

Is it not time RCVS was more accountable?

Dear editor,

I am writing in response to letters by Shams Mir ("Isn't it time we had our own veterinary union?", June 2 issue), Eamon McAllister ("Is low election turnout vote of no confidence?", June 9 issue) and several other letters, from which it is clear that members may feel very far removed from their RCVS in London.

While applying for jobs in the UK, I specifically flew to London to register at the RCVS. I had underestimated the costs of UK public transport and arrived at Belgravia House £15 short of the registration fee. I pleaded to be allowed to participate in the ceremony, but I was told to come back the next month and sent home again. This gave me the distinct impression that I was dealing with an organisation that valued itself over its members.

Since then, I have lived in the UK for more than 10 years and I've come to love the island dearly. One of its aspects that keeps surprising me, though, is how undemocratic Westminster politics is: a one-party government can time the call for an election to suit its own probability of being re-elected and is, for the four or five years in between elections, only held accountable for its actions how and when it chooses to be (the Hutton Inquiry springs to mind). Voters can no longer be persuaded that voting makes a difference and the turnout drops with every election. Unfortunately, there are strong parallels between the proceedings at Westminster and its neighbours at Belgravia House.

Once a year, members are given the opportunity to vote for a few new members on the council and the rest of the year the RCVS appears to retreat into a little ivory tower, in a world of its own. The two other times of the year the electorate is in contact with the organisation, of which it is not a member by choice, is when it is summoned to pay a substantial amount of money and when the annual report falls on the doormat.

In my view, the majority of members' subscription fees goes towards the process of policing members, while they can read in the latest annual financial overview that the RCVS' accumulated funds once again have risen, from £6.5m to £7m this time. It is not apparently clear to members to what purpose their organisation should get richer and richer, who decides what the money will be spent on, and why their subscription fees have to keep going up.

For example, in a previous report, members read about the acquisition of a flat in London "for guests of the RCVS". Had anyone ever asked members whether that was really something they intended their money to be spent on?

Meanwhile, the RCVS offers its members a credit card. It is not made clear to them how this works exactly, but, quite bizarrely, it seems as if the RCVS tries to lend members their own money back at 15.9 per cent APR to fund the RCVS Trust.

Is it not to be expected that the electorate feels removed from its RCVS, to say the least? Even those who feel they should take the little bit of annual influence they do have seriously, and vote, have only the flimsiest of flimsy manifestos to go on. This hardly convinces them that voting is crucial. In the most recent election, only one candidate put several clearly outlined strategic points in his manifesto (and, as far as I can see, he was not elected).

A general lack of transparency makes it difficult for members to understand why the RCVS chooses to get involved in some matters, yet not to exist when others come to light?

For example, why was tail docking a hot RCVS topic for years while the whole 2001 foot-and-mouth crisis passed by seemingly without a comment? Why does that not come under "to safeguard the health and welfare of animals committed to veterinary care through the regulation of the educational, ethical and clinical standards of the veterinary profession?" Is a "code of conduct" not especially helpful in times of crisis?

When these sort of things are pointed out to it, the RCVS is normally at pains to state that it is just a regulator and not there to represent the profession (like the BVA).

But how can you state not to represent the profession when your mandate is "to act as an impartial source of informed opinion on animal health and welfare issues and their interaction with human health?". Should the interpretation of "impartial source of informed opinion" be "the opinion of the institute RCVS, based in London, including those who the council chooses to listen to, but excluding all other members?". Surely not? Maybe most members of the RCVS completely fail to understand their organisation. Perhaps that means that the RCVS should make itself known a bit more clearly still?

Maybe it is even time for an open and honest debate about exactly what an MRCVS would like its RCVS, the only organisation all UK vets are members of, to do and what they would like it not to do? However, reading the RCVS General Administration Bye-Laws 2002, members do not have any powers to challenge the RCVS mandate, or the interpretation of that mandate, and such a debate would have to be instigated from the top down.

The real debate is not what is possible under the current mandate, but which direction the RCVS should take in the near future, and how it can involve members in its decision making.

Do we want a Royal College that the current members feel proud to be part of, or do we just perpetuate an organisation largely unchanged since the start of the 20th century?

I believe it is now time for the RCVS to stop defending its position and to start an open conversation; it should become less "those at Belgravia House" and a bit more the sum of its members.

Yours faithfully,

JAN VAN DIJK, DVM, PhD, MRCVS,

19 Alexandra Road,

Mold,

Flintshire CH7 1HJ.

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