MENTORING PROGRAMS FOR NEW GRADUATES – DO THEY WORK?

Dr Paul Davey
Grantham St Veterinary Clinic
58D Grantham St, Wembley

Background

The word "mentor" can be traced back to Greek Mythology, but the first modern usage of the word is found in a book entitled "Les Aventures de Telemaque," by the French writer François Fénelon. The book delves into the heretical concept of “Quietism”, a state of intellectual stillness and interior passivity. The Little Oxford Dictionary defines mentor as an “advisor or counsellor”. Other definitions of “mentor” include: 1: “a wise and trusted counsellor or teacher”. 2: “an influential senior sponsor or supporter”.

A mentor is different to a teacher, employer or a coach. Effective mentoring:

• is a relationship that focuses on the needs of the mentee
• fosters caring and supportive relationships
• encourages all mentees to develop to their fullest potential; and
• is a strategy to develop active community partnerships.

AVA (WA) New Graduate Support Scheme

It was with these concepts in mind that in 1996, in response to the tragic suicide of a new graduate veterinarian, the AVA (WA) Graduate Support Scheme was born, with significant contributions from the AVA (WA) Committee members, Dr Frank Gaschk, Dr Susan Kelly and particularly Dr Michael Lumsden.

The scheme was set up to provide an additional form of support for new graduate veterinarians as they headed out into the wide wondrous world of practice as a qualified vet. Obviously, family, friends and workmates are likely to provide the most potent and readily available form of support for new graduates. However, there are situations where they may feel isolated, or simply unwilling to discuss the issues with those around them. This is where a mentor can help.

A New Graduate Guide was written for the purposes of providing additional support through this incredibly important transition period.

In short, the Graduate Support Scheme worked by assigning each graduate from Murdoch University Veterinary School to an experienced volunteering member of the profession. In its infancy, this assignment was done by letter, after the student had graduated early in the first year of their new career, and the graduate and mentor encouraged to communicate via phone or letter if support was required. More recently, we have developed earlier assignment of mentors to graduates (In September at the AVA Trade Fair), efficient email communication systems, and more opportunities for graduates and mentors to socialise prior to leaving the university system. Some basic support resources are supplied to the mentors, and we plan to provide ongoing training opportunities to give mentors the option of up-skilling themselves in counselling techniques if they feel they need to. Much cooperation and collaboration has occurred between the VSB (WA), Murdoch University on many levels, and the AVA to ensure the AVA (WA) Graduate Mentor Scheme intermeshed appropriately with other strategies and resources designed to improve career resilience and new graduate satisfaction in their career choice.
New Graduate Challenges

Much has been published about the reasons why Newly Graduated Veterinarians are at greater risk of experiencing emotional stress than other categories of veterinarians. Trevor Heath in particular has done some comprehensive work in this area. Anecdotally, in consultation with mentors, the reasons for graduates seeking assistance from their mentors fell into the following broad categories:

- Employment related issues (pay rates, working hours, employer expectations)
- Veterinary case related issues (general medical, surgical or animal welfare questions)
- Interpersonal issues (communication failings, personality clashes, relationship issues)
- Career and/or job choice issues (doubts about overall career choice and/or particular aspects of current job)

Often, with further discussion and analysis, issues initially labelled as career or job choice issues often were actually found to fall within one of the other categories.

Over the years the AVA(WA) Graduate Support Scheme system has been enhanced and refined to encourage a more personal bond to develop between mentor and graduate.

The scheme has also morphed from its initial aim of being a fall-back safety net to providing a more proactive stream of support. This has arisen through acknowledgment that graduates are more likely to speak about problems to someone they have previously met, and developed some sort of rapport with, prior to needing them. Further enhancements that encourage this bond are planned in the future.

Do mentor programs work?

Whilst there is a lot of information in the literature regarding various models of mentor scheme, both within the veterinary profession and outside of it, there is little published data available looking at whether or not they actually work.

According to The Australian Network for Promotion, Prevention and Early Intervention for Mental Health (Auseinet), the Second National Mental Health Plan (Australian Health Ministers 1998), identified the following as desirable future outcomes of various mental health programs:

- improved public health strategies to promote mental health;
- reduced incidence and prevalence of mental illness and associated disability (including depression);
- reduced numbers of suicides;
- increased consumer and carer satisfaction with clinicians’ responses to early warning signs of mental disorders; and
- improved mental health literacy at all levels.

To reword these desirable outcomes to make them more pertinent to the particular environment peculiar to the veterinary profession, we could propose the following as desirable outcomes:

- improved strategies to promote mental wellness within the profession
- reduced incidence and prevalence of mental illness
- reduced number of suicides
- increased awareness of access to support, and increased satisfaction with the outcomes when support is sought.
- Diversified and simplified forums for discussion of mental health issues, of the issues surrounding career resilience

Based on largely anecdotal information, and close monitoring of our own “patch” of Murdoch Graduates, we certainly feel they do, but with some important small print.

They need to:

1) Protect and support the mentor, as well as the graduate
2) Provide education on mentoring skills to the mentor
3) Educate the mentors on the limit of their responsibility and capabilities
4) Encourage a bond to develop between mentor and graduate.
5) Provide a finite timeframe for the relationship. ie the contract needs a termination point.
6) Both mentor and graduate need to be committed to the concept
7) The initial assignment of graduate to mentor is certainly strengthened if the graduate can chose their mentor

Conclusions

From 11 years worth of anecdotal feedback, it seems the AVA (WA) Graduate Support Scheme has been an effective means to provide an additional tier of support to the graduates, which it is hoped will produce a more psychologically robust veterinarian likely to demonstrate better career resilience.

The concept of mentoring has been embraced wholeheartedly in Australia by a number of professions including most notably medical practitioners and psychologists, the latter who have created a very elaborate and formal system. Overseas, mentoring programs are also common, particularly in the USA where many of the veterinary schools have developed a range of resources to improve the provision of support to the new graduates through their transition into employment.

Perhaps the most difficult part of the AVA (WA)’s Graduate Support Scheme monitoring is determining how to measure its success. Obviously, any suicide is unacceptable, but equally, the aim of the program is to provide another tier to the many other support levels open to new graduates, not replace those already offered. So working out whether this is working or not is highly subjective, and other than Professor Trevor Heath’s excellent work on one cohort of University of Queensland graduates, very little has been done to assess the main issues, and how best to address them. There is some hope on the horizon, with a number of surveys being undertaken over the last few years that may provide some information on the level of these programs success.

Those involved in the WA program would love to have access to some sort of ongoing measure of their efforts to allow a more productive review of procedures and principles to be undertaken with hard data to influence any changes, rather than anecdotal information and opinion.
References

1. François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénélon (1699). The Adventures of Telemachus