

# Who wants a veterinary union?

**THE story so far ... Dr Shams Mir graduated in India at Mathura University, not far from the Taj Mahal (in Agra – not your local takeaway) in 1984. He has been on the RCVS Register since July 2002 and, after a few locums, was employed at the PDSA Petaid Hospital in Huyton, Liverpool, since 2003.**

A letter from Dr Mir appeared in another veterinary publication on 2nd June this year with the heading, "Isn't it time we had our own veterinary union?"

It was inspired by reports of vets having the highest suicide rate of all the professions in the UK.

Dr Mir blamed "vets' poor employment and working conditions,

being vastly underpaid" with no salary structure nor increment guarantees. He claimed this led to "stagnation and frustration in the wake of unabated demands on high performance and efficiency".

He acknowledged that the RCVS has no mandate to deal with employment issues. The BSAVA he dismissed as a "pomp-and-show organisation, providing a platform for academicians and commercial organisations rather than dealing with the serious problems

troubling small animal vets".

He is not a BVA member but "looking from outside" considers it is like the BSAVA on core issues confronting the common vet.

He ended by suggesting setting up a British Veterinary Union to address the issues that "threaten our very existence".

## What should we make of that?

Dr Mir might well take encouragement from the experiences of those who have seen more of veterinary life than he has. Working, as he does, for the largest employer of practising vets, he may well be less aware of what is happening at the grass roots and unaware of the young vets who seem to be content with their lot.

Having attended every BSAVA congress since 1963 I have observed little sign of a Dickensian penury among the younger graduates as the years passed by. One does notice that there seem to be more delegates under 30 years old than in the past but that may reflect an overall increased attendance.

I worked for one vet for my first six months after graduation and not being exactly happy moved to a practice where I stayed for four years. My employer was a gem; he told me at interview that there were no prospects of partnership and salary would increase by £1 a week every 12 months (the initial salary was £12 a week with house and car).

We worked 70 hours a week and had at least one half day a week off. I worked hard and was surprised to discover my salary increased every six months instead of 12. It was not easy but in those days all assistants had the same kind of workload. The moral is that if you grin and bear it, stress and all, you can be appreciated.

## What can a union do that you cannot do for yourself?

Perhaps a union would have more chance of influencing terms of employment with practices with rather more employees. I doubt if any assistant in a practice with six or fewer assistants would find a union a significant influence.

It is clear that those practices with higher profitability can afford higher salaries, thus lowering incidence of stress and happier employees. A less efficiently managed practice may be unable to afford higher salaries.

During my 18 years in industry I recall one of my lab technicians seeking a salary increase. My department head dealt with it

effectively. He promised him a good reference if he could find a job with higher pay. He did not – and stayed!

## The subsequent correspondence

■ The SPVS president observed that many of Dr Mir's points were addressed by the society, adding that the majority of vets found practice enjoyable; then Catherine Goldie wrote that if the RCVS could not broaden its scope to encompass his areas of concern she supported his union.

■ Dr Mir wrote again (published on 14th July), failing to appreciate that the RCVS is restricted to activities enshrined in the Veterinary Surgeons Act, namely in the public interest and not the profession. He criticised the BVA (of which he is not a member!) for ignoring the problem, apparently being unaware of the VBF, the Veterinary Surgeon's Health Support Programme and Vet Helpline, not to mention the relatively recent Young Vet Network and the Mentoring Initiative the BVA started for new graduates – all based on addressing the welfare of members of the profession most at risk.

■ An anonymous vet (28th July) of 20 years standing, sadly disillusioned and in complete agreement with Dr

Mir, was awaiting outraged responses with eagerness. I honestly feel sorry for him or her. In the same issue Ron Lowe supported SPVS in countering Dr Mir's demeaning of its role.

■ Another anonymous vet (also of 20 years standing)

wrote on 18th November of his desire to change and retrain – a common symptom of the climacteric. He supported the union. He should have done what I did, do the other job first (years four to 22 as a vet) and then return to practice. Both were enjoyable!

## And finally...

What is really new? It is over 20 years since I first read a paper in *The Lancet* on high suicide rates in vets – and wrote a column on it. Our profession is a cross section of society so perhaps we should expect increased demoralisation. God help us if the recession is as bad as it is forecast. Unions will not do much good then!

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*



**MIKE NELSON**  
wonders about the call for a new body to represent the UK's veterinary surgeons

## Is another organisation needed?

DOES the profession need a British Veterinary Union "to address the issues that threaten our very existence", as Dr Shams Mir suggests.

The British Veterinary Association (BVA) describes itself as "the national representative body for the veterinary profession", helping members fulfil their professional roles. It also claims to be "the voice of the British veterinary profession"

and the association's website adds: "In promoting and supporting the interests of our members, and the animals under their care, we are committed to developing and maintaining channels of communication not least with government, parliamentarians and the media."

The BVA is really, or supposed to be, the profession's union, in the same way that the British Dental Association and the British Medical Association are the representative bodies for dentists and doctors respectively. But unlike the BDA and the BMA, in recent years "the voice of the British veterinary profession" has been somewhat muted.

Where it used to court the media assiduously, the association now pretty much leaves it up to media representatives to make contact if they wish to know something. The regular, packed and informative press conferences, led by the officers, came to

an abrupt end for no apparent reason almost a decade ago and the BVA hasn't considered it necessary to meet the press since then. The media now frequently go

to more communicative sources for information – and generally end up less well informed.

Lobbying goes on behind the scenes with parliamentarians and others, but even some of the BVA's honorary members or

associates in Westminster are not sure what the association wants from them. Some are eager to help but are rarely approached. The BVA's own publications give little help.

The association has certainly stepped up efforts in recent years to involve and provide support for young graduates and also supports the VBF and others providing the sort of help which Dr Mirs appears to want – but he, like considerable numbers of veterinary surgeons practising in the UK, does not belong to the BVA.

Would a new organisation attract more members or do a better job? The answer is no. Could the BVA do a better job? The answer is yes. It is an organisation that has been too inward looking for far too long. It is time to move on and be the body it should be, acting effectively and speaking out on behalf of the British veterinary profession.

**VETERINARY Practice**  
believes the BVA could and should do more as the profession's union