provided by senior veterinarians. Newer veterinary graduates, veterinary nurses, and technicians also acted as informal mentors, offering critical day-to-day guidance and modelling positive leadership at the team level.

Effective mentoring must be flexible and responsive to each graduate's individual needs. It should involve regular check-ins, goal setting, and encouragement tailored to the graduate's stage of development. Positive leaders who adapted their approach to match participants' progression and needs helped enable thriving in the early stages of their careers.

New graduates' confidence may not always align with their actual abilities, which could be due to impostor syndrome (Kogan et al., 2020). Some new graduates had high proficiency but low confidence, doubting their abilities despite evidence of success. Conversely, some were more confident but lacked skills and knowledge, potentially leading to an increased risk of mistakes (Mellanby & Herrtage, 2004). Trusting, wraparound support from the team and mentors helped graduates align their confidence with their abilities, reduced feelings of impostor syndrome, and built both proficiency and self-awareness.

A key insight from this research was that effective mentorship required active participation from both mentors and mentees. New graduates who took a proactive approach, such as seeking feedback, asking questions, and engaging in learning, reported smoother transitions and greater benefits from mentorship. Participants also emphasised the importance of personal attributes, including curiosity, proactivity, effective communication skills, and self-awareness. Similarly, EI

was identified as integral to the success of early-career veterinarians in Canada (Kittisiam, 2025). This is consistent with earlier research linking proactive behaviours to improved well-being and performance in early-career veterinarians (Mastenbroek, Jaarsma, Demerouti, et al., 2014). Furthermore, personal resources such as proactive behaviour and self-efficacy can be developed through training programmes in the workplace (Mastenbroek et al., 2015).

While individual capabilities such as self-efficacy can help veterinarians manage stress and reduce the risk of burnout (McArthur et al., 2021), resilience alone is not enough. Thriving requires both personal and workplace resources. As Kittisiam (2025) noted, resilient individuals cannot thrive in unsupportive or toxic environments. Pizzolon et al. (2019) suggested that implementing workplace interventions to improve individual and team engagement may enhance satisfaction and reduce the risk of burnout. Similarly, van Gelderen et al. (2025) suggested that fostering the resilience of mid-career veterinarians requires organisational practices that manage workplace stressors. The findings of the present study emphasise the dual responsibility of fostering both personal and workplace resources to meet the demands of clinical work. Positive mentorship that builds EI, self-efficacy, and self-awareness will likely strengthen new graduates' resilience and success.

Based on these findings, it may be helpful to offer training about mentoring relationships to new graduates to help them benefit from this type of support. While online mentee training programmes are available in New Zealand, this may not be ideal for graduates already navigating the steep learning curve of early clinical practice. Hodgson et al. (2022) proposed integrating mentee training into undergraduate veterinary education to prepare new graduates better to engage with mentoring from the outset. Incorporating such training into the veterinary professional skills curriculum could improve new graduates' mentorship experiences and support smoother transitions into practice.

### 7.3 Final key concept two: Psychological safety

Psychological safety was the second key concept that emerged across all three studies and was crucial in enabling veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. As highlighted in Chapter 2, team psychological safety is defined as “a shared belief held by team members that the team environment is a safe place for taking interpersonal risks” (Edmondson, 1999, p. 350). It is an environment where people feel safe to speak up, share ideas and challenge the status quo without fear of negative consequences to their position or career (Kahn, 1990). In the larger veterinary business with multiple clinic sites, psychological safety at the clinic level influenced

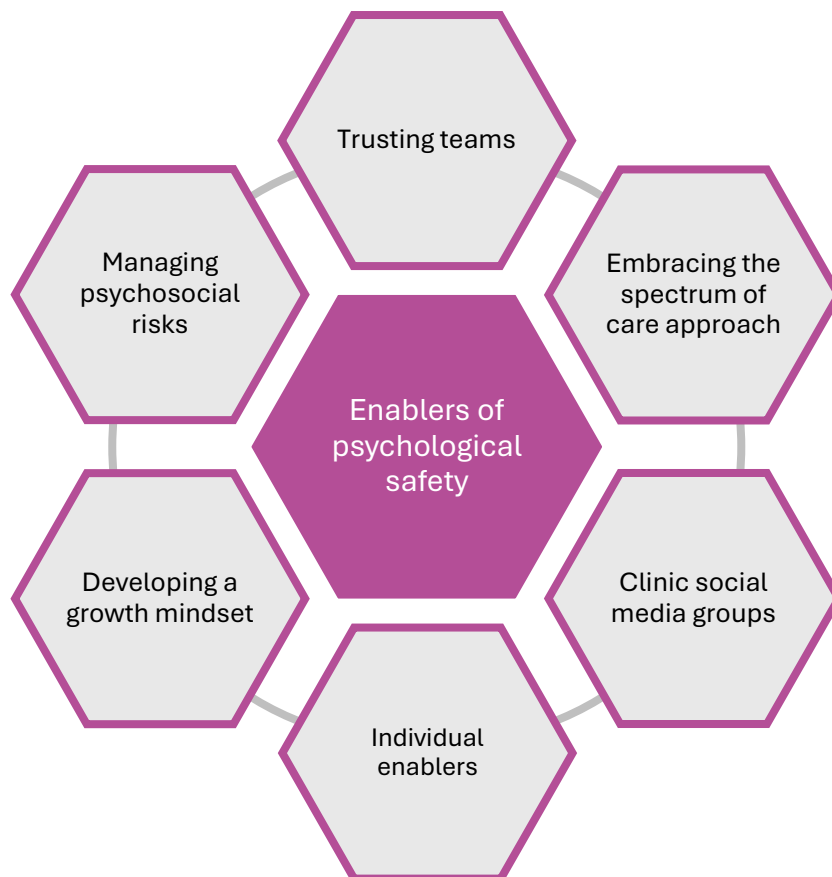
the workplace culture rather than being an overarching, broader organisational phenomenon. Veterinarians in companion animal practice valued day-to-day interactions with their close-knit teams and the wider clinic staff. Similarly, veterinarians in animal production or equine practice reported feeling safe and supported among their veterinary colleagues, large animal technicians, and the wider clinic staff.

### 7.3.1 Enablers of psychological safety identified in this research

Participants across all three studies described aspects of a psychologically safe environment that supported their well-being. They felt comfortable asking for help, admitting mistakes, providing clinical care that matched their values, and being their authentic selves at work. The enablers of psychological safety, as illustrated in Figure 7.3, are discussed in more detail below.

**Figure 7.3**

*Enablers of psychological safety identified in this research*



A safe environment was cultivated by developing trusting relationships with managers and team members who communicated openly, listened actively, and provided honest and timely feedback. Psychological safety appeared to be influenced by three main factors: the clinic

manager, the team, and the individual. These findings broadly align with previous research identifying trusting relationships, positive team dynamics, empathetic management, and supportive organisational norms as the basis for psychologically safe workplaces (Kahn, 1990; O'Donovan & McAuliffe, 2020).

### *7.3.1.1 Trusting teams and psychological safety foster a sense of belonging*

The results of this research showed that veterinarians who felt safe within their team also experienced a sense of belonging, knowing they could rely on mutual support from their colleagues. Participants described shared confidence in each other's abilities and reliability, knowing they could depend on colleagues during staff shortages, high workloads, emergencies, or family needs.

This study found that collective trust within veterinary teams not only buffered the impact of job demands on burnout, as noted by Bunjak et al. (2021), but also actively supported veterinarians to thrive. Collective trust fostered a culture of "give and take". Participants spoke of mutual respect, psychological safety, and reciprocity, where team members could rely on one another and felt valued in return. Veterinarians who were part of teams with strong collective trust also reported having shared goals, shared knowledge, open communication, and effective problem-solving; features of relational coordination (Gittell, 2002). Relational coordination, defined by Gittell (2002), is the process of achieving effective team coordination through frequent, timely, honest and problem-solving communication. This is supported by strong relationships based on shared goals, shared knowledge, and mutual respect, which enhance collaboration and lead to better coordination and work processes. This aligns with recent Canadian research showing that relational coordination improves the psychosocial culture in veterinary teams and is associated with increased job satisfaction and retention in clinical practice (Blokland et al., 2025).

Collective trust was vital as it enabled team members to depend upon and trust each other during routine or challenging situations. This finding supports the claim by Carmeli and Gittell (2009) that high-quality relationships based on mutual trust, respect, and shared goals foster a psychologically safe environment. Further research has highlighted that leadership styles focused on building trusting relationships and interpersonal connections, such as inclusive leadership (Carmeli et al., 2010), and transformational leadership (Carmeli et al., 2014), contribute to psychological safety within teams. A recent study highlighted the importance of exemplary leadership in creating psychologically safe veterinary teams (Kogan et al., 2025). The authors found that veterinarians in safe teams were better able to manage adverse events, which then had a positive impact on patient safety. Although trust provided the scaffold for creating

psychological safety in this study, team psychological safety extended beyond interpersonal trust and was a combination of mutual trust, respect, and caring about other team members (Edmondson, 1999).

The results from the three studies in this research demonstrated that building strong relationships and collective trust with colleagues, teams, and clinic managers was crucial for fostering psychological safety and well-being, a finding echoed by McKay and Vaisman (2023). Participants established trusting relationships with colleagues and managers through face-to-face interactions at work, clinic social events, team-building activities, personal connections outside of work, and through clinic social media groups. Therefore, clinics that offer regular informal social initiatives create valuable opportunities for connection and building collective trust within teams. However, individuals also play an active role by taking time to get to know their team, participating in social and team-building activities, and contributing to a positive and connected team culture. Therefore, clinics should create regular opportunities for team connection, and individuals are likely to benefit from engaging with these opportunities.

#### 7.3.1.1.1 Supporting veterinarians to manage women's health issues

The results of this research indicated the importance of increasing awareness and support of women's health issues in the workplace. Although menopause is a natural stage of life for women, the experience and severity of symptoms can vary greatly between individuals. While the impact of menopause is minimal for some women, others face significant challenges. As such, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to support in this area (BMA, 2020). The findings from study 1 and study 3 in this research highlight the importance of fostering a psychologically safe and supportive workplace culture, along with raising awareness, to help veterinarians feel comfortable discussing menopause and other women's health-related challenges at work.

This issue is particularly relevant to the New Zealand veterinary profession, where women currently comprise 64.2% of the workforce (VCNZ, 2024a), and the proportion is increasing. For example, 85.5% of the 2024 graduating class from Massey University were female (S. Gribbin, personal communication, June 30, 2025), and many veterinary schools internationally report similar trends (BVA, 2019).

The increasing feminisation of the UK veterinary profession (RCVS, 2024), together with growing recruitment and retention concerns in clinical practice, prompted the 2020 Veterinary Women's initiative, researching the impact of menopause on veterinary careers (Barton & Judson, 2020). Many female veterinarians reported that menopause affected their health and work, with

symptoms such as fatigue, anxiety, and insomnia (Barton & Judson, 2020). Similarly, research among doctors found that menopause commonly impacted work performance, yet many felt unable to discuss it with managers due to unsupportive workplace cultures (BMA, 2020).

Although research on menopause and women's health at different life stages in the veterinary sector remains limited, the UK is leading efforts in this space. Notable examples include the Menopause Hub (BVA, 2025) and the comprehensive, freely available menopause resources developed by VetWell (2024). In response to the growing interest in this topic, the NZVA have recently developed menopause resources for veterinary teams, which are available to members on their Vet Support site (NZVA, 2025b). The British Medical Association, BMA (2020), recommends several actions that may be beneficial for women in the health sector. These include normalising discussions about menopause, raising staff awareness, offering flexible working hours and improving workplace conditions, such as better ventilation, easy access to drinking water, and regular rest breaks. Supporting mental health and promoting an inclusive workplace culture were also emphasised. While especially helpful for women experiencing menopause, these initiatives can benefit all staff. These findings align with the present study and reflect the recommendations of Barton and Judson (2020) for the wider veterinary profession.

### *7.3.1.2 Embracing a spectrum of care approach*

The cost of veterinary care can be a barrier for clients and a source of stress for veterinarians striving to deliver appropriate patient care (Williams, 2024). The spectrum of care (SoC) approach addresses this issue by providing a range of evidence-based options that balance clinical standards with client expectations and financial constraints, thereby improving access to veterinary care for a diverse clientele (Fingland et al., 2021). Veterinarians in this study valued working in psychologically safe and supportive team environments where they felt comfortable offering diagnostic and treatment options tailored to each case. Some participants expressed discomfort with the term "gold standard" care, particularly when it did not align with the circumstances of a case, a finding also noted by Skipper et al. (2021). New graduates in Study 2 who felt comfortable embracing the SoC approach to cases had smoother transitions into practice and felt better prepared to manage the challenges of clinical work.

In response to the challenge of access to veterinary care, the Initiative for Accessible Veterinary Healthcare (IAVH) was established in the USA to promote the use of the SoC principles (Stull et al., 2018). The IAVH identified four priorities: developing clinical guidelines, promoting affordable evidence-based practices, building a research network, and enhancing communication with stakeholders. The results of the current study align with recent research conducted by Williams

(2024) and Fingland et al. (2021), which emphasised the importance of teaching the SoC approach in veterinary schools. Expanding on this, Warman et al. (2023) advocated for a SoC pedagogy that promotes a collaborative approach across both primary care and referral clinic settings. Supporting veterinarians in providing a full range of care options to clients can help reduce moral stress and promote veterinarian well-being (Warman et al., 2023).

#### *7.3.1.3 The role of clinic social media chat groups in fostering psychological safety*

A finding of this study, not widely reported in the veterinary literature, highlights the value of well-managed social media groups in promoting team connection, trust, and psychological safety in clinical veterinary practice. Participants valued clinic chat groups, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, which fostered a sense of belonging among team members.

Once considered a tool for the younger generation, social media platforms are now a mainstream method of communication for individuals of all age groups. These virtual networking groups helped veterinarians in the present study stay connected with colleagues, especially when working away from the clinic on farms, or outside regular working hours. The groups varied in composition; some included all clinic staff while others consisted only of veterinarians or specific teams and were viewed as an effective way to share information, ask for advice, and discuss cases. When managed correctly, they provided a safe helpline as well as a source of team connectedness. New graduates in particular appreciated the openness and honesty of more senior veterinarians who contributed to the chat groups. They respected and valued the experienced veterinarians when they also sought help and advice. This behaviour modelled vulnerability, encouraged reciprocal help-seeking, and fostered psychological safety.

Although social media chat groups are increasingly used in clinical veterinary practice, the advantages have not been previously reported. Previous research in non-veterinary settings found that social media groups can be beneficial in the workplace (Cardon & Marshall, 2015). Work chat groups have been linked to psychological safety and an individual's ability to respond to and adapt effectively and promptly to changes in their work environment (Pitafi et al., 2019). Veterinarians in this study referred only to private groups on public messaging platforms. While convenient, these platforms often lack the security, control, and professionalism that are typically expected in a professional workplace setting. Therefore, veterinary businesses should consider leveraging the benefits of social media groups by adopting appropriate platforms specifically designed for professional environments. Although participants in this research did not report any negative effects from clinic-related social media groups, such interaction may make it harder for some veterinarians to switch off from work. Therefore, veterinary businesses should support

veterinarians to establish a healthy work-life balance by encouraging them to turn off notifications when they are away from work.

#### *7.3.1.4 Individual enablers of psychological safety*

Veterinarians in the present study reported several personal attributes that contributed to their well-being and helped foster a sense of psychological safety in the workplace. These findings align with those of Kogan et al. (2025), who highlighted that cultivating a safe workplace culture required active engagement or “buy-in” from employees at every level. Personal resources such as proactive behaviour, curiosity, open-mindedness, a growth mindset, commitment to self-development, assertiveness, and self-awareness were commonly reported. Consistent with Mastebroek (2017), the proactive behaviours of participants’ in the current study such as seeking help when needed, engaging in well-being initiatives, and taking advantage of educational opportunities, further enhanced their sense of well-being. Furthermore, new graduates in the present study who proactively engaged in the mentor–mentee relationship reported a more rewarding experience that supported their professional growth. Mastebroek et al. (2015) demonstrated that personal resources such as proactive behaviour can be developed in young veterinarians. This is encouraging, as participants’ proactive behaviours appeared to enhance their sense of psychological safety, which in turn supported their well-being. However, previous research also suggested that psychological safety can foster proactive behaviour (Carmeli et al., 2010; Edmondson, 2018), which highlights a circular argument for the importance of psychological safety. The current study supports the notion that proactive behaviour not only contributes to psychological safety but also thrives within it, promoting open communication and safe sharing among team members. Similarly, Newman et al. (2017) argued that a psychologically safe environment increases the positive effects of proactive behaviour.

There is, therefore, a strong case for supporting veterinarians to develop personal resources, such as proactive behaviour, to promote psychological safety and well-being within veterinary teams. This could be achieved through targeted education programmes at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Additionally, encouraging individuals to embrace opportunities, ask for help, and take initiative within the team may help veterinarians to thrive.

#### *7.3.1.5 Developing a growth mindset and psychological safety*

Some veterinarians in this study felt they had perfectionist tendencies. However, many recognised that a culture of perfectionism created a fear of admitting mistakes, as there can be pressure to appear perfect and hide weaknesses (Oxtoby, 2018). While striving for excellence was

often valued by participants, maladaptive perfectionism can lead to a reluctance to admit mistakes and is strongly linked to impostor syndrome; a common phenomenon described in veterinarians who doubt their abilities and feel like frauds (Hamood, 2020). Despite often being high achievers, veterinarians who suffer from impostor syndrome and perfectionism often experience poor mental health, anxiety and depression (Kogan et al., 2020).

The present study highlighted how veterinarians managed unhealthy perfectionism in a psychologically safe environment. By shifting their focus from perfection to improvement, participants appeared to adopt a growth mindset; the belief that their abilities could be developed through effort, learning and persistence (Dweck, 2006). Feeling safe to fail and receiving constructive feedback allowed participants to reframe setbacks as opportunities for learning and professional growth, which, in turn, supported their overall well-being. These findings concur with previous studies, which highlighted that the practical implications of psychologically safe environments included increased learning, engagement, commitment, satisfaction and well-being at work (Frazier et al., 2017; Moin et al., 2021). These results of the present study mirror recent research in healthcare settings, which suggested a strong link between psychological safety, a growth mindset, and well-being among team members (Hopkins et al., 2023). Encouraging veterinarians to prioritise progress over perfection may help shift the culture towards continuous learning and support greater well-being and thriving.

#### *7.3.1.6 Managing psychosocial risks to enhance psychological safety*

Veterinarians are exposed to various psychosocial risks and workplace stressors that can negatively affect their mental or physical health (Bartram, Baldwin, et al., 2009). It is therefore essential that clinics take active measures to mitigate or address them.

The present research found that workplaces that acknowledged and actively addressed these risks through open, honest communication earned the trust and respect of their teams, fostering psychologically safe environments where veterinarians could thrive. Participants valued positive leaders who not only encouraged them to raise concerns but also took meaningful action to address them. It was the follow-through, not just being heard, that built trust, enhanced well-being, and improved job satisfaction and performance. Clinics should consider identifying workplace stressors and psychosocial risks that impact veterinarians and the wider team. They could consider using validated tools to help identify these workplace stressors, such as the Veterinary Stressors Questionnaire (Mudry et al., 2025). Once identified, the risks should be mitigated or reduced through meaningful action by leaders. Visible action can strengthen trust and psychological safety, encouraging continued discussion about workplace challenges.

## 7.4 Final key concept three: Purpose and meaning at work

Veterinarians often find purpose and pleasure in clinical work (Clise et al., 2021). Research shows that helping others is strongly linked to compassion satisfaction, professional fulfilment, and well-being in veterinarians (Figley & Roop, 2006). Meaningful work has been suggested as an essential mediator of eudaimonic well-being (McMahan & Renken, 2011) and underpins the veterinary eudaimonic well-being model proposed by Cake et al. (2015). The findings of this study align with Cake and colleagues' (2015) model, highlighting that helping others, feeling a sense of belonging, and opportunities for self-actualisation contribute to meaningful work. Participants in the present research described a strong sense of purpose and meaning derived from their clinical roles, particularly through relationships they developed with the team, colleagues, and clients. This reinforces the relevance of the veterinary well-being framework within the context of New Zealand clinical practice.

Many participants in this study found satisfaction in belonging to a collaborative team that worked effectively toward shared goals. This finding aligns with M. A. Bell et al. (2021), who identified a sense of belonging and shared purpose as key to veterinary career success. While the team's purpose was valued, participants in the present research also pursued individual goals such as developing clinical expertise, taking on leadership roles, or supporting and mentoring others. Fulfilling these personal goals required a workplace culture in which veterinarians felt safe sharing their ambitions. Psychologically safe environments and supportive leadership that encouraged open communication about veterinarians' individual goals helped them find purpose in their work and experience personal growth. A veterinarian's sense of purpose was influenced by several factors, some of which appeared to evolve over an individual's career. Figure 7.4 illustrates the factors identified in the current research that were important to veterinarians developing purpose and meaning at work. Each factor will be discussed in more detail below.

**Figure 7.4**

*Developing purpose and meaning at work for veterinarians in this research*



#### *7.4.1.1 An evolving sense of purpose over a veterinarian's career*

New graduates in this research started their careers with a clear purpose of wanting to help animals and people, a finding that aligns with recent research (Morabito et al., 2025). Their motivation for clinical work was influenced by a fundamental interest in science, a commitment to animal care, and a desire to contribute to society.

To achieve this purpose, participants reported that they initially focused on enhancing their proficiency and confidence in clinical work. This enabled them to contribute effectively to the team and be a “good vet” who could help animals and people. However, participants’ purpose and passion for clinical practice were not such that they were willing to sacrifice their quality of life for their job. Establishing a healthy work-life balance in their clinical careers was a crucial element of new graduates’ purpose at work. Effective mentorship, supervision, and experiential learning improved their self-efficacy in clinical work. Additionally, workplace support also helped them integrate work and home life by promoting the establishment of healthy boundaries.

Interestingly, the present research revealed that, as veterinarians progressed in their careers, their sense of purpose evolved. Similar to previous studies, new graduates and experienced veterinarians across all three studies found meaning in their work through achieving successful clinical outcomes and providing high-quality care, which benefited both animals and people (Clise et al., 2021; Morabito et al., 2025). Building trusting relationships with clients and team members also contributed to their sense of purpose. However, their sense of purpose appeared to shift over time. Senior veterinarians reported that they found purpose in supporting new graduates, the profession, and broader society, often through philanthropic work. They appeared to derive satisfaction and meaning from “giving back” through education, mentorship, involvement in professional organisations, and voluntary work. The experienced veterinarians in Study 1 took pride in being mentors and enjoyed watching their mentees grow and achieve success. LaFleur and White (2010) highlighted similar benefits of being a mentor in human healthcare. The authors reported that nurse mentors experienced personal satisfaction, professional success, and a sense of contribution to their organisation and profession.

Thus, the present research found that a veterinarian’s sense of purpose in clinical practice was not static but appeared to evolve, shaped by their experiences and professional insights. Similarly, in a study of early-career veterinarians in Canada, Morabito et al. (2025) observed that purpose in work was not a fixed concept but developed over time. New graduates in the present study also reported a shift from a primary focus on helping animals to a broader purpose of helping people, concurring with the Canadian study.

#### *7.4.1.2 A sense of calling and identity provides purpose*

Some experienced veterinarians in the present study described their work as a “calling,” reflecting a deep commitment and loyalty to their clinical careers. Although based in theology and not well documented in the veterinary context, the concept of a ‘calling’ in the workplace is defined as an ongoing evaluation of purpose, meaning, and contribution to the greater good (Dik & Duffy, 2009). These authors highlighted an association between a perceived calling at work with increased levels of job satisfaction, career commitment and life satisfaction. More experienced veterinarians in the present study often reported a strong sense of purpose characterised by dedication, passion, and a sense of meaning in their work, and viewed their career as their personal identity, not “just a job”. This sense of vocation was associated with greater well-being and overall thriving.

In contrast, the new graduate participants did not describe their careers as a calling. Although they showed commitment to their jobs, their passion for clinical work did not outweigh the

importance they placed on maintaining a good quality of life. This aligns with a study by M. Bell et al. (2021) who found that recent graduates ranked work-life balance higher than more experienced veterinary employees. Instead, the younger participants in this study placed importance on developing not only their professional identity but also their identity outside of work by maintaining a healthy work-life balance. Having a clear professional identity has been associated with improved well-being and mental health in veterinarians (Armitage-Chan & May, 2018). New graduates in Study 2 who focused on supporting clients using attributes of EI developed a relational and challenge-focused professional identity. This helped them manage interpersonal and ethical challenges in clinical practice. This identity was associated with positive well-being, a stronger sense of purpose, and thriving in the clinical workplace.

Consistent with the findings from Study 1, Yoon et al. (2017) found that physicians who viewed their work as a calling experienced greater purpose, well-being, career satisfaction, and clinical commitment, and were less prone to burnout. However, understanding what drives veterinarians to view their work as a calling may offer insights into long-term career satisfaction and is an area for future research.

#### 7.4.1.2.1 Generational differences and purpose

The results of this study suggest that a sense of work calling may be stronger in older veterinarians, a finding not previously reported in the literature. Generational differences in the workplace have become a topic of increasing interest, particularly in the healthcare sector (Aaron & Levenberg, 2018). The experienced veterinarians in Study 1 were mainly from Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979, and some from the Baby Boomer generation, born after World War II (between 1946 and 1964). Aaron and Levenberg (2018) described doctors from earlier generations as having “wisdom, a strong work ethic and loyalty to their jobs” (p. 17). Similarly, many of the experienced veterinarians in the present study viewed being a clinical veterinarian as their life’s purpose.

In contrast, the new and recent graduates in Study 2 were mostly millennials or from Generation Y, born between 1980 and 2001. They grew up in a very different environment from the older generations of veterinarians. The findings of Study 2 align with those of Aaron and Levenberg (2018), who found that millennial doctors were generally team-oriented, technologically savvy, optimistic, and people-focused. In addition, the present research highlighted that new veterinary graduates derived purpose and thrived in clinical practice when they established a relational challenge-focused professional identity, developed self-efficacy and proficiency through tailored mentorship, received effective feedback, and had support for work-life balance. These factors enabled them to find purpose and meaning in their clinical work, which involved helping both

animals and people. These findings align with a recent study that showed millennials reported greater job satisfaction when supported by effective mentoring and leadership, resulting in a healthy work-life balance (Fleeton, 2024).

#### *7.4.1.3 Self-efficacy in new graduates develops purpose*

While often confused with self-confidence or self-esteem, self-efficacy is grounded explicitly in developing both skills and mastery. Self-efficacy thus refers to an individual's confidence and belief in their ability to carry out specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). New graduates in Study 2 developed self-efficacy through experiential learning and mentorship, which enabled them to provide valuable veterinary care to patients and strengthened their sense of purpose in clinical work. This concurs with previous research, which showed that self-efficacy was linked to motivation, persistence, and engagement - key drivers of purposeful work (Bandura, 2023; Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

New graduates in the present study found purpose in developing proficiency and confidence, which enabled them to work independently as veterinarians and find meaning in helping animals and clients. As their self-efficacy grew, they also gained satisfaction from contributing to the team's shared purpose. Similarly, Morabito et al. (2025) found that early-career veterinarians developed a sense of purpose through building technical and professional skills and confidence. This enabled them to develop meaningful relationships with clients and colleagues, contribute to their communities and shape their professional identity.

New graduates in the present study emphasised the importance of effective mentoring and support in developing both self-efficacy and proficiency. This is consistent with previous research in nurse practitioners, which found that effective mentoring was critical to developing self-efficacy (Jnah & Robinson, 2015). However, many new veterinary graduates emphasised the importance of maintaining a healthy balance and valued having time for necessary and enjoyable activities outside work. Therefore, supporting new graduates to find purpose in clinical practice required more than skill development — it involved fostering self-efficacy through tailored mentorship and supervision, along with support for personal well-being and a healthy work-life balance. This approach may strengthen client relationships, promote teamwork, and foster a sense of belonging and purpose, enabling new graduates to thrive. Additionally, this research demonstrated the benefits of being a mentor and supporting others in the development of a veterinarian's evolving sense of purpose.

#### *7.4.1.4 Positive relationships at work increase job embeddedness and provide purpose*

A consistent finding across all three studies in this research was that building positive client relationships and belonging to a trusting, collaborative team were central to participants' sense of purpose and ability to thrive. This result aligns with the PERMA model, developed by Seligman (2011), who proposed that positive relationships were one of the five key elements of flourishing. Recent veterinary research has highlighted that positive relationships contribute to a sense of joy (Clise et al., 2021), while a sense of belonging to a team enhances feelings of purpose in one's work (Wallace, 2019). In the present study, strong client and team connections often evolved into friendships, resulting in participants becoming deeply embedded in their workplace and community. As a result of these strong connections, participants felt a strong sense of purpose in their work, driven by loyalty to their teams and clients. This concurs with the theory of job embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001), which suggests that veterinarians who foster strong relationships in and out of work are more committed to staying in a job, as leaving may mean sacrificing meaningful relationships. This highlights the importance of encouraging veterinarians to build strong relationships with team members, clients and others in the community to increase their sense of purpose, embeddedness, and commitment to their job.

##### *7.4.1.4.1 The three-way (veterinarian-animal-client) relationship*

Consistent with previous studies, veterinarians in the current research reported that they were drawn to a veterinary career as they wanted to work with animals (M Cake et al., 2019). Although participants acknowledged the importance of working with people in their clinical careers, most found that their interest in animals remained a core source of purpose and motivation. Working with animals was reportedly helpful for some participants' mental well-being, a concept supported by the findings of Cake et al. (2015). Furthermore, veterinarians in the present study noted the important role animals played as the 'social bridge' in fostering positive client-veterinarian interactions. In many instances, understanding the human-animal bond provided veterinarians with a strong sense of connection to both the client and the patient, contributing to a greater sense of purpose and intrinsic motivation in their professional role. The positive influence of animals on veterinarian-client relationships and veterinarians' well-being in clinical practice has not been widely reported in the literature. Therefore, recognising and enhancing the three-way relationship between veterinarian, client, and animal may enhance relational trust, strengthen communication, and contribute to veterinarians' sense of purpose and well-being in practice.

#### *7.4.1.5 Finding a good job-fit fosters purpose in work*

Wallace (2019) reported that a sense of fit was critical for meaningful work and was a key mediator for veterinarians' eudaimonic well-being. The link between job fit, sense of purpose, and thriving was also highlighted in the present research. Veterinarians across all three studies experienced a good job fit when their core values and skills aligned with the values and needs of the workplace. Strong values alignment was particularly important in terms of animal welfare and ethics. When participants felt they fitted into a clinic, they experienced an increased sense of meaning in their work. Interestingly, participants who felt a strong sense of fit within their team also reported a positive perception of their work-life balance, aligning with findings from a British survey of veterinarians (Begeny et al., 2018). This may be attributed to the mutual support shared among team members who had similar values around work boundaries and family responsibilities.

The present research found that job fit was influenced by two dimensions that changed over time: how well the workplace met the veterinarian's expectations and values (job-person fit), and how well the veterinarian's skills and needs matched the job demands and rewards (person-job fit). These findings support the theory of work adjustment (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984) that views job fit as a dynamic process that develops over time. Participants, particularly the more experienced veterinarians, demonstrated 'job crafting' behaviours (Tims et al., 2013) by creating a niche, developing a special interest, becoming a mentor, or participating in voluntary or other meaningful philanthropic work. Veterinarians who effectively job-crafted enhanced their sense of fit and evolving purpose within the clinic. This concurs with extant research showing that job crafting and strong job fit positively influence well-being (Tims et al., 2013). When mutual expectations were met and values were aligned, veterinarians in the present study reported greater job satisfaction, engagement, commitment, and purpose.

Participants who experienced a strong job fit felt empowered to utilise their skills, felt included in the workplace, and were safe to be their authentic selves. Similarly, Begeny et al. (2018) suggested that a sense of belonging fosters purpose, identity alignment, and positive well-being among veterinarians. On the other hand, Armitage-Chan and May (2018) showed that a lack of fit and being unable to be an authentic version of oneself at work could lead to identity dissonance, which can negatively impact well-being. The present research contributes to the growing body of evidence that shows that purpose and thriving are fostered when veterinarians experience a strong job fit and a sense of team belonging. This underscores the importance of carefully evaluating a prospective workplace's vision, culture, and nature of work when seeking initial employment.

#### *7.4.1.6 Purpose through agency and autonomy*

Participants experienced a strong sense of purpose when they had autonomy to make decisions, manage their time, and develop mastery. They valued having a sense of control over their work. They appreciated having the ability to make clinical and ethical choices that aligned with their personal and professional values, as well as the opportunity to develop a special interest within a practice. Providing participants with agency gave them ownership over their work, reinforcing their motivation and well-being.

Conversely, low decision latitude and micro-management led to frustration and dissatisfaction. This is consistent with Karasek's (1979) job demands-control (JDC) model, which suggested that while high job demands can elevate stress levels, sufficient decision-making autonomy and control can mitigate these effects. Karasek and Theorell (1990) later developed the JDC-support model, emphasising the protective role of social support. This was reflected in the present study, where support from leaders, mentors, managers, and colleagues enhanced veterinarians' sense of purpose by fostering agency, connection, and growth.

While heavy workloads are often cited as stressors in the veterinary profession (Bartram, Baldwin, et al., 2009; Gardner & Hini, 2006), some veterinarians in the present research thrived under pressure, provided they enjoyed sufficient autonomy and support. These findings reinforce the importance of combining decision-making power, job variety, and social support to promote well-being and are consistent with earlier research (Hesketh & Shouksmith, 1986). Thus, this research supports the JDC-support model (Karasek & Theorell, 1990) and aligns with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these psychological needs are met, veterinarians may reframe high workloads or complex cases as meaningful challenges that contribute to a more profound sense of purpose.

In summary, participants reported experiencing high levels of personal growth and self-actualisation when they felt supported in their professional development and were empowered to work autonomously. Clinics should therefore consider reflecting on the autonomy and support they provide for veterinarians' professional development. Investing in personal growth may help veterinarians reach their full potential through mastery, encouraging them to cultivate a special interest and thrive in their work.

#### *7.4.1.7 Purpose through feeling valued*

Veterinarians who felt valued and appreciated by their team members, managers, and clients had a strong sense of purpose, a sense of belonging, and commitment to their workplace. Not feeling valued or rewarded appropriately has been identified as a common reason for veterinarians

leaving the profession (Buzzeo et al., 2014). In contrast, previous research has shown that feeling valued, a sense of fit or belonging (Begeny et al., 2018), and recognition from clients (Clise et al., 2021) contributed to veterinarians' motivation, job satisfaction, and retention. In line with findings by Begeny et al. (2018) veterinarians in the current study who were actively involved in decision-making and whose input was sought by colleagues and managers felt valued and respected, which in turn strengthened their sense of purpose in the clinical setting. Managers should, therefore, enable and encourage veterinarians to actively participate in clinic decision-making processes as much as possible. This action may foster a sense of purpose through being perceived as a valued team member

#### 7.4.1.7.1 Extrinsic and intrinsic rewards

Participants reported that both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards contributed to their motivation, job satisfaction, sense of purpose, and value in the workplace. Veterinarians in the current study felt that various extrinsic rewards such as a fair salary, compensation for on-call duty, financial bonuses, support for flexible work arrangements, and other employee benefit packages (e.g. health insurance and paid leave) were important but primarily acted as 'hygiene factors' that prevented dissatisfaction rather than driving motivation (Herzberg et al., 1959). In contrast, participants reported that intrinsic rewards such as the sense of achievement from positive outcomes, solving complex problems, personal growth, professional autonomy, recognition of achievements, and strong trusting relationships were more closely linked to personal fulfilment and meaning. As previously reported, veterinarians also highlighted the importance of recognition and appreciation from clients and colleagues (Clise et al., 2021; Morabito et al., 2025).

Both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards were important and resulted in improved job satisfaction, which agrees with similar research in the healthcare sector (Alshmemri et al., 2017). While factors such as fair remuneration, support for work-life balance, and career development were essential, simple acts of recognition and appreciation significantly boosted participants' internal motivation and sense of being valued. This highlights the need for workplaces to develop a system of recognition and appreciation (e.g. through celebrating individual and team successes) in addition to providing their veterinarians with the usual extrinsic rewards.

## 7.5 Summary

This qualitative research examined the factors that enable veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. A total of 70 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with veterinarians in three separate studies, encompassing all career stages. Across these studies, three final key

concepts consistently emerged: positive leadership, a psychologically safe workplace culture, and the importance of purpose and meaning in work. Together, these form the three Ps, which will be referred to hereafter as the “3Ps of thriving”.

Veterinarians were more likely to thrive when supported by positive leadership. Clinic managers, often veterinarians themselves, who demonstrated EI, empathy, honesty, and accessibility, and empowered others, helped create a trusting and inclusive environment. Their leadership was critical in fostering a psychologically safe clinic culture. A psychologically safe workplace was characterised by collective trust, respect, support, and open communication. It was further supported by veterinarians’ attributes, such as proactivity and a growth mindset. A strong person–job fit also contributed to a sense of belonging and security, which, when combined with a healthy work-life balance, supported veterinarians in developing a sense of purpose in their clinical roles. This purpose evolved and was linked to helping animals and people, making a difference, mentoring others, and achieving a sense of mastery. Strong relationships with clients and colleagues reinforced purpose through job embeddedness, contributing to job satisfaction, commitment, and professional fulfilment.

## 7.6 Strengths and limitations of this research

This research is significant as it marks the first investigation in New Zealand focusing on the positive aspects of a clinical veterinary career. The three qualitative studies reported in this thesis enabled meaningful connections with a diverse range of clinical veterinarians across New Zealand, exploring the factors that contribute to thriving in veterinary practice.

The notable strengths of this research project included my insider perspective as a veterinarian and my passion for veterinary well-being. My professional networks were extremely valuable during the recruitment process. Also, I was familiar with the veterinary terms and concepts used by participants. Having a shared professional background enhanced my credibility and helped build rapport with participants, which in turn encouraged trust and openness during the interviews.

The use of qualitative semi-structured interviews captured rich and detailed narratives of participants’ lived experiences in clinical practice. This approach provided nuanced insights into the complexity of thriving and revealed findings that may not have emerged from quantitative surveys. The broad representation of participants provided a deep understanding of thriving from different perspectives and various practice contexts. Grounded in the lived experiences of veterinarians, the findings have led to a series of practical recommendations applicable to clinical

practice that aim to enhance veterinarians' well-being and thriving, which will be discussed in Chapter 8.

### 7.6.1 Sample size and generalisability

Due to the nature of qualitative interviews, the sample size was limited. Although 70 interviews across three studies are sufficient for qualitative research, sample size limits the generalisability of the findings compared to quantitative surveys. Additionally, since this study was conducted in New Zealand, its relevance to other countries may be limited. Also, as the research focus was on veterinarians working in clinical practice, the findings may not be widely applicable to different sectors of the veterinary profession.

### 7.6.2 Implicit and researcher bias

Implicit bias in semi-structured interviews refers to the unconscious attitudes and assumptions that an interviewer may hold. Such bias can subtly influence how questions are asked or how rapport is established during the interview process.

As a veterinarian with personal experience in clinical practice and my own views on well-being, I recognised the potential for researcher bias. As all interviews across the three studies were conducted by the same person, this could introduce implicit bias, for example, by asking leading questions. To address this, I recognised and acknowledged my "insider" position and maintained reflexivity by keeping a reflexive journal throughout the research. I also made a conscious effort to avoid letting my own experiences influence the interpretation of the data.

The use of a carefully prepared interview guide with open-ended questions, probes, and prompts helped to reduce the risk of researcher bias in data collection. Furthermore, a rigorous qualitative approach was adopted whereby interviews were continued until no new ideas or concepts related to thriving emerged (thematic saturation). Additionally, the triangulation of the data helped strengthen the validity of the research. My supervisors reviewed the questionnaire development and analysis of the qualitative data, and discussions were held with peers to increase the reliability of the findings. Finally, the findings align with recent international studies (Kogan et al., 2025; Volk et al., 2024), which provide further reassurance about the validity of the findings.

### 7.6.3 Selection bias

Participants for all three studies were purposively selected based on meeting specific study criteria using my professional networks. This may have influenced the diversity of perspectives in the study. To address this, I actively sought a broad mix of veterinarians across practice types

(private, corporate, or club), species focus (companion animal, equine, and production animal practice), and gender to reflect the New Zealand veterinary profession as closely as possible. I also expanded the selection beyond my professional networks in Study 3 by reaching out to practice owners and managers who circulated the invitation to participate in the study to their teams. Those who volunteered may have had a particular interest or views regarding workplace well-being, which contributed to the self-selection bias. I addressed this by purposively selecting participants who met the study criteria from the pool of volunteers and ensured a diverse representation of veterinarians across various practice types and clinical roles.

#### 7.6.4 Minority groups underrepresented

Despite efforts to ensure diversity, the limited sample size may not have captured all perspectives, particularly those of underrepresented groups. Māori and Pacific veterinarians remain underrepresented in the profession, including in this study. Similarly, the experiences of LGBTQIA+ and neurodiverse veterinarians were not explicitly explored. Participants were not asked to disclose their ethnicity, gender identity, or neurodiversity status, and so unique insights from minority groups may have been overlooked. Future research focused on the factors that support thriving among minority groups of veterinarians is warranted to build a more inclusive understanding.

#### 7.6.5 Survivor bias

This study only interviewed veterinarians who had stayed in clinical practice and did not include any who had left clinical work. Therefore, the interviews captured the perspectives of those who had successfully navigated the challenges of clinical practice, focusing on what works rather than what does not. As a result, the findings may not accurately represent the broader reality of the profession and could potentially lead to an overly optimistic conclusion. However, there is an abundance of literature that focuses on the negative impact of veterinary work on veterinarians' mental health and intention to leave clinical practice. Adopting a novel, strengths-based, positive psychology approach to this research expanded the knowledge about thriving among veterinarians in clinical practice.

#### 7.6.6 Recall bias

The experiences and perceptions shared by veterinarians in this study were self-reported, which may have introduced individual recall bias. Participants reflected on their careers and experiences of thriving in clinical practice, but personal perspectives and memory limitations may have influenced their recollections. Those currently thriving may have overemphasised positive

aspects of their work, while others may have forgotten details or benefits of past well-being initiatives. To mitigate recall bias, participants were encouraged to freely describe their experiences, with follow-up probing questions used to clarify meanings and provide deeper insights.

## 7.7 Areas for future research

This study has highlighted several opportunities for future research into thriving in New Zealand clinical veterinary practice.

To build on the present study, further research could expand beyond veterinarians to include the perspectives of other veterinary stakeholders such as non-veterinary team members, clients, business owners, senior leaders, and clinic managers. Using similar qualitative methods, insights gathered from these groups would help triangulate the current findings and offer fresh perspectives on what supports thriving in clinical practice. Team dynamics and interpersonal relationships strongly influence veterinarians' sense of thriving. Understanding the perceptions of nurses, technicians, and reception staff could provide valuable insights. This also applies to underrepresented groups such as veterinarians who identify as neurodiverse.

Client interactions are central to veterinary work and significantly influence veterinarians' sense of purpose and satisfaction. Interviewing clients could help identify what they value in their relationships with veterinary staff and clarify expectations that either support or strain the team. Understanding this dynamic could guide approaches that benefit veterinary well-being, client experience, and patient care.

There is a lack of research on veterinary leadership. However, this study identified positive leadership as a key factor in shaping workplace culture and enabling veterinarians to thrive. Future research could explore the leadership styles of veterinary clinic owners, senior leaders, and managers using in-depth interviews, and survey data could be used to identify staff satisfaction levels. This approach could offer valuable information on how leadership contributes to thriving across the organisation.

Psychological safety remains underexplored in veterinary clinical practice. Given this study's findings on the importance of psychological safety for thriving, further research is needed to deepen our understanding of this concept within the veterinary field. Surveys, using validated psychological safety assessment tools, could provide baseline data on psychological safety and well-being across the profession. Research could also explore veterinary leaders' knowledge and

skills in fostering psychologically safe environments, as well as investigate how clinics identify and manage psychosocial risks.

There is growing recognition that the needs of neurodivergent veterinary professionals may not be fully met, which can contribute to their increased stress and attrition from clinical practice. Thus, future research could explore how to better support veterinarians who identify as neurodivergent, such as those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism and dyslexia. Qualitative interviews with neurodivergent veterinarians would offer valuable insights into their experiences and determine what enables them to thrive. As the perspectives of minority groups are often overlooked, research in this area is warranted to promote a more inclusive and supportive veterinary profession.

Together, these future research directions could support the development of evidence-based strategies that help both veterinarians and the wider veterinary team thrive. This would likely contribute to improved client experience, better patient care, and promote a sustainable veterinary workforce.

## Chapter 8: Recommendations and conclusions

As a result of this research, I have identified three final interconnected key concepts that support veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. These are positive leadership, psychological safety, and purposeful work, and are collectively termed the three Ps (3Ps) of veterinary thriving (Figure 8.1).

**Positive leaders:** demonstrated high levels of emotional intelligence. They were kind, empathetic, supportive, and listened without judgment. They set the tone for a respectful, inclusive culture where open communication was encouraged. All team members were empowered to take responsibility (little “l” leaders) and contributed to decision-making. This type of leadership fostered psychological safety and reinforced a shared purpose.

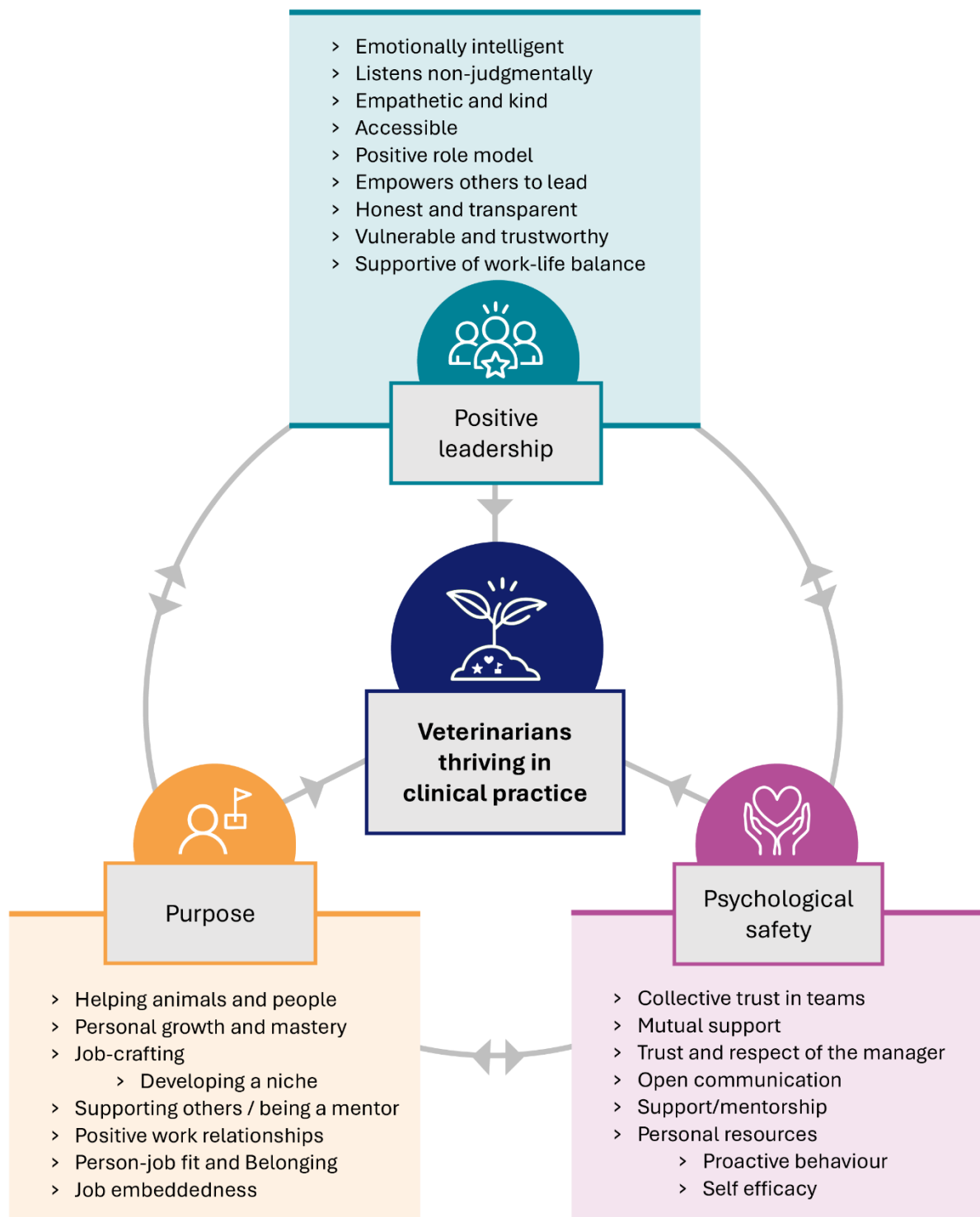
**Psychological safety:** was established through the development of trusting relationships with managers and teams. When managers and senior veterinarians demonstrated positive leadership skills, they led by example to create a safe environment where teams could speak up, ask for help, and admit mistakes without fear of retribution. A psychologically safe team fostered trust and learning, which enabled veterinarians to share their ideas, personal goals, and aspirations. This enabled individuals to develop a sense of purpose.

**Purpose:** Having a strong sense of purpose and meaning in veterinary work was the main driver for well-being and thriving. However, it depended on the support and encouragement of positive leadership, as well as the ability to share ideas, challenge the status quo, and take risks in a psychologically safe environment. When veterinarians had a strong sense of purpose, their work was meaningful, motivating, and fulfilling, which led to eudaimonic well-being. This, in turn, strengthened the team culture and supported positive leadership within teams (little “l” leadership).

Together, the 3Ps form an integrated loop that fosters a positive clinic culture, promoting the well-being of veterinarians in clinical practice. When veterinarians thrive in their work, they are happier, more engaged, and motivated, which increases their intention to stay in clinical practice. Thriving veterinarians are likely to have a positive impact on the team, which may improve client experience and patient care. Therefore, fostering the 3Ps in clinical practice is not only beneficial for veterinarians but is also good for the business. Expanding on this model, recommendations have been developed for employers and businesses, individual veterinarians, and the broader veterinary profession to promote the well-being and thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice.

**Figure 8.1**

*The 3Ps of veterinary thriving. Model of thriving for veterinarians in clinical practice based on the three final key concepts: Positive leadership, psychological safety, and purpose*



Note. The features of each P are listed in the pale-coloured boxes.

## 8.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, recommendations have been developed to promote the 3Ps and guide practical actions that support veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. These recommendations target three levels:

- The business (veterinary employers and managers),
- The individual (veterinarians),
- The profession (veterinary education providers and professional organisations).

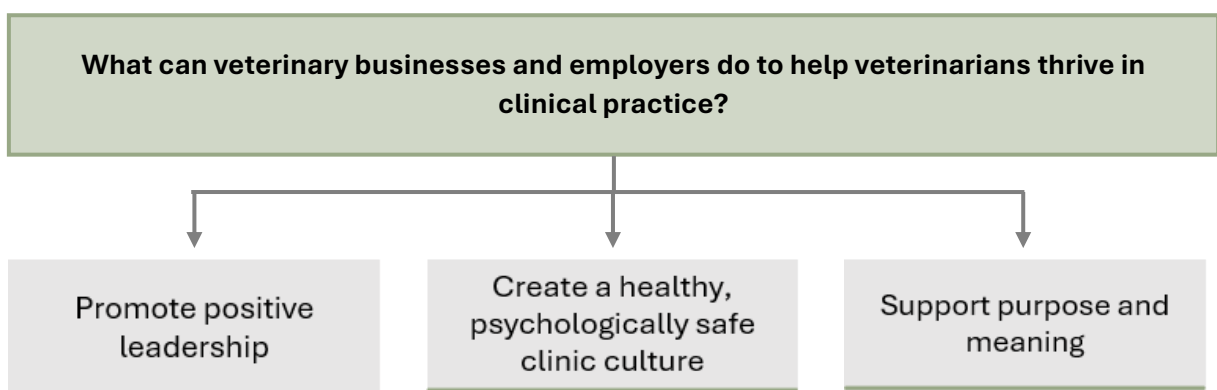
The recommendations are outlined below and summarised in Table 8.1 at the end of this chapter.

### 8.1.1 Recommendations for veterinary businesses and employers

Figure 8.2 outlines three key areas where veterinary businesses can focus their efforts to enhance veterinarians' well-being and job satisfaction. These recommendations have been designed to promote positive leadership, build a healthy and psychologically safe clinic culture, and foster purposeful, meaningful work. Each of these areas is further detailed in the following sub-sections, with accompanying figures that present specific recommendations.

**Figure 8.2**

*Recommendations for veterinary businesses and employers to promote thriving*



#### 8.1.1.1 Promote positive leadership

This study highlighted the importance of positive leadership for the well-being and thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice. Therefore, three recommendations for veterinary businesses have been developed from this important finding (Figure 8.3).

**Figure 8.3**

*Recommendations for veterinary businesses: Promote positive leadership*

Promote positive leadership
1. Recruitment of clinic managers with positive leadership skills.
2. Encourage little “l” leadership.
3. Support managers and leaders.

#### 8.1.1.1.1 Recruitment of clinic managers with positive leadership skills

It is recommended that businesses take care to recruit clinic managers who demonstrate the attributes of positive leadership described in this research. These attributes include integrity, empathy, reliability, a supportive and inclusive communication style, and high emotional intelligence. Managers with these qualities are more likely to foster a psychologically safe culture and support veterinarians’ core psychological needs.

#### 8.1.1.1.2 Encourage little “l” leadership

This study highlighted the importance of positive leaders empowering veterinarians and their team members to take on little “l” leadership roles. This informal shared leadership at a team level helped veterinarians feel trusted, respected, and valued for their contributions to decision-making and team functioning. Embracing a more inclusive approach to leadership enhanced effective collaboration, reduced hierarchical barriers, fostered psychological safety, and promoted a shared sense of purpose. It is recommended that leaders and managers actively support and encourage little “l” leadership across the team to strengthen team dynamics and promote thriving among veterinarians.

#### 8.1.1.1.3 Support managers and leaders with training and development

The importance of positive leadership, as identified by participants in this research, emphasises the need for continuous training to strengthen core leadership capabilities in clinic managers and the wider team. Positive leadership in this study was grounded in kindness, empathy, high EI, and inclusive behaviour, fostering psychological safety. Thus, leadership training should focus on developing skills such as open and non-judgmental communication, active listening, self-awareness, and vulnerability, while also encouraging a reduction in hierarchical barriers. Therefore, it is recommended that businesses invest in ongoing leadership training and support

of clinical managers and team members to promote positive, emotionally intelligent leadership at all levels of the team.

### 8.1.1.2 Create a healthy, psychologically safe clinic culture

The findings of this research demonstrated that veterinarians who felt safe at work were comfortable speaking up and challenging the status quo, asking questions, acknowledging and learning from mistakes, and sharing new ideas. Developing a psychologically safe culture is underpinned by seven recommendations, as shown in Figure 8.4.

**Figure 8.4**

*Recommendations for veterinary businesses: Create a healthy, psychologically safe culture*

Create a healthy, psychologically safe clinic culture
1. Manage workplace stressors
2. Encourage vulnerability and open communication
3. Support veterinarians working through women’s health issues /menopause
4. Support a healthy work-life balance
5. Build collective trust in teams
6. Enable virtual team connection
7. Adopt the spectrum of care approach

Participants who worked in psychologically safe teams experienced enhanced professional growth, well-being, a sense of belonging and purpose in their work. This study strongly recommends that businesses and employers encourage and promote the creation of a psychologically safe clinic culture. However, creating a safe environment is a gradual process that depends on developing collective trust and respect. The results of this research suggest seven recommendations to help employers and leaders foster psychologically safe teams.

#### 8.1.1.2.1 Manage workplace stressors

A positive step towards creating a psychologically safe work environment is identifying workplace stressors (psychosocial or well-being risks) that impact individuals and developing practical plans to reduce or eliminate them. Psychosocial risks can be identified through open communication with veterinarians or by using a validated psychosocial risk assessment tool. A bespoke validated survey tool that practices may wish to consider is the recently developed Vet-SQ (Mudry et al.,

2025). However, as workplace risks typically vary by role, all team members should be included in the assessment process and the development of mitigation plans. To earn trust, leaders must actively acknowledge concerns and take visible steps to mitigate key sources of stress. Follow-through is essential; clear communication and practical, co-designed mitigation plans demonstrate a genuine commitment to improvement and support the development of a psychologically safe environment.

#### 8.1.1.2.2 Encourage vulnerability and open communication

The results of this research identified that managers and leaders who modelled positive leadership behaviours, such as vulnerability and open communication, fostered psychologically safe teams. It is recommended that managers consider openly sharing their own challenges and mistakes, which may encourage honest input from veterinarians and team members. Engaging in active listening and showing appreciation when staff speak up, raise concerns, or admit mistakes fosters open communication and helps create a safe environment where veterinarians can thrive.

#### 8.1.1.2.3 Support veterinarians working through physical and mental health issues, including menopause

This research highlights the importance of fostering a safe, supportive, and inclusive workplace culture around health issues, including women's health and particularly menopause. Veterinarians who felt comfortable discussing menopause at work with informed and understanding teams reported feeling better able to manage this life stage. This support helped them enjoy their work and feel more effective in their roles. It is therefore recommended that veterinary practices adopt a proactive approach by normalising conversations about a range of health issues, including menopause, raising awareness among all staff, and providing tailored support, such as flexible working arrangements and well-being resources, to meet individual needs.

#### 8.1.1.2.4 Support a healthy work-life balance

This research identified that a clinic culture that endorsed a healthy work-life balance was critical for veterinarians' well-being, thriving, and long-term commitment to clinical practice. Veterinarians who were supported by managers to effectively manage their personal and professional lives through flexible work arrangements such as part-time roles, flexible scheduling, compressed hours, and adaptable start and finish times were better able to balance work and home responsibilities and experienced positive well-being. Support for setting clear boundaries, as well as encouragement to engage in physical and mental well-being activities, was also

important. Therefore, it is recommended that employers and managers support flexible work options when possible and encourage boundary setting and well-being activities. Managers should lead by example by modelling a healthy work-life balance and self-care behaviours themselves. This approach may help normalise a healthy work-life balance and well-being practices, contributing to a healthy, safe workplace culture where veterinarians can thrive.

#### 8.1.1.2.5 Build collective trust in teams

The importance of positive relationships at work and collective trust in promoting team psychological safety was highlighted in this research. It is therefore recommended that clinics offer regular informal clinic social initiatives and team-building activities to create opportunities for connection, relationship building, and developing mutual trust within teams. It is also suggested that simple wellness check-ins be incorporated into daily morning planning sessions or other regular team meetings. Regular meetings should include opportunities to debrief openly after stressful events. Open discussions about medical management and patient care are important in clinical practice. When held in a safe and supportive environment, these conversations provide opportunities to unpack emotional responses such as moral distress, sadness, and grief; benefitting both veterinarians and the wider team. Encouraging such team connections may help build relationships, grow collective trust and foster psychological safety within teams.

#### 8.1.1.2.6 Enable virtual team connection

The value of clinic social media groups, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, in promoting connection, belonging, and psychological safety has been highlighted in this study. It is recommended that employers and leaders support the creation of virtual networking initiatives with secure online networking groups. Businesses should consider adopting enterprise social media tools, such as Microsoft Teams or Slack, which are specifically designed for professional environments and offer enhanced data security, control, and privacy.

#### 8.1.1.2.7 Support the spectrum of care approach

This research found that veterinarians who were supported to offer a range of diagnostic and treatment options that were tailored to both the client's financial situation and the animal's welfare needs experienced better well-being and reduced moral stress. The spectrum of care, or contextualised care, is often taught in veterinary schools in recognition that gold-standard care is not always feasible. It is recommended that veterinary businesses actively support and encourage veterinarians to use this flexible, evidence-based approach to patient care.

### 8.1.1.3 Support purpose and meaning

This study highlighted the importance of veterinarians feeling a sense of purpose and meaning in their clinical work. Five recommendations for veterinary businesses have been developed at this level, as shown in Figure 8.5.

**Figure 8.5**

*Recommendations for veterinary businesses: Support purpose and meaning*

Support purpose and meaning
1. Value and appreciate staff
2. Provide support and tailored mentorship for new graduates
3. Strengthen the support network provided by other team members for new graduates
4. Encourage lifelong learning and personal development
5. Promote job embeddedness

#### 8.1.1.3.1 Value and appreciate staff

This study found that veterinarians who felt valued and appreciated at work were more likely to thrive in clinical practice. It is recommended that workplaces implement formal and informal strategies to recognise and celebrate individual and team contributions. Providing specific, timely feedback, acknowledging effort, and recognising successes are simple, low-cost initiatives that can enhance motivation, reinforce purpose and support thriving in clinical practice.

#### 8.1.1.3.2 Provide support and tailored mentorship for new graduates

The most critical factors in new graduates' transition to practice were support, reduced time pressure, and effective mentorship. A key recommendation from this study is for businesses to offer new and recent graduates tailored mentorship support and regular check-ins that assess progress and set goals. It is also recommended that measures to reduce time pressure be implemented, such as extended consult times and scheduled administration periods.

#### 8.1.1.3.3 Strengthen the support network that other team members provide to new graduates

Although senior veterinarians played a significant role in mentoring new graduates, this study also highlighted the valuable support and guidance provided by non-veterinarian team members, such as experienced nurses and large animal technicians, as well as more recently graduated

veterinarians. To strengthen this informal support network, it is recommended that employers formally acknowledge and recognise the important role these team members play in supporting new graduates' successful transition to clinical practice.

#### 8.1.1.3.4 Encourage and support lifelong learning and personal development

Veterinarians in this study derived a strong sense of purpose and satisfaction in learning new skills, developing mastery, and establishing a niche area within the practice. When provided with professional development opportunities and autonomy, they experienced personal growth, increased confidence and a deeper sense of purpose in their roles. It is recommended that clinics actively support veterinarians' strengths and interests by investing in ongoing education and encouraging them to develop an area of special interest within the clinic. Encouraging and supporting individuals' personal development can enhance motivation and engagement and foster a sense of purpose.

#### 8.1.1.3.5 Promote job embeddedness

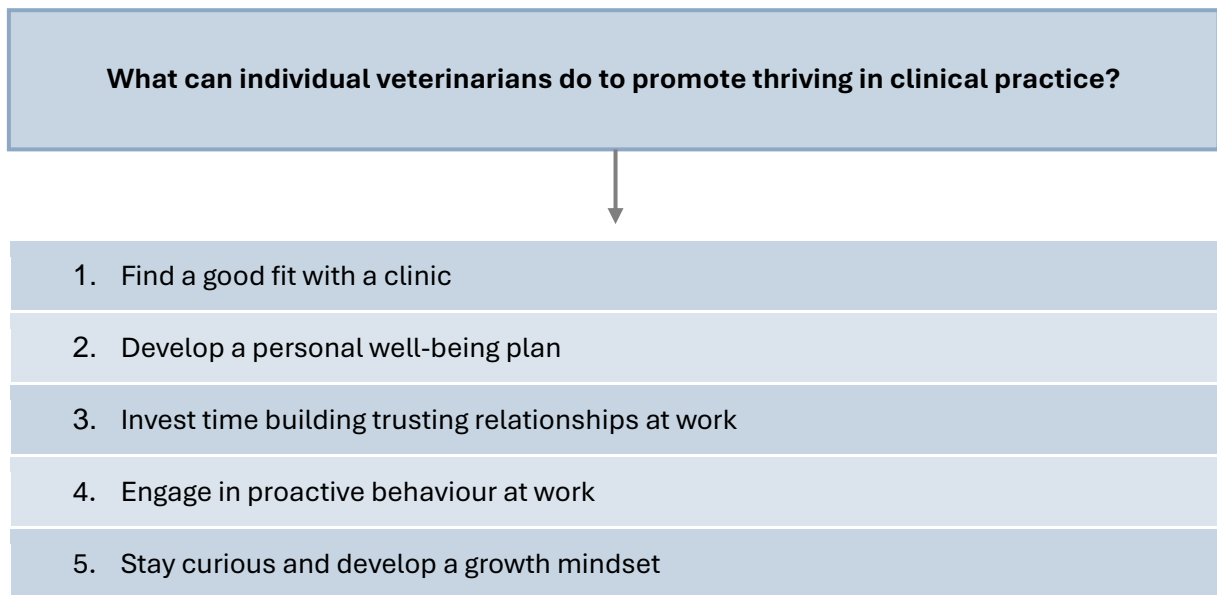
Strong client and community connections often evolved into relationships that resulted in veterinarians becoming deeply embedded in their workplace and community. As a result of these strong links, participants felt a strong sense of purpose in their work through their loyalty to their clients and community. A recommendation from this study is for businesses to support opportunities to build client and community connections. Businesses could, for example, organise client and farmer social events, offer employee membership to community clubs and societies, and support employee involvement in community events. Encouraging connections with clients and the community can enhance veterinarians' sense of belonging, commitment, and purpose, supporting their ability to thrive.

### 8.1.2 Recommendations for the individual veterinarian

This study identified five key areas of focus that individual veterinarians are recommended to implement to support their ability to thrive, as shown in Figure 8.6.

**Figure 8.6**

*Recommendations that individual veterinarians can implement to promote thriving*



#### *8.1.2.1 Find a good fit with a clinic*

Veterinarians in this study who found a good person–job fit, where their values, interests, and skills aligned with the clinic’s culture and expectations, reported a strong sense of belonging and job satisfaction. This alignment also contributed to their commitment to the workplace and a sense of professional fulfilment. Whether starting in the workforce as a new graduate or seeking a new clinical role later in a career, veterinarians are recommended to take time to assess job fit.

#### *8.1.2.2 Develop a personal well-being plan*

Veterinarians who implemented a personal well-being plan, including self-care strategies, clear work-home boundaries, and regular activities that support physical and mental health, had a stronger sense of thriving. It is recommended that individuals establish a consistent daily routine for well-being, as this can help reduce stress and build resilience. Observing and learning from colleagues who demonstrate positive leadership and model a healthy work-life balance can also support the development of a sustainable approach to work and personal life.

#### *8.1.2.3 Invest time in relationships at work*

Individuals are encouraged to prioritise building trusting relationships at work to enhance psychological safety and create a supportive team environment. While not everyone needs to be close friends, developing mutual respect and trust is key. This research highlights the benefits of collective trust in teams. It is therefore suggested that individuals invest time in developing collective team trust by getting to know team members, both in and out of work, through everyday

interactions, shared experiences, and participation in clinic social activities. This can strengthen workplace connections, improve well-being, and foster a positive, psychologically safe team culture.

#### *8.1.2.4 Engage in proactive behaviour at work*

The results of this research highlight the benefits of proactive behaviour. It is recommended that individual veterinarians adopt a proactive approach to their work and professional development. Proactive behaviours such as seeking support, participating in well-being and team-building initiatives, and embracing learning opportunities were associated with greater psychological safety, a stronger sense of purpose, and improved well-being. For new graduates, proactively engaging in a mentorship relationship can enhance learning, build confidence, and support a smoother transition into clinical practice.

#### *8.1.2.5 Stay curious and develop a growth mindset*

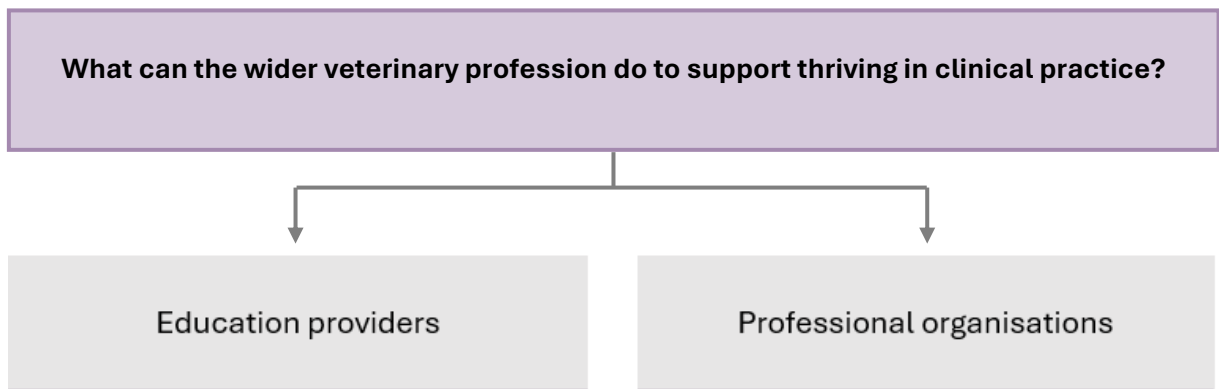
The outcomes from this research suggest that veterinarians cultivate a growth mindset and stay curious through reflective learning, asking questions, being open to feedback, embracing new ways of doing things and focusing on positive outcomes. Veterinarians are encouraged to reframe challenges as drivers for growth, reflect on what went well, and view mistakes as learning opportunities to help develop a growth mindset. These behaviours are more easily fostered within psychologically safe teams, supported by positive colleagues and leaders who provide reassurance and constructive feedback. To support ongoing development, veterinarians should nurture their curiosity, embrace their love of learning, and be willing to grow and adapt. Doing so may not only enhance clinical proficiency but also support long-term engagement, resilience, and thriving.

### **8.1.3 Profession-wide recommendations**

The broader veterinary profession has a collective responsibility to support veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. This research highlights the need for coordinated action from both veterinary education providers and professional organisations (Figure 8.7). Recommendations have been developed to guide how these groups can contribute to a more supportive and sustainable clinical veterinary workforce. Each area is further detailed in the following sub-sections, accompanied by figures that present specific recommendations.

**Figure 8.7**

*Recommendations for the wider veterinary profession to promote the thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice*



### 8.1.3.1 Education providers

Education providers at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, have a role to play in supporting the well-being and thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice. The following section highlights three areas identified in this research that education providers can support as shown in Figure 8.8.

**Figure 8.8**

*Recommendations for the wider veterinary profession: Education providers*

Education providers
1. Create training programmes to develop mentee and mentor skills
2. Support the development of personal resources
3. Support the development of health resources, including women's health and menopause, for the veterinary profession
4. Develop veterinary leadership training that fosters positive leadership qualities

#### 8.1.3.1.1 Create training programmes to develop mentee and mentor skills

This study highlighted the vital role of mentoring in supporting new graduates as they transition into clinical practice. However, effective mentorship depends on active participation from both the mentor and the mentee. Establishing a clear understanding of their respective roles is essential for building a successful and supportive mentoring relationship.

#### *8.1.3.1.1.1 Mentee training*

A recommendation from this research is to provide mentee training for veterinary students and/or new graduates to help them engage confidently and effectively in mentoring relationships. Although online mentee training is available in New Zealand, expecting new graduates to fully engage in these programmes at the start of their careers may be unrealistic. Integrating a mentee training programme into the veterinary professional skills curriculum might be the most effective approach. This training would ensure that graduates have the skills to maximise the benefits of mentorship when they start their clinical careers.

#### *8.1.3.1.1.2 Mentor training*

Veterinarians and non-veterinarians who take on new and recent graduate mentoring roles should have a clear understanding of their responsibilities. It is recommended that postgraduate education providers offer targeted mentor training programmes to equip mentors with the skills needed for effective support of early-career veterinarians. Providers should consider guidelines that promote positive leadership qualities such as active listening, setting realistic goals, providing constructive feedback, and encouraging reflective learning. This approach will help develop a successful mentorship relationship and support new graduates to experience a smooth transition into practice and develop proficiency and confidence.

#### **8.1.3.1.2 Support the development of personal resources**

This research identified personal resources, including curiosity, proactive behaviour, self-awareness, a growth mindset, and communication skills, that contributed to veterinarians' well-being and ability to thrive in clinical practice. These attributes fostered self-efficacy, professional growth, purpose and resilience. Participants with these attributes built positive relationships, asked questions, sought help, viewed challenges as opportunities, reframed mistakes as learning experiences, and managed conflict. As such, veterinary education providers should consider implementing undergraduate and graduate programmes that support the development of these personal resources. Encouraging curiosity, proactive behaviour, a growth mindset, and strong communication skills may improve self-efficacy and help foster team psychological safety. This may also empower new graduate veterinarians to develop a professional identity suited to clinical practice.

#### **8.1.3.1.3 Support the development of health resources including women's health and menopause for the veterinary profession**

Participants in this research valued learning about menopause and its potential impact in the workplace. They also emphasised the need for increased awareness of women's health issues

within the veterinary profession. Taking an educational awareness approach can help normalise the topic and encourage veterinarians of all ages and genders to share their own experiences. It is recommended that postgraduate education providers develop relevant, practical resources tailored to the veterinary profession. These resources should be suitable for all staff members, including male colleagues and younger team members, to increase awareness and foster a supportive work environment.

#### 8.1.3.1.4 Develop veterinary leadership training that fosters positive leadership qualities

This research identified the importance of positive leadership from clinic managers as well as little “l” leadership within wider teams. It is recommended that postgraduate veterinary education providers develop bespoke training programmes in positive leadership for new and existing clinic managers. These programmes should emphasise positive leadership qualities such as EI, self-awareness, inclusivity, and empowering others. Tailoring training to include the wider veterinary team may encourage shared leadership, which may contribute to greater team effectiveness.

#### 8.1.3.2 Professional organisations

Professional organisations such as veterinary associations and regulatory bodies play an important role in shaping veterinarians working environment. As key stakeholders in the veterinary profession these organisations have a responsibility to promote and contribute to sector wider interventions that support a thriving workforce. Figure 8.9 shows three areas identified in this research that professional organisations can focus on.

**Figure 8.9**

*Recommendations for the wider veterinary profession: Professional organisations*

Professional organisations
1. Advocate for policy positions that support psychologically safe and healthy workplaces
2. Support awareness around health, particularly women’s health issues and menopause in the veterinary profession
3. Promote awareness of positive leadership in clinical veterinary practice

#### 8.1.3.2.1 Advocate for policy positions that support psychologically safe and healthy workplaces

This research clearly emphasised the importance of positive leadership, a psychologically safe clinic culture and having purpose in supporting veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice. It is recommended that professional organisations consider developing a policy position on what constitutes a good veterinary workplace. The findings suggest that such a policy should prioritise positive leadership, the development of a psychologically safe culture, and the fostering of purpose and meaning in clinical work. By addressing important areas such as personal and professional growth, health and well-being, clinic management, and flexible work arrangements, the policy could provide guidelines for veterinary businesses that enable veterinarians to thrive and improve the sustainability of clinical veterinary practice.

#### 8.1.3.2.2 Support awareness around health, particularly women's health issues and menopause, in the veterinary profession

The findings of this research highlight the importance of raising awareness about women's health issues, including menopause, within the increasingly feminised veterinary workforce. As part of a healthy workplace policy, this study recommends that veterinary organisations in New Zealand support the distribution of educational resources and help break the workplace taboo surrounding menopause.

#### 8.1.3.2.3 Promote awareness of positive leadership in clinical veterinary practice

This research identified effective leadership as a key factor in creating a healthy clinic culture that supports veterinarians to thrive. Veterinary organisations are encouraged to promote awareness of positive leadership across the profession as it is essential for fostering supportive work environments and psychologically safe teams. These conditions are critical for fostering well-being and engagement and have the potential to increase retention in clinical practice.

**Table 8.1**

*Summary of the recommendations to support the thriving of veterinarians in clinical practice*

Level		Recommendation	Description of recommendation
Veterinary business/clinic	Positive leadership	Recruit clinic managers carefully	Select clinic managers with positive leadership qualities.
		Support managers and leaders	Provide ongoing leadership development and training.
		Encourage little “l” leaders	Empower team members to lead.
	Psychological Safety	Manage workplace stressors	Identify psychosocial risks for team members and co-design strategies to mitigate them collaboratively.
		Encourage vulnerability and open communication	Model respectful, active listening, vulnerable sharing and encourage others to speak up.
		Support veterinarians working through menopause	Aim to normalise conversations and raise awareness.
		Support a healthy work-life balance	Support flexible working, boundary setting and model healthy work-life balance and self-care behaviours.
		Build collective trust in teams	Support informal social activities and encourage a culture of open communication.
		Support the spectrum of care approach	Support and encourage veterinarians to use this flexible, evidence-based approach to patient care.
		Enable virtual team connection	Encourage the use of secure online networking groups.
	Purpose	Value and appreciate staff	Implement formal and informal recognition routines to acknowledge work contributions/celebrate successes.
		Provide support and effective mentorship to new graduates	Ensure that mentorship and supervision are tailored to the individual’s needs.
		Strengthen the support network provided by other team members for new graduates	Acknowledge the support that nurses, technicians and junior veterinarians provide to new graduates.
		Encourage lifelong learning and personal growth	Support continuing education to grow an area of interest.
		Promote job embeddedness	Offer membership to community clubs/client social events.

Level	Recommendation	Description of recommendation	
<b>Individual veterinarian</b>	Find a good clinic fit	Choose a workplace that aligns with personal values, skills, and interests.	
	Create a personal well-being plan	Prioritise self-care, set boundaries, and maintain physical and mental health routines.	
	Invest time in building trusting relationships at work	Foster connections between the team, clients and community.	
	Engage in proactive behaviour at work	Ask for help or support when needed.	
	Stay curious and develop a growth mindset	Reframe challenges as opportunities and embrace reflective learning.	
<b>Profession wide</b>	Development of mentee and mentor skills	Integrate mentee training into veterinary undergraduate professional skills curricula.	
		Provide mentor training that focuses on developing positive leadership qualities relevant to mentors.	
	Development of personal resources	Provide undergraduate/postgraduate training that develops curiosity, proactive behaviour, a growth mindset, and strong communication skills.	
	Support the development of health resources, particularly on women's health and menopause	Generate relevant and practical postgraduate resources tailored to the veterinary profession.	
	Develop veterinary leadership training that fosters positive leadership qualities	Create bespoke positive leadership training programmes for new and existing clinic managers. Programmes should be tailored for the wider veterinary team to encourage little "l" shared leadership qualities.	
	<b>Professional organisations</b>	Advocate for policy positions that support psychologically safe and healthy workplaces.	
		Support health awareness, particularly around women's health and menopause, in the veterinary profession.	
		Promote awareness of positive leadership in clinical veterinary practice.	

## 8.2 Concluding comments

Although this thesis focused on the positive aspects of clinical veterinary work, this does not imply that veterinarians who participated had challenge-free or perfect careers. All participants were actively working in clinical practice and, like most veterinary professionals, had experienced a range of difficulties and setbacks as well as joys and pleasures throughout their career. Had the research explored negative experiences, there would have been no shortage of material. However, by focusing on what was working well rather than what was lacking, the research identified key factors that supported veterinarians' well-being and ability to thrive in clinical practice.

This in-depth qualitative approach offers a novel strengths-based perspective on veterinary well-being. It addresses an underexplored area, as the literature has predominantly concentrated on the negative mental health impacts of clinical veterinary work. While acknowledging the significant challenges and psychosocial risks in the profession, this research demonstrates that clinical practice can also be a deeply meaningful and rewarding career. For many participants, working in clinical practice provided a space where they could grow, contribute, and thrive.

Using a semi-structured interview method and a positive psychology lens, this research explored the complex phenomenon of thriving among veterinarians at various stages of their careers. The findings contribute to the broader conversations about workforce sustainability and retention in clinical practice. Rather than focusing solely on harm prevention, this study reflects an appreciative inquiry approach, asking what is working, what enables success, and how to build on it. The results highlight how thriving can be fostered and sustained over time.

Key enablers of thriving identified in this research include positive leadership, a psychologically safe clinic culture, and a strong sense of purpose and meaning in work. These findings informed a set of practical, easy-to-implement recommendations grounded in the lived experiences of veterinarians in clinical practice. The recommendations emphasise the shared responsibility for well-being and outline strategies at the business, individual, and profession-wide level.

Implementation of these recommendations may enhance veterinarians' thriving and career satisfaction, which could potentially improve retention in clinical practice. This, in turn, may create positive ripple effects for individual well-being, team cohesion, clinic performance, the wider profession and society. The findings could also guide the refinement of existing workplace well-being and retention strategies. This research demonstrates the value of applying a positive psychology approach, which may be helpful for future exploration of the complex challenges in the veterinary profession.

In conclusion, a thriving veterinary career can be seen as an odyssey; a long, transformative journey marked by challenges, growth, and learning. A healthy and safe workplace culture enables veterinarians to craft relevant aspects of their jobs and find meaning in their work. The term “Odyssey” originates from Homer’s ancient Greek epic, which recounts the adventures of Odysseus on his long journey home after the Trojan War. Similarly, the veterinary odyssey reflects a path of lifelong learning and an evolving sense of purpose, making a clinical veterinary career far more than just a job. Instead, it becomes a meaningful and rewarding adventure.

It has been an honour and a privilege to undertake this research, and I am deeply grateful to the veterinarians who generously shared their experiences with me. I hope their uplifting stories inspire optimism and confidence in veterinary students and early-career veterinarians as they begin their journeys in this profession. Above all, I hope that the insights and outcomes from this research will contribute to supporting veterinarians to thrive and enjoy fulfilling, sustainable careers in clinical practice. This research represents just one small step in the broader journey toward thriving in practice, and I hope it encourages others to build further on the positive aspects of clinical veterinary work.

*“Every journey has an end, but every end is a new beginning” – Seneca*



Over time, each koru unfurls and becomes part of a flourishing frond. In the same way, veterinarians who are supported to thrive become part of something greater, a connected team, a collaborative clinic, and a sustainable veterinary profession.

Illustration by Zeta Hittmann: Drawn at the Teahouse, Lake Agnes, Alberta, Canada, 31st July 2025.

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# Appendices

## Appendix 4A: Ethics approval – Study 1

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2/09/2022

Dear: Charlotte Cantley

**Re: Low Risk Notification - 4000026466 - A qualitative study into factors supporting career retention in experienced veterinarians in clinical practice.**

Thank you for submitting a low risk notification for your research/teaching/evaluation.

This email is to acknowledge receipt of the low risk notification and to inform you that the details of your project have been recorded in our database for inclusion in the annual reports to the Health Research Council Ethics Committee (HRCEC) and the Massey University Research Committee (URC).

You may proceed with your research, though it is advisable to provide a couple of weeks before commencing, as all low risk notifications are checked for completeness and clarity by a Research Ethics Advisor. You may be contacted if your application is incomplete and/or further clarification is required.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please notify me if situations subsequently occur which cause you to reconsider your initial ethical analysis.

*If a sponsoring organisation, funding authority (e.g., the Health Research Council) or a journal require evidence of ethical approval from a Human Ethics Committee (with an approval number), you need to complete a full Massey University Human Ethics application to be reviewed and approved by one of our Human Ethics Committees. Applications must be submitted and approved prior to the commencement of the research.*

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

*If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Research Ethics Office, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).*

*Please include the following statement on all public documents (e.g., information sheet, consent form) related to your project:*

***This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.***

***If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Massey University Human Ethics by email: [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).***

I wish you all the best in your research, teaching or evaluation activities and appreciate your thoughtful consideration of ethics principles and practices.

Ngā mihi nui,

Professor Craig Johnson  
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and Director (Research Ethics)

## Appendix 4B: Email invitation to participate – Study 1

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Subject: **Invitation to participate in veterinary well-being research**

**Date**

Dear [recipient's name]

My name is Charlotte Cantley (Lotte), and I worked as a clinical equine veterinarian in both university and private practice settings for 20 years before joining the New Zealand Veterinary Association in 2015 as Director of Continuing Professional Development. Over the years, I have developed a strong interest in the well-being of the veterinary profession and have recently embarked on a full-time PhD at Massey University.

My research focuses on what helps veterinarians in clinical practice. This study aims to explore job satisfaction, thriving, and long-term career retention among clinical veterinarians in New Zealand.

I plan to interview clinical veterinarians who have been practising for eight years or more, and I would like to invite you to participate in this study. The interviews would be one-on-one, either face-to-face or by video conference. They will take approximately one hour and be scheduled at a time and place convenient for you. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation.

I have attached an information sheet with further details for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me with any questions and let me know if you would like to accept this invitation.

Thank you for considering this opportunity—I would greatly value your input.

Ngā mihi

Lotte

**Charlotte Cantley | Vet MB, MVSc. PhD Candidate**



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### INFORMATION SHEET

## A qualitative study into factors supporting thriving in experienced veterinarians in clinical practice.

#### Introduction

My name is Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley, and I graduated as a veterinarian from Cambridge University in 1992. I have worked as a large animal/equine clinician in both a university setting and private practice for 20 years before making a career move in 2015 to the NZVA as Continuing Professional Development director. Over the years, I have developed a passion for the well-being of the veterinary profession and have recently embarked on a full-time PhD at Massey University. I am very interested in exploring ways to increase job satisfaction, support thriving, and promote the retention of veterinarians in clinical veterinary practice in New Zealand (NZ), which is the focus of my PhD research project.

#### Project Description and Invitation

This study will explore the factors that support experienced veterinarians to remain in clinical practice in NZ using a one-on-one interview technique. I would very much appreciate your participation in my research project.

#### Participant Identification and Recruitment

Participants will be current clinical veterinarians with a minimum of 8 years of clinical experience. I would like to include participants from various areas of clinical practice, as well as a mix of men and women.

#### Project procedure

If you are interested in participating, I would like to conduct an interview with you either face-to-face or via video conference.

Each interview will take 20-60 minutes and will be recorded and transcribed. You will be given a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy. Participation is completely voluntary, and no information that could identify participants will be released.

In the unlikely event that the interview causes distress, the following support options may be considered.

- Talk to a support person of your choice
- Contact Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) for counselling services
  - Vitae funded counselling service through NZVA/VCNZ.  
Appointments can be made via the 24-hour free phone service 0508664981 or by completing the self-referral form <https://www.vitae.co.nz/contact/counselling-form/>
  - Other external EAP providers such as EAP services 800327669
- Contact your General Practitioner.

#### Data Management

All data will be stored on password-protected computers. Once the data has been analysed, I will send participants a summary of the results. The interview recordings will remain confidential, and the transcriptions will be anonymised.

#### Participant's Rights

Please note that you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If, however, you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any question.
- Withdraw from the interview at any time
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.

- Request that the recording be paused at any time during the interview.
- Ask that your interview not be used in the analysis or publications should you change your mind at a later date, but before the study is completed.
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used.
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

#### **Project Contacts**

##### **Main Researcher**

Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley  
PhD Candidate  
School of Veterinary Science, Massey University  
Mobile number: [REDACTED]  
Email Address: [c.cantley@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.cantley@massey.ac.nz)

##### **Primary Supervisor**

Professor Jenny Weston  
Academic Lead  
School of Veterinary Science, Massey University  
Email address [J.F.Weston@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.F.Weston@massey.ac.nz)

#### **Human Ethics Approval**

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director of Research Ethics, at telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271 or email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix 4D: Participant consent form – Study 1

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### **Exploration of the factors that support veterinarians to thrive in clinical practice in New Zealand**

#### **Participant Consent Form**

I have read and understand the Information sheet that was emailed to me. The details of the study have been clearly explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may ask further questions at any time, and I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study. I understand that participation is voluntary.

1. I agree/disagree with the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recording transcript returned to me for checking.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

#### **Declaration by Participant:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to take part in this study.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### Questions for semi-structured interviews with experienced clinical veterinarians – Study 1

Hi, I'm Lotte, a former equine vet in the Waikato. Thank you very much for helping with my PhD research. OR (if I know the participant): Hi, thank you very much for helping with my PhD research. As you saw in my email, I am researching the experiences of veterinarians in clinical practice. I'll be recording the interview to analyse later, and I can send you a copy of the transcript if you would like to review it. It's important that you give informed consent by signing the consent form. This form ensures that you fully understand the research and interview process and are making an informed decision about whether to participate in the study.

May I start the recording now?

#### **START RECORDING**

You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to, and you can request to pause the recording at any time. You've a copy of the information sheet I emailed you, which contains details about the study and support options. Have you got any questions for me? Are you happy to proceed with the interview now?

1. First, a couple of details about yourself
  - a. When did you graduate (finish vet studies)?
  - b. What kind of practice are you in now?
  - c. How long have you been in clinical practice?
2. Now, could you briefly tell me about your veterinary career?
3. What do you really enjoy about clinical practice?

*Prompts:*

  - a. What are some positive things you have experienced in clinical practice?
  - b. What keeps you interested?
4. Please describe a time when you thought about leaving clinical practice and tell me why you decided to stay.

*If NO to Qu 4 OR: Can you tell me about a challenging experience or period of difficulty in your clinical work, what helped you deal with it?*

  - a. *Prompt:* What helped you deal with the situation? (personal strategies used (*Internal resources*))
  - b. *Prompt:* What things and people in your workplace helped you? (*External resources*)
5. Please describe a situation at work that was particularly uplifting and tell me what helped make the experience so memorable.
6. What do you find most fulfilling about your career?
7. That's everything I have to ask you. Do you have any final thoughts or anything you'd like to add about your positive experiences in clinical practice that haven't already been covered?

Thank you very much, I will email you a copy of the transcript within a couple of weeks.

#### **STOP RECORDING**



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## Thriving of clinical veterinarians in New Zealand

### TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I Megan Ede (Full Name - printed) agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

Signature:

Date:

19 October 2022

## Appendix 4G: Participant description – Study 1

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Gender	Number of veterinarians
Male	7
Female	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>

Years in clinical practice	Number of veterinarians
> 20 years	6
15-20 years	7
8-14 years	6
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>

Type of clinical work	Number of veterinarians
Companion animal practice	9
Production animal practice	7
Equine practice	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>

Type of practice	Number of veterinarians
Club practice (multi-clinic)	4
Privately owned practice	8
Multi-clinic business - New Zealand owned	4
Multi-clinic business – fully / partially internationally owned	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>19</b>

## Appendix 4H: Map of New Zealand showing the geographic distribution of the 19 participants in Study 1

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Each dot represents the approximate location of the clinical practice where a participant was working at the time of the interview.



## Appendix 5A: Ethics approval – Study 2

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18/09/2023

Dear: Charlotte Cantley

**Re: Ethics Application - OM3 23/38 - Factors influencing job satisfaction and engagement of recent graduate clinical veterinarians in New Zealand**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

**Ohu Matatika 3** at their meeting held on **Thursday 10, August 2023**

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Professor Tracy Riley,  
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Chair's Committee

## Appendix 5B: Email invitation to participate – Study 2

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Subject: **Invitation for new and recent graduates to participate in veterinary well-being research**

**Date**

Dear [recipient's name]

My name is Charlotte Cantley (Lotte), and I worked as a clinical equine veterinarian in both university and private practice settings for 20 years before joining the New Zealand Veterinary Association in 2015 as Director of Continuing Professional Development. Over the years, I have developed a strong interest in the well-being of the veterinary profession and have recently embarked on a full-time PhD at Massey University.

My research focuses on what helps veterinarians thrive in clinical practice, and I have completed the first study, which investigated thriving in experienced veterinarians. This study aims to explore the transition phase from university to clinical practice and the early career success of clinical veterinarians in New Zealand.

I plan to interview new and recent veterinary graduates who have been in clinical practice for less than three years. The interviews would be one-on-one, either face-to-face or by video conference. They will take approximately one hour and be scheduled at a time and place convenient for you. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation.

I have attached an information sheet with further details for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me with any questions and let me know if you would like to accept this invitation.

Thank you for considering this opportunity—I would greatly value your input.

Ngā mihi

Lotte

**Charlotte Cantley** | Vet MB, MVSc. **PhD Candidate,**



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### INFORMATION SHEET

## **A qualitative study into factors supporting job satisfaction and engagement in new and recent graduate veterinarians in clinical practice in New Zealand.**

### **Introduction**

My name is Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley, and I worked as an equine clinical vet for 20 years before moving to a Continuing Veterinary Education role in 2015. Throughout my career journey, I've developed a passion for the well-being of the veterinary profession and have now embarked on a PhD at Massey University. My research is focused on the factors that influence job satisfaction and engagement among clinical veterinarians in New Zealand. I hope to contribute valuable insights that will help veterinarians thrive in their clinical careers.

### **Project Description and invitation**

Early experiences significantly impact new veterinarians' career paths and decisions to leave or stay in clinical practice. Understanding their experiences and expectations is vital for identifying factors that affect job satisfaction and engagement, which can inform strategies to support sustainable and enjoyable clinical careers. This study aims to investigate the experiences of recent veterinary graduates in New Zealand through individual interviews and I would like to invite you to participate.

### **Participant eligibility**

To be eligible for this study you must be registered with the Veterinary Council of New Zealand, currently employed in clinical veterinary practice and have three years or less of clinical experience. I aim to include participants from various areas of clinical practice. Additionally, I will strive to have both men and women among the participants and veterinary graduates from Massey University or elsewhere.

### **Interview procedure**

If you are interested in taking part, I would like to interview you in person at a mutually agreed date and time in a quiet location of your choice. However, if it is not convenient to meet face to face the interview can be carried out online via zoom.

The interview will last about 60 minutes and will be recorded using an audio recorder for face-to-face sessions or audio-visual recording if conducted via Zoom technology. If the recording is paused for any reason, the conversation during that time will be considered "off the record" and will not be saved or used as part of the data. The recording will be transcribed, and you can be provided with a copy of the recording and the transcript to check for accuracy if you wish. Participation is completely voluntary, and confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Transcripts will be anonymised and no information that could identify participants will be released.

In the unlikely event that the interview causes any distress then the following supports should be considered.

- Talk to a support person of your choice.
- Contact Employee assistance programmes (EAP) for counselling services
  - Vitae funded counselling service through NZVA/VCNZ.  
Appointments can be made via the 24-hour free phone service 0508 664 981 or by completing the self-referral form
  - Other external EAP providers if one is available through your employer.
- Contact your General Practitioner.

### Data Management

To ensure participant confidentiality and privacy, the transcripts will be anonymised. I will remove any identifying information from the transcripts to protect the identities of participants and replace each participant's name with a pseudonym or number. I will also remove any details that could identify colleagues, clients, or organisations that might be mentioned in the interview.

All data will be securely managed, on password-protected computers or locked filing cabinets, in line with Massey University's guidelines on research ethics, data protection and confidentiality.

Once I have analysed all the data, I will send you a summary of the results from this study.

### Participants' Rights

Please note that you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If, however, you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any question.
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation.
- Ask for the recording to be paused or stopped at any time during the interview.
- You can ask to stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study.
- Ask that your interview not be used in the analysis or publications within 2 weeks of receiving the transcript for review should you change your mind about participation.
- Your name and any identifying information will be anonymised in the transcripts and any publications. This will ensure the privacy and confidentiality of individuals involved in the study.
- All data will be stored securely. Transcripts and recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer, while consent forms and printed transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet for a duration of 7 years. After this period, they will be securely disposed of through shredding or permanent deletion from the computer.
- You can be provided with a copy of the recording if you wish
- You can be provided with a copy of the transcript of the recording to check for accuracy if you wish.
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

### Project Contacts

#### Main Researcher

Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley

PhD Candidate

School of Veterinary Science, Massey University

Mobile number: [REDACTED]

Email Address: [c.cantley@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.cantley@massey.ac.nz)

#### Primary Supervisor

Professor Jenny Weston

Academic Lead

School of Veterinary Science, Massey University

Email address [J.F.Weston@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.F.Weston@massey.ac.nz)

**Human Ethics Approval** *This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 23/38. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, email.*



**Study 2: Thriving of new and recent graduate veterinarians in clinical practice in New Zealand**

**Participant Consent Form**

I have read and understand the Information sheet that was emailed to me. The details of the study have been clearly explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may ask further questions at any time, and I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time before it is complete.

1. I agree/disagree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have my recording transcript returned to me for accuracy checking.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Declaration by Participant:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interview Schedule for Study 2**  
**Questions for semi-structured interviews with new or recently graduated veterinarians in clinical practice.**

Hi, I'm Lotte, a former equine vet in the Waikato. Thank you very much for helping with my PhD research. OR (if I know the participant): Hi, thank you very much for helping with my PhD research. As you saw in my email, I am researching the experiences of veterinarians in clinical practice. I'll be recording the interview to analyse later, and I can send you a copy of the transcript if you would like to review it. Please let me know if you have any further questions after reading the information sheet that I emailed to you. It's important that you give informed consent by signing the consent form. This form ensures that you fully understand the research and interview process and are making an informed decision about whether to participate in the study.

May I start the recording now?

**START RECORDING**

You don't have to answer any questions you don't want to. You can request to pause the recording at any time; therefore, the data gathering is also paused. Here is a copy of the information sheet I emailed you, which contains details about the study and support options. Do you have any questions for me? Are you happy to proceed with the interview now?

1. Rapport building: First, a couple of details about yourself
  - a. When did you finish your vet studies?
  - b. What kind of practice are you in now?
  - c. Is this the first practice you have worked in?
    - i. If yes, why did you want to become a veterinarian?
    - ii. If no, please tell me about your career journey.
2. Tell me how working in clinical practice has met your expectations.
3. Now tell me how working in clinical practice has been different to what you expected.
4. How did you find the transition from student to clinical practice?
  - a. What helped you with this transition?
5. Can you describe the type of support you have received since starting work in clinical practice?
  - a. What other types of support might be/have been useful?
    - i. Prompt: Consider mentors, friends, and family.
6. What do you really enjoy about clinical practice?
  - a. What are some of the positive things you have experienced in clinical practice?
  - b. What keeps you interested?
7. What have you found to be challenging in clinical practice? Why was it difficult, and what helped you deal with the situation?
  - a. What things and people in your workplace helped you? (*External resources*)
  - b. and what personal strategies helped you (*internal resources*)
8. That's everything I have to ask you. Do you have any final thoughts or anything you'd like to add about your transition into clinical practice, based on your early career experiences that haven't already been covered?

Thank you very much for your time today and for contributing to my research project. I will email you a transcript for your review within a couple of weeks. **STOP RECORDING**



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**Study 2: Experiences of new and recent veterinary graduates in clinical practice in New Zealand**

**TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

I Megan Ede agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "M Ede".

**Date:**

11/7/2023

## Appendix 5G: Participant description – Study 2

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
Male	8
Female	14
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>Years in clinical practice</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
< 3 years	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>Type of clinical work</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
Companion animal practice	7
Mixed animal practice	11
100% Production animal practice	1
100% Equine practice	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>Type of practice</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
Club practice (multi-clinic)	4
University clinic	1
Privately owned practice	9
Multi-clinic business - New Zealand owned	5
Multi-clinic business – fully / partially internationally owned	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>

## Appendix 5H: Map of New Zealand showing the geographic distribution of the 22 participants in Study 2

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Each dot represents the approximate location of the clinical practice where a participant was working at the time of the interview.



## Appendix 6A: Ethics approval – Study 3

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24/06/2024

Dear: Charlotte Cantley

**Re: Ethics Application - OM3 24/11 - Measures implemented by veterinary practices in New Zealand to support employees to thrive**

Thank you for the above application that was considered by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee:

**Ohu Matatika 3**

at their meeting held on **Thursday, 16 May 2024**

On behalf of the Committee I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are approved.

Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely



Professor Tracy Riley,  
Acting Chair, Research Ethics Chair's Committee

## Appendix 6B: Email to practice principles – Study 3

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**Subject:** Research into veterinary well-being

**Dear:** (practice manager or business owner)

Good to talk earlier. As I explained over the phone, I am currently pursuing a PhD at Massey University, School of Veterinary Science, on thriving in clinical practice. My research focuses on exploring factors that enhance job satisfaction, engagement, and overall well-being. Hopefully, this research will support the retention of veterinarians in clinical practice in New Zealand.

Having completed the first two studies of my PhD, which investigated what helps experienced clinical veterinarians thrive and what new graduates need for a successful transition into practice, I am now embarking on my third and final study. This study aims to investigate the measures employed by veterinary practices to promote employee motivation, engagement, and well-being.

I would like to interview veterinarians who meet the following criteria:

- Graduated for more than three years.
- Worked in your business as a clinical veterinarian for more than one year.
- Not a shareholder or holding a major leadership role in the business.

The interviews will be conducted one-on-one, either face-to-face or via Zoom, and will last approximately 35 minutes to 1 hour. Could you please inform your veterinary staff about my study and suggest that anyone interested contact me via email or phone? I will then provide them with further details and an information sheet by email to help them decide if they wish to participate.

The Massey University Human Ethics Committee has approved this study, participation is voluntary, and all information will be treated confidentially. I believe the findings from this research will benefit the wider veterinary profession by offering recommendations for creating supportive and thriving work environments for veterinarians and their teams.

I am very grateful for your help and support in sharing this information with your veterinary staff, which is crucial to the success of my research. If you have any questions or need further information, please do not hesitate to contact me at xxx

Kind regards

Lotte

Charlotte Cantley | Vet MB, MVSc. PhD Candidate, Mobile phone and email xxx



## Appendix 6C: Email to potential participants – Study 3

---

**Subject:** Opportunity to contribute to research on veterinary wellbeing in NZ

Dear [Recipient's Name],

Many thanks for getting back to me. That's great news; you're interested in being part of my research on veterinary well-being. I hope this email and the attached information sheet provide you with the necessary details to decide whether you would like to participate in the study.

I worked as a clinical equine veterinarian for 20 years before my career change to the NZVA as CPD director. Over the years, I have developed a passion for the well-being of the veterinary profession and have recently embarked on a full-time PhD at Massey University and work part-time as the NZVA well-being advocate.

My research focuses on ways to increase job satisfaction and engagement and ultimately improve the retention of veterinarians in clinical practice in New Zealand. I have completed the first two studies of my PhD, which investigated what helps experienced clinical veterinarians thrive and what new graduates require for a successful transition into practice. I am now on to my third and final study, which aims to explore the measures implemented by veterinary practices to support employee wellbeing. I plan to interview veterinarians working in clinical practice who have graduated more than three years but are not shareholders of the business, and I would like to invite you to participate in my study.

The interviews would be one-on-one and preferably face-to-face at a time and place that suits you. I estimate that the interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are under no obligation to accept this invitation.

I have attached an information sheet with more details for your consideration. Feel free to call me on xxxx if you'd like to discuss it further.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Kind regards,

Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley

Charlotte Cantley | Vet MB, MVSc, PhD Candidate.



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### INFORMATION SHEET

#### **A qualitative study exploring measures implemented by veterinary practices in New Zealand to support employees to thrive**

##### **Introduction**

My name is Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley, and I worked as an equine clinical vet for 20 years before moving to a Continuing Veterinary Education role in 2015. Throughout my career journey, I've developed a passion for the well-being of the veterinary profession and have now embarked on a PhD at Massey University. My research is focused on the factors that influence job satisfaction and engagement among clinical veterinarians in New Zealand. I hope to contribute valuable insights that will help veterinarians thrive in their clinical careers.

##### **Project Description and Invitation**

Working in clinical veterinary practice can be a highly rewarding and pleasurable career. However, it can also be a challenging and demanding job at times, leading to poor health outcomes, such as stress and burnout. The workplace culture within veterinary practices can influence the motivation and engagement of veterinarians and their teams. Recognising this, many veterinary practices across New Zealand have implemented various workplace initiatives aimed at improving employee motivation and engagement. This study aims to investigate the steps taken by veterinary practices in New Zealand to support veterinarians, using individual interviews. I would like to invite you to participate in this research.

##### **Participant eligibility**

To be eligible for this study, you must be a veterinarian registered with the Veterinary Council of New Zealand, currently working in clinical practice, graduated from veterinary school for at least three years and not a shareholder of the business. Participants must have been employed at the veterinary practice for at least 12 months. I aim to include veterinarians from a range of practice types across New Zealand, a mix of genders and graduates from Massey University as well as universities elsewhere.

##### **Interview procedure**

If you are interested in participating in this study, I would like to conduct an in-person interview with you at a mutually agreed-upon date and time in a quiet location of your choice. However, if it is not convenient to meet face-to-face, the interview can be conducted online via Zoom.

The interview will last about 60 minutes and will be recorded using an audio recorder for face-to-face sessions or audio-visual recording if conducted via Zoom technology. If the recording is paused for any reason, the conversation during that time will be considered "off the record" and will not be saved or used as part of the data. The recording will be transcribed, and you can be provided with a copy of the recording and the transcript to check for accuracy if you wish. Participation is completely voluntary, and confidentiality will be maintained at all times. Transcripts will be anonymised, and no information that could identify participants will be released. In the unlikely event that the interview causes any distress, then the following supports should be considered.

- Talk to a support person of your choice.
- Contact Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) for counselling services
  - Vitae funded counselling service through NZVA/CNZ.  
Appointments can be made via the 24-hour free phone service 0508 664 981 or by completing the self-referral form <https://www.vitae.co.nz/contact/counselling-form/>
  - Other external EAP providers, if one is available through your employment
- Contact your General Practitioner.

### Data Management

To ensure participant confidentiality and privacy, the transcripts will be anonymised. I will remove any identifying information from the transcripts to protect participants' privacy. I will replace the participant's name with a pseudonym or code number. I will also remove any details that could identify colleagues, clients, or organisations that might be mentioned in the interview.

All data will be securely managed on password-protected computers or in locked filing cabinets, in accordance with Massey University's guidelines on research ethics, data protection, and confidentiality. Once the study is complete, I will send you a summary of the results

### Participants' Rights

Please note that you are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If, however, you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any question.
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during the interview.
- Ask for the recording to be paused at any time during the interview, and the conversation during that time will be considered "off the record" and will not be saved or used as part of the data.
- You can ask to stop the interview at any time or decline to answer any questions you do not want to answer.
- If you decide to withdraw from the study, you can do so up to 2 weeks after receiving the transcript for review.
- Your name and any identifying information will be anonymised in the transcripts and any publications. This will ensure the privacy and confidentiality of individuals involved in the study.
- All data will be stored securely. Transcripts and recordings will be stored on a password-protected computer, while consent forms and printed transcripts will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for a period of 7 years. After this period, they will be securely disposed of through shredding or permanent deletion from the computer.
- You can be provided with a copy of the transcript of the recording to edit/review it if you wish.
- You will be provided with a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

### Project Contacts

#### Main Researcher

Charlotte (Lotte) Cantley  
PhD Candidate  
School of Veterinary Science, Massey University  
Mobile number: [REDACTED]  
Email Address: [c.cantley@massey.ac.nz](mailto:c.cantley@massey.ac.nz)

#### Primary Supervisor

Professor Jenny Weston  
Academic Lead  
School of Veterinary Science, Massey University  
Email address [J.F.Weston@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.F.Weston@massey.ac.nz)

**Human Ethics Approval.** *This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, Application OM3 24/11. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact the Chairperson, Massey University Human Ethics Ohu Matatika 3, email [humanethics3@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics3@massey.ac.nz).*



**Measures implemented by veterinary practices in New Zealand to support employees to thrive**

**Participant Consent Form**

I have read and understand the Information sheet that was emailed to me. The details of the study have been clearly explained to me, and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I may ask further questions at any time, and I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study. I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time, up until after reviewing the transcript of my interview.

1. I agree to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I wish/do not wish to have the transcript of the recording returned to me for accuracy checking.
3. I wish/do not wish to have the recording of this interview returned to me
4. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Declaration by Participant:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ hereby consent to take part in this study.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

### **Interview Schedule for Study 3**

#### **Questions for semi-structured interviews with employee clinical veterinarians**

Hi, I'm Lotte, a former equine vet in the Waikato. Thank you very much for helping with my PhD research. OR (if I know the participant): Hi, thank you very much for helping with my PhD research. As I mentioned in the information sheet I emailed to you, I'm studying the well-being measures that New Zealand veterinary practices use to support veterinarians. I'll be recording the interview to analyse later, and I can send you a copy of the transcript if you would like to review it. It is essential that you sign the consent form before we start the interview to indicate that you understand the research process and you're making an informed decision about participating. Have you got any questions? May I start the recording now?

#### **START RECORDING**

Please note that you are under no obligation to answer any questions you don't wish to, and you may request to have the recording paused at any time and data collection will also be paused. Here is a copy of the information sheet I emailed you, which includes details about the study and support options. Have you got any questions for me? Are you happy to proceed with the interview now?

1. First, a couple of details about yourself
  - a. When did you finish your vet studies, and where did you graduate from?
  - b. What kind of practice are you in now?
  - c. What is your role at this practice, and how long have you worked here?
1. What does your workplace do to support staff wellbeing, motivation and engagement?
2. Describe how your workplace has supported your personal well-being, motivation and engagement.
  - a. Please give an example
3. What else could your workplace do to support your well-being, motivation and engagement at work?
4. That's everything I have to ask you. Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your experiences of well-being and thriving in this practice or previous veterinary practices you have worked in?

Thank you for your time today and for contributing to my study. I will email you a transcript for your review within a couple of weeks. **STOP RECORDING**.

#### ***Probe questions if needed.***

Can you tell me about the measures your practice provides for:

- i. Mental health support.
- ii. Specific Wellbeing Initiatives
- iii. Mentoring and support
- iv. Support for challenging cases.
- v. Managing unexpected outcomes and errors
- vi. Flexible work.
- vii. Managing workload and time pressure
- viii. Social connection and collegiality opportunities.
- ix. New graduate support
- x. professional development
- xi. Career Opportunities
- xii. The physical working environment



**Study 3: Measures implemented by veterinary practices in New Zealand to support employees to thrive.**

**TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

I ..... Megan Ede ..... (Full Name - printed) agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'MEDE', written over a horizontal dotted line.

**Date:**

2 July 2024

## Appendix 6H: Participant description – Study 3

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<b>Gender</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
Male	8
Female	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

<b>Years in clinical practice</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
4 – 12 years	18
> 12 years	11
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

<b>Type of clinical work</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
Companion animal practice	12
Mixed animal practice	8
100% Production animal practice	8
100% Equine practice	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

<b>Type of practice</b>	<b>Number of veterinarians</b>
Club practice (multi clinic)	6
Privately owned practice	11
Emergency after-hours business	2
Multi-clinic business - New Zealand owned	9
Multi-clinic business – fully / partially internationally owned	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>

## Appendix 6I: Map of New Zealand showing the geographic distribution of the 29 participants in Study 3

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Each dot represents the approximate location of the clinical practice where a participant was working at the time of the interview.

