

# Investigating the impact of client, co-worker and supervisor incivility in veterinary practice

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## SUMMARY

Workplace incivility is defined as disrespectful, insensitive behaviour that violates social norms, and has been found to have a variety of adverse consequences on workers ranging from performance decrements to reduced mental health. This study investigated the impact of incivility from three sources (clients, co-workers and supervisors) on veterinary staff ( $n = 252$ ) using an online survey. The key findings suggest that veterinary staff experience rudeness frequently from all three sources, with incivility linked to increased reported burnout levels, decreased mental wellbeing, decreased job satisfaction and increased quitting intention.

## KEYWORDS

Incivility, veterinarian, mental health

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## Introduction

The field of veterinary work is considered very stressful, with reports indicating that veterinarians experience high rates of burnout and suicidal ideation (Andela, 2020). Research conducted to identify veterinarian workplace stressors has reported a range of factors including issues with co-workers, workload, issues with clients and emotional demands (Andela, 2020). This suggests that social interactions have the potential to adversely impact veterinary staff. Certainly, dealing with demanding and angry clients has been identified as a stressor that can trigger negative emotional responses and mental health issues among vets (O'Connor, 2019). Similarly, rivalry and conflict with colleagues can also result in adverse consequences (O'Connor, 2019; Andela, 2020). However, the majority of these studies group a range of behaviours (including aggression and bullying) under the broad heading of 'client issues' or 'co-worker issues' and as such it is unclear whether all adverse behaviours have the same potential to impact veterinarians, and relatively low-level behaviours such as rudeness have largely been neglected.

One recent paper explored veterinary experience of client-based incivility (Irwin, Hall & Ellis, 2021) using qualitative interviews. The results indicated that veterinarians experienced a range of rude behaviours from clients, leading to impacts such as increased stress, withdrawal from clients and even a change of career focus. This highlights the capacity of client incivility to impact veterinarians, but does not give a full picture of incivility effects within veterinary practice – where incivility could arise from multiple sources including clients, co-workers and supervisors.

The aim of the current study was to investigate the potential impact of, and responses to, incivility from three sources within veterinary practice; clients, co-workers and supervisors with UK veterinary staff. An online survey was conducted to examine the potential relationship between incivility, mental wellbeing, job satisfaction, burnout level, quitting intention and coping strategies of veterinary staff. The current paper reports the preliminary analysis of the data collected.

## Method

### Participants

A total of 251 participants (207 female, mean age: 36.3yrs, mean years job experience: 12.2yrs) were recruited, comprised of veterinary surgeons ( $n = 125$ ), veterinary nurses ( $n = 82$ ), animal care assistants ( $n = 7$ ), client care assistants ( $n = 13$ ), practice managers ( $n = 4$ ) and not stated ( $n = 20$ ).

### Survey

The online survey encompassed four sections including: a section requesting demographic details (job role, type of practice etc.), a section designed to measure mental health status, job satisfaction, job turnover intention and burnout using pre-validated scales, a section assessing incivility frequency from clients, co-workers and supervisors, and a section assessing coping strategies.

### Preliminary findings

- Participants reported significantly different levels of incivility frequency across the three sources assessed (client: 22.05, co-worker: 18.73, supervisor: 17.53)  $p < .001$ , with pairwise comparisons indicating that client incivility was experienced most frequently ( $p < .001$ ). Nurses reported a higher level of incivility from supervisors and co-workers than veterinary surgeons.
- All three sources of incivility correlated positively with mental health status and burnout ( $p < .001$ ), and negatively with job satisfaction ( $p < .001$ ). Supervisor and co-worker incivility also correlated negatively with quitting intention ( $p < .001$ ).
- Regression analysis indicated that supervisor, co-worker and client incivility all significantly predicted reported mental wellbeing. Supervisor incivility significantly predicted quitting intention, supervisor and client incivility both significantly predicted job satisfaction and burnout levels.
- The pattern of coping strategies for all three incivility sources was similar; participants appeared to prefer avoidance (avoid person, put up with it), mitigation (try to forget it, assume person didn't mean it) and seeking support (talking to friends, colleagues and family). Reporting the behaviour and confronting the person were reported less frequently.

### Discussion

The preliminary findings suggest that the level of incivility experienced can vary according to both source and job role. Incivility, regardless of source, was linked to reduced mental wellbeing, supporting previous research indicating that incivility can function as a workplace stressor. Incivility from senior staff appears particularly impactful in terms of future career intentions and current levels of satisfaction. These results highlight the importance of supporting veterinary staff following an uncivil incident and that reporting behaviours are encouraged.

### References

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