

Pushing Back When Cyberbullies Attack: A True Story

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Review platforms and social media sites allow people to share their experiences (whether good, bad, or indifferent); however, when clients take negative feedback too far, it can cause feelings of helplessness, isolation, and lack of safety in veterinary staff.


A Reputation on the Line

In August 2021, Lindsay Ruland, DVM, CEO and Chief of Medicine at Emergency Veterinary Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, noticed a sudden and unusual influx of email alerts as hundreds of negative reviews began pouring in from multiple platforms. At the time, Dr. Ruland's clinic was the highest-ranked emergency clinic in the state based on organic reviews.

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Dr. Ruland soon learned a client who had visited the clinic one day prior had posted videos to a popular social media site accusing the clinic of animal abuse, calling Dr. Ruland and her staff *murderers*, and threatening to throw incendiary devices into the clinic.

A disturbing trend: Veterinary Cyberbullying



Staff reviewed the clinic's video footage and patient records and determined the client had previously presented her cat 2 days after accidental marijuana ingestion. The patient was determined to be stable on primary and secondary triage, so more critical patients were prioritized. After waiting 45 minutes, the client left without seeing a clinician.

The client's boyfriend then posted 3 negative reviews across multiple platforms. As with any case of negative feedback, Dr. Ruland and her team planned to reach out to the client but were met with a wave of hundreds of one-star reviews before they had a chance to do so.

“To see the reputation of something you've worked so hard to build crumble before your eyes from fake reviews is scary, sad, and confusing,” said Dr. Ruland. “There's a fear of, ‘will this destroy my clinic and my team?’ It's my family's livelihood. I remember I almost passed out; I looked at myself in the reflection of the computer screen, and my face was so white. I don't think there's anything that can mentally prepare you for something like this. You feel like you're drowning, and you're not sure where to start.”

Effects of the Cyberbullying Attack

Fear spread within the clinic as insults and threats of violence came in via website comments and phone calls, taking a toll on staff morale.

“We were afraid of opening the doors to give patients to their owners. We were afraid to answer the phone because we didn't know if it would be an actual emergency or another person calling us murderers. The phone lines were clogged with these phone calls, and we had quite a few emergency situations in which clients weren't able get through on the phone.”

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The clinic added additional security measures and protocols (eg, key card access, using the buddy system when entering and leaving the clinic), but there was still a significant

weight on staff and clients. Staff were even afraid to wear clothes with the company logo in public.

Dr. Ruland and her staff are working to remove the false reviews. They estimate nearly 700 remain posted.

Pursuing Legal Action

Dr. Ruland contacted law enforcement immediately after seeing the client's videos and comments threatening violence. After months of pursuing civil charges for defamation, Dr. Ruland was granted a temporary restraining order against the client. A stipulated order and settlement agreement parameters were then approved by the court, including a retraction video and a written statement.

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The poster of the video was ultimately arrested and faced criminal charges. Dr. Ruland and her team accepted a plea deal including probation and mental health support, which Dr. Ruland greatly supported.

"I can't excuse her behavior, but I also can't dismiss it," Dr. Ruland said. "The impact of cyberbullying on mental health in the veterinary profession must be acknowledged, but the mental health of the bully can't be ignored either. For the client to receive mental health support was important to me."

The emergency clinic lost over \$100,000 that will likely never be recouped, but Dr. Ruland still sees the civil and criminal charges as justice.

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"This happens too often in this profession, and there are too many clinicians who commit suicide over issues like this. We've lost good people. It's not about the money. I want to set a precedent so other clinicians can see there's some hope and they can get through it. That was why we pushed forward," Dr. Ruland added. "It allowed me to clear our name as a business and my name as a business owner, but I think, more importantly, it set a precedent."

The Mental Health Toll

Mental illness and suicide rates continue to be areas of major concern in veterinary medicine. A recent study found one in 11 early-career veterinarians (ie, <5 years of experience) had severe psychological distress and emotional turbulence manifested by depressive and anxious symptoms.¹

One in 6 clinicians has considered suicide, with suicide rates estimated to be at least 4 times higher in the veterinary profession than the general US population.^{2,3} One retrospective study showed that >3% of veterinarians died from suicide.⁴

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- [Reducing Suicide Risk in the Veterinary Profession](#)
- [Racing for Veterinary Mental Health Awareness](#)
- [Impact of Workplace Factors on Veterinary Mental Health](#)
- [Taking a Break: Difficult but Necessary](#)

“I’ve personally known 3 veterinarians who committed suicide for various reasons,” said Dr. Ruland, “and it just hits you to the core when you lose somebody again. So it was very important to me to make sure to at least do my part.”

Advice for Clinicians

Dr. Ruland’s advice for those who find themselves in a situation like hers is to not be afraid to contact the authorities and to have someone you trust record the evidence (eg, social media posts, comments) rather than doing it yourself.

“It’s important for us to be aware of and collect the evidence,” she said, “but when the comments pertain to you, it can be emotionally intense.”

“When clients belittle, threaten, or verbally abuse a staff member, we decide those clients would be better served elsewhere,” Dr. Ruland said, “Showing our team we care about them as individuals has fostered an environment where they can develop their own resiliency. This becomes a collective resiliency when facing something traumatic.”

Although nothing can truly prepare a clinic for a cyberbullying attack, Dr. Ruland recommended ensuring safety plans are in place, staff are informed of safety protocols, and, if possible, a legal firm is on standby.

Dr. Ruland had reputation management help from a marketing company her clinic already employed. The company helped monitor the clinic’s social media and online reviews, working with staff to respond to client feedback.

During the attack, the marketing company was able to track the IP addresses of users who left one-star reviews to identify those reviews not made by real clients, helping build Dr. Ruland’s civil case.

Reputation management companies can help clinics manage their reviews and social media presence. In cases of cyberbullying, they can step in to take control of the situation (see **Suggested Reading**).

For those experiencing cyberbullying, Dr. Ruland wants them to know it does get better.

“For any clinician going through this, I hope they can see there’s a light at the end of the tunnel. It may seem as though you’re in a dark place, but you will come out of it and be stronger on the other side.”

References

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2. American Veterinary Medical Association. Study: 1 in 6 veterinarians have considered suicide. AVMA. Published March 18, 2015. Accessed February 2024. www.avma.org/javma-news/2015-04-01/study-1-6-veterinarians-have-considered-suicide
3. Bartram DJ, Baldwin DS. Veterinary surgeons and suicide: influences, opportunities and research directions. *Vet Rec*. 2008;162(2):36-40. doi:10.1136/vr.162.2.36
4. Tomasi SE, Fechter-Leggett ED, Edwards NT, Reddish AD, Crosby AE, Nett RJ. Suicide among veterinarians in the United States from 1979 through 2015. *J Am Vet Med Assoc*. 2019;254(1):104-112. doi:10.2460/javma.254.1.104

Suggested Reading

- Social media and cyberbullying: a reputation management series. AVMA. Accessed February 2024. www.avma.org/resources-tools/practice-management/reputation/social-media-cyberbullying-reputation-management

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For global readers, a calculator to convert laboratory values, dosages, and other measurements to SI units [can be found here](#).

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