

Sexual harassment in veterinary medicine: Who cares?

No group spearheads anti-harassment effort for the profession

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For The VIN News Service

Soon after graduating from Michigan State University's veterinary program in 2002, Dr. Rachel Cezar was offered a job she really wanted. Her prospective boss took her to dinner to discuss the terms, and spent much of the time talking about how much he liked women. Cezar thought, "Oh my gosh, what is this man thinking is going to happen if I take this job?"

She declined the offer, thinking, "This guy is going to be weird with me. No way I'm dealing with that." To avoid similar situations in the future, her then-boyfriend suggested she switch from large animal medicine, which was dominated by men, to small animal medicine.

"No," she responded. "I'm going to push through it. I'm going to deal with these situations, brush them off and keep moving."

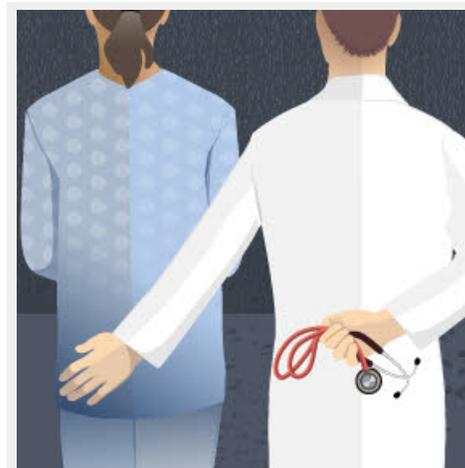
She did. Cezar continued working in large animal medicine, enduring and ignoring persistent, unwanted sexual overtures and inappropriate remarks. She is now a leader in a veterinary workplace where she is in a position to support and assist employees who might have sexual harassment complaints of their own.

VIN News Service contacted Cezar in her capacity as the immediate past president of the Women's Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative to learn what that organization is thinking about the issue of sexual harassment. Her personal story came up during the interview. It wasn't the only time a conversation about sexual harassment in the profession led to the revelation of a firsthand experience.

A [commentary](#) published by the VIN News in December by a veterinarian who said she was fired in 2015 after reporting sexual harassment by her boss sparked a robust [discussion](#) 🗉 on a confidential message board of the Veterinary Information Network, an online community for the profession and parent of VIN News. The conversation ranged widely and included about a dozen additional revelations of harassment and assault in workplaces and academia.

With #MeToo and #TimesUp roiling industries from film, music and journalism to academics, the arts and government, and with veterinarians and veterinary staffers divulging their own stories, VIN News explored the profession's experience with sexual harassment. Are there veterinary-specific challenges to consider? Are big corporations or small businesses better at preventing or addressing harassment? Will the increasing numbers of women in the profession improve the outlook? Many answers are a muddle, but one thing is clear: No veterinary organization or large employer is grabbing the megaphone just yet.

How prevalent is the problem?



Digital art by Tamara Rees
Sources: Adobe Stock/Jomkwan7/Ydefinitel

Nationally, workplace sexual harassment is pervasive. An ABC News-Washington Post [poll](#) in October found that 54 percent of women in the United States report having experienced unwanted work-related sexual advances. A 2016 [report](#) from the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) estimates that somewhere between 25 and 85 percent of women have dealt with workplace sexual harassment.

Instances of sexual harassment don't always involve male aggressors and female victims. Vox [reported](#) last fall, citing an EEOC statistic, that between 1990 and 2009, men reporting workplace sexual assault doubled to 16 percent of all claims. However, the dynamic of men sexually harassing women is far more commonly reported.

As for veterinary medicine in particular, it's impossible to say with assurance how many people are affected. AVMA officials did not respond to repeated inquiries over the course of several weeks for information about any research or initiatives on sexual harassment. A search of "sexual harassment" in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* returned one study on the subject: a 2000 [survey](#) of faculty at veterinary schools. The prevalence of sexual harassment among 478 respondents was 31 percent, with "offensive sexual comments" and "unwanted attention" cited as the most common forms.

In December, VIN [polled](#)  members on the topic of sexual harassment. Of 2,310 veterinarians who responded, 43 percent reported that they had witnessed or experienced sexual assault or harassment while at work or in school. The unscientific results suggest that veterinary medicine is in the ballpark with national trends.

The National Association of Veterinary Technicians (NAVTA), which represents veterinary support staff, has not surveyed its members to determine the prevalence of sexual harassment and/or assault. In January, the organization voted to establish a wellness task force. Its job is to develop a self-care program to improve work-life balance, reduce compassion fatigue, and better the physical and financial health of veterinary technicians/nurses and team members. Sexual harassment will be one of the areas of focus for the task force, according to Mary Berg, a registered veterinary technician who is leading the effort.

Are there veterinary-specific challenges to consider?

A profession or industry can have distinctive challenges to curbing sexual harassment. For example, in male-dominated industries such as technology and construction, a boy's-club culture can cause women to be treated like intruders, [reportedly](#) creating workplaces rife with sexism and harassment.

Among those who talk about reasons that sexual harassment persists in veterinary medicine, a couple of factors rise to the surface: intimacy is inherent in the traditional model of small, owner-operated clinics; and the act of handling animals requires veterinarians and staff to work in close physical proximity.

"Veterinary practices often have a small-business, family-type culture, where personal issues are shared, jokes are prevalent, and the unprofessional release of stress through anger or other means is sometimes tolerated," said Dr. Karen Parker, director of marketing for Innovetive Petcare Inc., a Texas-based company that owns and operates 12 veterinary practices and employs 250

The VIN News Service contacted these companies to ask how they handle sexual harassment:

American Veterinary Group
 Banfield Pet Hospital (owned by Mars)
 BluePearl (owned by Mars)
 Blue River PetCare
 Companion Animal Practices North America
 Compassion-First Pet Hospitals
 Community Veterinary Partners
 Heartland Veterinary Partners
 Innovetive Petcare
 Lakefield Veterinary Group
 MedVet Medical & Cancer Centers for Pets
 Mixed Animal Veterinary Associates North America
 National Veterinary Associates
 O'Brien Veterinary Management
 Pathway Partners
 Pet Partners (owned by Mars)
 PetVet Care Centers
 PetWell Partners
 Southern Veterinary Partners
 VCA (owned by Mars)
 VetCor
 VetEvolve
 Veterinary Practice Partners
 VitalPet

Responded and provided information about sexual-harassment policies
 Responded but did not provide information about sexual-harassment policies
 Did not respond

people. "In the casual camaraderie of a veterinary practice, it can sometimes be difficult to tell when a line is crossed."

That was the case for an associate veterinarian at an independent clinic on the East Coast who asked not to be identified due to concerns that doing so might create problems for her at work.

In an interview with VIN News, she recounted an incident last fall where a pornographic image of a woman was posted near the practice's rear entrance. She reported it to one of the practice owners, and the image was removed. There were no follow-up conversations, consequences or apologies, she said.

"One of the part-time vets was also quite offended," she recalled. "She had once had her own clinic, and said that would have been a 'firing offense.' " The veterinarian doesn't expect any more such antics at her workplace but still feels bad about it and thinks she is viewed as a "bad sport" for complaining.

Parker of Innovetive, who previously worked as an associate veterinarian in small animal practice for five years and was a relief veterinarian for 10, noted that many practices are run by married couples or have family members working together, and employ dating couples or those interested in pursuing relationships. "In a culture where you can't eliminate personal relationships at work and with small staff sizes increasing the odds of one member of a couple being in a position of authority, there is an increased risk of gray areas and nuance to interactions," Parker said.

Dr. Melanie Butera, a practice owner in Ohio, would agree. Prior to opening her practice, Butera ran emergency clinics owned by others. During that time, she witnessed surprising interoffice hijinks, usually involving veterinarians engaged in relationships with technicians, extramarital and otherwise. Inappropriate or not, she pointed out that personal relationships in the workplace create an appearance of favoritism. It's a sense that "people who aren't sleeping with the boss aren't getting the perks," she said.

Even absent relationships or unwanted sexual overtures, many clinic cultures tend to be informal and jokey, which can lead to questionable interactions. Jade Velasquez, a licensed veterinary technician in Washington, described how the physical demands of the job can lead to uneasy situations.

"I like my own personal space but I've had to learn in vet med, you're going to work really closely with people," Velasquez said. "A lot of times, maybe you accidentally brush up against someone or a hand goes somewhere; it's not intentional. A lot of times, that can create humor to kind of deal with an awkward situation but that humor can also get out of hand to the point that it makes people uncomfortable."

Velasquez has read plenty of reports of bad behavior in clinics on [Veterinary Support Staff Unleashed](#), a 10,000-plus member Facebook group she started a few years ago. She said, "I've heard a lot of people say, 'We're a very open clinic and we make jokes.' And I think that's a wonderful thing, but what it really comes down to is, is the behavior unwanted? We need to really look at, is our clinic being professional? We have to say, 'One comment, that just sets the precedent for another comment.' "

Can big corporations do a better job curbing sexual harassment?

Small, independent veterinarian-owned and -operated practices still constitute the majority of practices in the United States but their numbers are diminishing as large corporate practice chains and practice groups rapidly expand. With formal policies, training programs and human resources in place, major corporations are in a position to police workplace sexual harassment. Whether they're doing so is unclear.

VIN News contacted [24 companies](#) to request information on their sexual harassment policies. Fifteen responded; only six answered questions.

Through a Banfield Pet Hospital spokesperson, Mars Inc., the largest owner of veterinary practices in the world, provided a statement that reads in part: "The health, safety and well-being of associates is a top priority for all Mars-owned veterinary practices, and we have a zero-tolerance policy as it relates to

How veterinary schools address the issue

In 1972, Congress passed Title IX, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs or activities operated by recipients of federal financing. Sexual harassment — which includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal, nonverbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature, as well as sexual violence — is a form of discrimination prohibited by the law.

Even so, it happens. Veterinarians have recounted their experiences on the [Veterinary Information](#)

harassment of any kind.” Mars owns Banfield, BluePearl, Pet Partners and VCA, encompassing more than 2,000 practices mostly in the U.S. and Canada. It also owns Antech, a major veterinary laboratory, and other veterinary-service companies.

As a condition of employment, Banfield, BluePearl, Pet Partners and VCA require employees to complete trainings on harassment and discrimination policies and prevention, the statement said. Anyone subject to or witnessing harassment is “strongly encouraged” to report it following the practice’s Anti-Harassment Procedures. VIN News requested but was not provided a copy of them.

Only Parker at Innovetive Petcare and Diana Byrne, director of marketing and employee engagement at VetCor, a practice consolidator based in Massachusetts, responded with detail.

“There is a regrettably high incidence of sexual harassment in our society and we recognize that the veterinary profession is not immune,” Parker said. “We work hard to create a culture where team members are respected and our team is comfortable reporting instances of concern.”

While her company does not provide sexual harassment training, all new hires are required to read the employee handbook, which includes a two-page policy on harassment. She said that responsiveness and enforcement are emphasized to managers.

She also suggests that when it comes to policing harassment, multi-clinic owners and larger corporations may have the advantage over independent clinics. “If the owner of an independent clinic is involved or unresponsive, employees have no recourse unless the harassment meets a criminal standard. Employees may have to leave their positions to escape the harassment,” Parker said, adding that Innovetive Petcare requires employees to report concerns additionally to the home office. “Consequently, should someone in a position of local power be involved, team members have other people in greater positions of power to respond.”

VetCor uses a third-party hotline enabling employees to anonymously report bad behavior, including sexual harassment. “It came about as we scaled up in size,” Byrne said. In use for about seven years, hotline contact information (phone, fax and email) is posted in break rooms at company headquarters and in VetCor’s 254 hospitals. Response to a verified incident of sexual harassment, Byrne says, is immediate and could entail firing the offender. “Sexual harassment is not anything anyone here thinks is OK,” she said. Byrne was unable to say how many reports the company has received through the hotline.

The company has not made substantial changes to its anti-harassment policy over the course of its 20 years in business. “Because we’ve always been so zero-tolerance, it’s not like we needed to step up our game,” Byrne said. She added that the policy is regularly reviewed by outside experts.

Boston-based employment attorney Rebecca Pontikes points out that the best policies are only as effective as the people who enforce them.

“[Large corporations] are more likely to have policies that are written down,” said

Network and interviews with VIN News, sharing how they’ve been sexually harassed while in school, by fellow students, mentors and professors. There also have been news reports in recent years of professors of veterinary medicine losing tenured posts because of sexual harassment.

A University of Florida veterinary school professor pleaded guilty in 2013 to voyeurism charges for using a video camera in a pen to view and record student bodies. Oregon State University fired a tenured professor of toxicology from its veterinary college last year over allegations of sexual harassment and bullying. The professor, who’s been employed by the university since 1977, is appealing his termination. The case is scheduled for a hearing on Feb. 22.

VIN News contacted the 30 U.S.-based veterinary programs about their sexual harassment policies and curricula. Sixteen responded. Cornell University, Kansas State University, Louisiana State University, Michigan State University, Oklahoma State University, Purdue University, Tuskegee University, University of Missouri and the University of Wisconsin cited university-wide commitment to harassment awareness, including mandatory training and online resources.

In addition, some veterinary schools reported augmenting university policies with veterinary-specific programs or shifts in the approach to training. While the topic of sexual harassment has been under heavy examination in recent months by mainstream media, some in veterinary academia have been talking about it for years.

- About 10 years ago, Carlson College of Veterinary Medicine at Oregon State University began addressing sexual harassment in several of its lectures and discussions, including in its two-day new-student orientation, and in Veterinary Communication and Veterinary Ethics, which are required courses.
- For about seven years, Iowa State University College of Veterinary Medicine has included the topic of sexual harassment and what constitutes consent in its mandatory Freshman Seminar Series.
- Since 2012, all incoming students at Tufts University have received a 75-minute in-person mandatory training session with the Office of Equal Opportunity, walking through reporting and resources on sexual misconduct. Faculty and staff are required to attend a three-hour in-person training. By contrast, a Tufts spokesperson said, “Most universities require only online training for sexual harassment prevention.”
- In 2015, the University of California, Davis, School

Pontikes, a sexual harassment expert who views the issue through the lens of her employee clients. “They are more likely to have HR departments. They are more likely to have people that are well-versed in what the law says and what’s prohibited than a small mom-and-pop veterinary organization. That’s not necessarily to say that that gives an advantage in protections or an advantage in receptivity to complaints or anything like that.”

Pontikes, who has represented veterinarians in the past, continued: “A mom-and-pop organization may have a culture of not tolerating bad, lewd behavior that enforces itself a lot better than a large corporate entity with all these lovely policies, but your particular manager doesn’t really care and lets a boys-will-be-boys culture permeate the particular location.”

When she talks about responsive leadership in small practices, she could be referring to someone such as Butera, a one-woman no-tolerance zone.

Butera remembers only one serious complaint of groping and sexual comments in her 30 years in veterinary medicine. They were made against a newly hired veterinarian at an emergency clinic she ran before starting her own. “When it happened, the tech walked off her shift and called me from the pay phone across the street (before cellphone days) to apologize that she was quitting because of him,” Butera [wrote](#)  on a VIN message board. “ ‘Whoa! Wait a minute,’ I told her. ‘I don’t put up with that BS. Meet me there in a half hour.’ ” Talking about the experience to VIN News, Butera said she and her husband immediately confronted the veterinarian and threw him out.

But Butera is only one person. As many victims of harassment know, the person in charge or taking complaints might be the harasser or the spouse of the harasser.

Often at large corporations, enforcing sexual harassment policies falls to the human resources department, which may not be an independent arbiter.

“The reality is, HR organizations aren’t generally as independent as they’re portrayed to be,” Pontikes said. “They are in service to the company. So, when they do an investigation, it is equally as likely to be a means of providing a defense of the company in court as it is to be a means of actually eradicating the problem.”

Moreover, reporting harassment — with or without a reporting system in place — isn’t the norm. According to the EEOC, the majority of those harassed or assaulted at work don’t make a complaint. And with good reason. As *Harvard Business Review* [reported](#) last fall, “several large-scale surveys show, people who file harassment complaints are much more likely to lose their jobs than people who experience similar levels of harassment and say nothing.”

Said Velasquez, the veterinary technician: “[Reporting it] sounds fine and dandy ... but it’s one of those things, like OK, but how do I go about that without actually losing my job?”

The arbitration wrinkle

A potential downside to ever-larger companies moving into veterinary medicine is that large companies tend to favor mandatory arbitration agreements. These agreements require employees, as a condition of employment, to submit any complaints to an arbitrator rather than going to civil court, and to keep the results confidential. This could be a serious setback for anti-sexual harassment efforts, in part because lawyers working on a contingency fee are less likely to represent employees in arbitration because the potential settlements and award payouts generally are less than in court.

In addition, systemic change is undermined by keeping claims secret. “If you don’t know that it’s happened at a company, there’s no

of Veterinary Medicine began requiring all year-one students to attend a two-hour session on sexual violence as part of its Profession and Clinical Skills course.

- In 2016, Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine enacted the [Green Dot College Prevention Strategy](#). The 8-year-old program trains individuals to act against sexual harassment in everyday situations. Acts might involve calling out a friend for telling a sexist joke, or intervening non-confrontationally when someone is drunk at a party and may be in a potentially dangerous situation. Sometimes called “bystander training,” this approach is gaining traction, as [research](#) casts doubt on sexual harassment training developed in the 1980s and 1990s.
- During the 2016-17 academic year, sexual harassment training became mandatory at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine. In addition, lectures on professionalism include vignettes that might include a sexual-harassment scenario.
- This spring, the Mississippi State University College of Veterinary Medicine will begin incorporating sexual harassment awareness and training in professional development courses taught to first- and second-year students, a spokesperson said.

reason for them to clean up their act,” Pontikes said.

Susan Fowler, a former software engineer at Uber, was unable to sue that company or be part of a class action suit due to an arbitration agreement she had signed. When Uber’s HR team and upper management failed to help her, she called out the toxic work environment in a [blog post](#) that shook the tech world.

Arbitration agreements have been growing in corporate America over the past couple of decades. The Economic Policy Institute, a think tank in Washington D.C., estimates that 60 million American workers currently are [subject to these agreements](#), almost a quarter of the workforce.

VIN News could not determine if any of the major players in veterinary medicine require arbitration. Parker at Innovetive Petcare and Byrne at VetCor said their companies do not. The Banfield representative declined to answer when asked whether employees of Mars-owned veterinary practices are required to sign arbitration agreements. No other companies VIN News contacted addressed this question.

In December, a bipartisan group of lawmakers introduced legislation to ban forced arbitration in sexual harassment and discrimination cases. The [bill](#) is in committee in both the House and Senate.

Will women save themselves?

Multiple studies show that hiring and promoting women does more to reduce sexual harassment than policies and training. This could bode well for veterinary medicine. *JAVMA* [reports](#) that women now hold more than half of all veterinarian jobs, and the female demographic is projected to reach upwards of 70 percent by 2030.

But there is an important caveat: To make a difference, women need to be in positions of power. As Harvard Business Review [reports](#), research shows “harassment flourishes in workplaces where men dominate in management and women have little power.”

Among the 24 multi-practice veterinary companies VIN News contacted for this story, only one, Lakefield Veterinary Group, has a CEO/president who is a woman (judging from information on the companies’ websites). Meanwhile, NAVTA’s membership, which is comprised mostly of veterinary technicians and assistants, is 95 percent female.

Women also are underrepresented in professional organizations such as the AVMA, where only six (or 33 percent) of 18 board of directors positions are held by women.

Additionally, in U.S. veterinary schools, where women constitute about 80 percent of students, only 37.2 percent of tenured/tenure track positions are filled by women, according to the Association of American Veterinary Medical Colleges. (See "[How veterinary schools address the issue.](#)")

Cezar of the Women’s Veterinary Leadership Development Initiative hopes to change that. The goal of her group, which was started in 2013, is to improve the representation of women in organizations such as the AVMA.

The Initiative offers continuing education at conferences and networking events aimed at helping women succeed in veterinary medicine and take leadership roles. The sessions are geared toward how to open your own practice, building confidence, learning how to negotiate, and dealing with imposter syndrome — the feeling that you don’t deserve your success. Networking events aim to be an alternative to the golf course, a place where women encourage each other and provide advice on getting involved in professional organizations.

According to Cezar, the group does not specifically address sexual harassment and assault in its efforts, even though these issues affect and are affected by their goals. For example, Cezar believes women might be less eager to serve on boards that are loaded with men out of concern that they’ll just have to put up with more bad behavior. Conversely, she also worries that men concerned about getting into trouble in this #TimesUp era may avoid mentoring women, creating new challenges for women.

She doesn’t believe that a group focusing on women’s leadership needs to focus on sexual harassment. “I understand we may all go through unwanted harassment,” Cezar said. “[You] need to know how to persevere and keep pushing forward and knowing your self-worth, because someone is always going to try to steal your glory ... and that is regardless, man or woman.”

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