ALN

Overcoming Compassion Fatigue in the Biomedical Lab

Helen Kelly

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Instinctively we know that belonging and attachment are intrinsic human needs—and that compassion, even for strangers and those of different species, is a hard wired response.

Recently, research evidence has confirmed both. So it is not surprising to find that in an animal research laboratory, first-line caretakers can be ambushed and even overcome by feelings of sadness, loss and grief such that they become disappointed, dejected, disillusioned, exhausted, or burned out.

This is a very challenging circumstance, first for the technicians themselves who after all take enormous pride in their work yet have the normal human finite capacity to endure feelings of helplessness, to knowingly place an animal in harm's way and to suffer the pain of loss. And it is equally challenging for those who must manage the delicate balance of allowing for such sadness as will arise in the course of tending to research animals and at the same time reviving commitment to the work that for most technicians is at the start, rewarding.

The enormity of the issue is reflected in emotions ranging from sadness and anger to despair, anxiety, headaches, sleeplessness, overeating, rage, feeling derailed—and in turnover rates. Even

those who firmly believe that suffering in the name of biomedical progress is righteous and are prepared for the emotional storm nevertheless struggle mightily when the sadness comes.

For this piece I spoke with four experienced managers about how they are addressing compassion fatigue. Here are their reports.

Make it Public

The *Welcome Wall* includes pictures of employees, announcing the part they play in the facility, and a photograph of a personal pet or the animals for whom they are responsible.

The Center for Comparative Medicine (CCM) at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of America's top performing hospitals, is in Boston, where there are fifty-one institutions of higher education including Brandeis and Harvard. So it is not surprising that when animal care staff started showing signs of compassion fatigue, CCM managers widened opportunity to learn, apply what they learned, and grow in the job. After all, the drives to learn and grow are hard wired, so what else would you need than the chance to become a member in good standing in a community of professionals?

“Recognition,” Donna Jarrell, DVM and CCM's Director told me. “We failed to look at the equally powerful drive, the need for

acknowledgement. So it's not just knowing you did the job as well as you could - even as well as it could be done."

With characteristic openness, energy, and commitment, Donna and her team embraced the notion of approval and set about systematically planning for respectful, dignified recognition of animal care staff. They used a twelve-question survey developed by the Gallup Consulting group. The questions do not mention job duties and responsibilities; rather they ask about the experience of the job: do you matter? are your goals aligned with that of the organization and people? are you able to do the best job possible? do you feel close to people at work? are you recognized? are you appreciated?

Based on the survey results, here are some ways CCM recognizes employees.

- Job responsibilities expand as the employees progress from research animal technician 1, to research animal specialist 2, to team leader.
- As they move through the steps, promotions are publicized and celebrated.
- Staff are compensated for obtaining AALAS ALAT and LAT certifications.
- The "CARE" (Committee for Appreciation, Recognition, and Education) group was created to support departmental activities.
- There is a Welcome Wall. Here there are pictures of employees, announcing the part played in the facility and a photograph with a personal pet or the animals for whom they are responsible.

Donna told me that if she could make just one suggestion for those trying to help employees combat compassion fatigue, it would be this: be present. Commend people for their work face to face. Let them know that they matter to you, to the facility and to the industry. That, she said, might make all the difference.

Provide a Career Path

We are animal caretakers and we are here to make the best for these animals as long as they live. That is my mission.
-- Kajsa Noaksson Chief Animal Care Technician, Department of Comparative Medicine, Karolinska Institutet

At the Karolinska Institutet in Stockholm, Sweden, Animal Care Technician is the gateway to a career of increasing responsibility and ultimately a specialty—for instance species-specific animal behavior, research protocol, team leadership, and surgery. Each specialty holds education and training prerequisites though ideas and action proposals come from anywhere and everyone's ideas are thoughtfully assessed.

Brun Ulfhake, Professor of Anatomy
Director Comparative Medicine at Karolinska Institutet

“I don't want anyone to feel, or to be, anonymous,” Brun Ulfhake, Professor of Anatomy, Director Comparative Medicine at Karolinska Institutet told me. “With a presence, with a voice, with a sense of control, responsibility, acceptance, dependable relationships, the promise of a future and education and training that will prepare them for success, people develop confidence in their ability to do their best work and to progress. And they stay.”

Work in small animal care teams supports a focus on employee development, local decision making and long-term retention. Within the team people raise possibilities for improvement, enhancement, enrichment, overhaul; they express concerns, share positive and difficult experiences, and are of help to one another. When problems arise, all team members are tasked to develop solutions in a timely way. When a new idea proves fruitful the Team Lead shares with the Chief Technician who disseminates ideas for the greater good.

“This experience of long-term association brings a camaraderie, a safe place, and a wonderful atmosphere,” Professor Ulfhake explained. “And since we hope everyone will have the confidence to exchange ideas with colleagues from around the world everyone is asked to learn, and to speak in, English.”

There is a flow of information and relationship among all concerned with a study. Care staff are informed about the purpose of the study, the research animals' species specific behavior patterns, and what to expect. Sometimes an animal care team does the experiment.

Inevitably there are strains, both physical and emotional and work can be repetitive. When necessary, technicians take paid time to exercise and regroup and the Institute subsidizes the cost of gym membership. Everyone has one salaried hour a week to spend as he or she wishes on the likes of exercise, reflection, or study.

“This culture—where ideas originate everywhere, where people know one another as individuals, where we learn what matters to one another, where each person's talents unfold in the course of taking responsibility and making choices—this culture takes time to build,” Dr. Ulfhake continued. “And there are challenges in the form of some hard realities. Animals must die. People may need time away. Not every idea sees the light of day. This is where the team steps in. The team helps people stay positive, stay encouraged, stay engaged and stay with us on the job.”

I asked Professor Ulfhake what it takes to develop and manage policies and practices that are almost perfectly aligned to basic human drives. He said that local decision making keeps things efficient, and that he'd learned a lot from the Toyota

management innovations—Philosophy, Process, People & Partners and Problem Solving. But I think it's at once simpler and more profound than that. I think the Department is an exemplar learning organization, in very large part because the top manager is a generous, welcoming person who himself lives a vibrant learning life.

Create Safe Spaces to Share

Dr. Sylvia Singletary, DVM, Director of Animal Facilities and Attending Veterinarian at the City University of New York Advanced Science Research Center

“This generation has been raised to be sensitive; to recognize that animals are sentient. And in some ways, the progress we've made ensuring the welfare of research animals, the commitment to providing opportunities for species-specific behavior and the focus on enrichment—all have brought today's generation of animal technicians in close touch with an animal in distress. The technicians not only respect the animal's right to the best possible life; they recognize the animal’s pain and distress, and as managers, we can't ignore the stress this causes.

“So we talk a lot, together, about our emotional ties to the animals and research objectives. We talk about the pleasure of taking a dog out for exercise, and about seeing a young rat or

mouse pups as they develop. People become animated talking about the joy, and the wonders of species specific behavior. I encourage opportunities for safe spaces to decompress, reset emotional buttons, and deepen connections."

Address Grief and Guilt

Dr. Rickey Lucket, Laboratory Animal Facilities Manager at the College of Veterinary Medicine, North Carolina State University

"Virtually everyone respects and values the animals who are giving their lives to further scientific knowledge that hopefully leads to cures," Dr. Luckett says. "Nevertheless the act and fact of sacrifice is traumatic.

"However, though the distress is entirely normal, unfortunately so is the effect of grief, which is so often guilt. Guilt can push people to take on more than they can handle. They may come in early, stay late, driven to provide that extra effort of emotional care to the living. Furthermore, behind the guilt there is often anxiety or anger which the affected person may not recognize."

Dr. Luckett said that this mix of powerful emotions almost always engenders a stormy backlash.

“There's so much confusion, both overt and subconscious. Animal technicians and animal caretakers are universally animal lovers, so they are bound to have pets. That means at work they put animals in harm's way while at home they are on the lookout to keep pets from harm’s way. And there are more individual issues that arise—philosophical and religious questions. Do animals have souls, or not? Who is right about that?

“When confusion reigns attitudes change; people argue, come in late or just stay home. Compounding the situation, everyone has different thresholds and the issues are different for each person and at different times in each person's life.

“So a big part of my job is leading the way in expressing what may be difficult for my staff members to say or for others to hear, and making sure staff members are recognized for their contribution to the greater good.

Discuss Shared Experiences

“When managers and supervisors express the feelings their staff experience, there's a shared experience not only of pain but of compassion, and there's a bond that creates trust. People cry. Managers and supervisors must not shy away at these times. Silent companionship and expression of understanding go a long way to helping the individual accept and continue. This is not grief counseling; this is simple human compassion. We work in teams and we share details of each new study. People may opt in or out. There are no negative consequences.

Allow People to Shine Among Their Peers

“There was a time when people here moved in a career progression stepwise with a raise at each step. Not now. So we make every effort to raise the profile of excellent work. People win awards at national meetings, at pot luck suppers, via bulletin boards. We aim to boost morale through respect and standing, so we invite award winners to take on the role of teaching others, including investigators, about the animal, species specific behavior and the animal's life cycle.”

Technicians Train Investigators

“Building on that foundation many of our technicians deliver training to our investigators. They are tasked with delivering important information about the animals' characteristics or procedures. Their involvement may increase their job satisfaction and offset some of the more trying aspects of the job,” Dr. Singletary added.

“So we're optimistic. PI's no longer think of the animal care staff as cage cleaners. Research personnel recognize that the animal care staff are among the best trained in the business and that in addition they are whole people, strong and confident in their knowledge and abilities.”

“Hopefully, your article will raise a debate,” Dr. Ulfhake wrote to me. “This is a debate we are having in Europe to raise both the standards and rewards in lab animal care-taking. The ultimate goal is that high quality work in facilities will improve significance and reproducibility of science based on the use of lab animals. This is an important incentive I repeat over and over again to all involved in the care and use of lab animals.”

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For more on compassion fatigue, and to see the results of an April 2015 survey on this topic, to go www.alnmag.com/articles/2015/06/dealing-with-compassion-fatigue.

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http://www.alnmag.com/articles/2015/07/overcoming-compassion-fatigue-biomedical-lab?