

Isn't it time we had our own veterinary union?

Dear editor,

This letter is in response to a number of articles that have appeared in various sections of the veterinary press during the past couple of years regarding possible causes of, and remedies for, the high incidence of suicide among vets.

It is paradoxical that according to the *RCVS 2006 Survey of the Profession* (the latest of the type), although a big number of vets agreed with the statement that veterinary work was "stressful", the greatest majority agreed to the fact that it was "enjoyable". Yet vets have the highest rate of suicide in any profession in Britain. The explanations given in many articles do not explain this paradox.

I think the root cause of the problem is the poor employment and working conditions of the vets. Most vets work without a proper employment contract; if there is one, it is often there to protect an employer's interests. Vets are vastly underpaid. There is no standard salary structure and no arrangement or guarantee for increments, leading to stagnation and frustration in the wake of unabated demands on high performance and efficiency.

Vets work strenuous, long hours. For most vets, there is no reward for hard work. Legal right to an hour's lunch break and two 15-minute tea breaks in a long, working day (generally exceeding 10 hours) is not applicable to vets, as they never work fast enough to earn such breaks. Most veterinary practices are cramped, unventilated, unhealthy work environments (excluding the reception areas). I have seen vets have to compete for space on the settee in the staff room with the boss' dogs.

No one would talk about such issues. Even the RCVS did not dare to include salaries and working conditions in its so-called *Survey of the Profession*. The reason is that most of those who are in commanding positions, thronging the various veterinary professional bodies in the country, are usually employers, owners or partners of veterinary practices – those who can afford the luxury of earning while not working. They know the real cause of the trouble, but they would obviously not want to talk about the real issues.

They would rather let the sleeping dog lie and project vets' lack of training to cope with stress, or possible poor psychological make-up of vets, or negative experiences of "putting animals to sleep" as causes of the problem. So far, they have been very successful in creating a smoke screen.

It is nice to see funds and websites being developed to help vets who are on the slippery slope or, sadly, already at the deeper end, not to speak of those who have lost it all.

But what is being done to investigate and address the real causes of the tragic problem? I think, as it stands now, nothing is going to happen to reverse the trend.

Who could address the problem? I don't think there is currently an establishment in our profession to deal with such issues. The RCVS is there mainly to safeguard members of the public from vets, which it is doing quite enthusiastically. Dealing with the employment issues of vets is not a mandate for the RCVS; therefore, it is unrealistic to look at the RCVS with any expectations in this regard. BSAVA, in my opinion, is more a pomp-and-show organisation, and best for providing a platform for academicians and commercial organisations rather than for dealing with the serious issues troubling small animal vets. I am not a member of BVA, but, looking from outside, I would consider it to be no different from BSAVA with regard to the core issues confronting the common vet.

Not much is going to change unless vets speak up and unite together under a different umbrella for this purpose. I think the time is nigh to set up a British veterinary union to address the issues that threaten our very existence.

Yours faithfully,

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