

Charting low points of our profession

Dear editor,

In his reply to Jan van Dijk's comments (June 23 issue), RCVS president Bob Moore (now senior vice-president) gave the usual adequate defence and explanation of the college's functions (June 30 issue). It is regrettable that Mr van Dijk's first encounter with the college was both frosty and negative, however long ago, as first impressions mean a lot. Mr van Dijk continues with analytical criticism of the manifestos of RCVS council candidates, which more often tell us about past achievements rather than future intentions – except to serve the college and the profession to the best of their ability. It bodes well that a European graduate who has settled in this country feels sufficiently motivated to comment on the faults. Those who are educated in Britain have grown up with such faults, and often have come to accept them as normal, as we are unable to make meaningful comparisons.

To continue, I share Mr van Dijk's criticism of council over its extended sitting on the fence over the cosmetic docking of puppy dogs' tails, and I endorse the condemnation of its guidance on kidney transplantation in cats, as expressed elsewhere by others. It weakens the authority of the disciplinary committee when college council fails to give a strong ethical lead to the whole profession.

However, I can certainly state that in the past few years, the college has become much less remote and more user friendly. Regional question times had a poor start, but have now become really useful and well-attended gatherings, while a "Meet the RCVS" day in London is to be thoroughly recommended. Perhaps we may look forward to "Meet the BVA" days being held concurrently in future years? On a practical note, one does not have to stay in expensive hotels, as the Youth Hostel Association maintains an excellent chain of secure and friendly accommodation around the UK's capital city.

Returning to Dr Moore's letter, I have to point out that before, during and after the debacle of the foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) outbreak in 2001, our college was institutionally slow to grasp the full extent of the unfolding tragedy in rural Britain. Although many individuals spoke out, council was deterred from debating the issues for reasons that were never fully explained. Eventually, a debate was held "in camera", after which council members voted for a public inquiry (although not on the lines of the expensive and lengthy Philips inquiry into BSE). This decision was hijacked by press officials for Prime Minister Tony Blair, who hastily and, I feel, deceitfully stated to the media that "the Royal College does not want a public inquiry". This effectively scuppered the college's own press statement, which was ignored by the media. This was another historic low point and the end of any meaningful or significant role for our college.

The disciplinary committee later received around 30 formal complaints, investigation of which – for various reasons – had lengthy delays. Eventually, after the elapse of more than two years, a whitewash report was produced that exonerated all those accused of misconduct – yet another historic low point for our profession and our college. It should be noted that complainants were not seeking to harass or pillory the accused, they were merely seeking *justice*, which is often not the same as the rule or misrule of law. I know; I was there. I had complained against the entire animal welfare team of the SVS, based at Page Street, where circumstantial evidence later had vague, but unproven, links to a veterinary suicide.

Fast forward to 2006, when in mid-March a most useful FMD conference was held in Manchester. Although poorly attended, this holistic get-together combined good veterinary science with artistic, literary, poetic and sociological impacts of the FMD epidemic on already fragile rural communities. Later that month, and on the exact fifth anniversary of the announcement of the illegal contiguous 3km cull, a symbolic wreath was laid at the Animals at War Memorial in London's Park Lane. This received no publicity, but a simultaneous ceremony was held at the Great Orton airfield burial site in Cumbria (since landscaped and renamed Watchtree), where another wreath was laid by individuals connected with the area's livestock industry, and suitable prayers were led by a Buddhist monk. The latter event received good coverage by regional radio and local press, and was appreciated by Cumbrian livestock farmers.

I still find it strange that although our college claims to apply the same rules of conduct equally to all its members, it appears that only those in the front line of clinical practice, who are exposed daily to an ever-more discerning and demanding public, become the subject of complaints to the disciplinary committee. Can it really be true that only those employed in Government service are enabled and empowered to indulge in the traditional and time-honoured procedures of covering their backs, or passing the buck? In real-time UK veterinary life, there is only one place where the buck should stop, and that is at the door of the RCVS disciplinary committee. Period.

Yours faithfully,

NORMAN W LESLIE, BA, MVB, MRCVS,
55 Cambridge Avenue,
Marton-in-Cleveland,
Middlesbrough TS7 8EG.

VT 38(35):46
15.9.08