

It's time vet employee voices were also heard

Dear editor,

It may not be by chance alone that interest in 24-hour emergency cover coincides with an imminent vote on a new European Working Time Directive (WTD). In the article from the November 17 issue, three veterinarians came out in warm support of 24-hour cover. What did all three have in common? They were owners of veterinary businesses of course. In the same article, we read that the RCVS is frequently reminded by members that the profession is proud to offer the 24-hour service. Partners owning veterinary practices may indeed be heard saying such things from time to time. But I wonder how many veterinary assistants have reminded the RCVS of their pride in 24-hour cover in the past few months? Assistants accept the need for out-of-hours work, and that it is supposed to be part of the job, but they normally feel burdened by it. Why? Because they are in no way compensated for their efforts and sleepless nights. Only a few years ago, I worked on a two-in-five on call, and weekend, rota. The farms were up to an hour's drive away, and when you were called out it would cost you half of your night. Many assistants have asked to be compensated for extra hours, but have been refused point blank, so are doing all the work on a salary of around £25,000. If practice partners feel so dedicated to doing their own out-of-hours work, it is about time they started to compensate their assistants accordingly, whether in time in lieu or financially. The real question should not be "do we want to keep the 24-hour service?" but "how can we provide the 24-hour service while ensuring all workers are kept healthy, happy and sane?"

Working the hours we do, without time compensation, is illegal. However, the solution to that "problem" is in sight: new European law (WTD) proposals want to make it easier for employers to comply by hollowing out the rights of their employees. No wonder employers are over the moon. Speaking on the issue, the then-president of the BVA (Nick Blayney) acknowledged that the working hour patterns of the majority of veterinary surgeons working in practice didn't currently comply with legislation. He therefore welcomed the new WTD proposals with great enthusiasm (August 4 issue). Somehow, Mr Blayney even managed to see the structural ignoring of employment rights in veterinary practices as "a reflection of the standards that the profession is prepared to set". In the same article, a SPVS representative was quick to add her feelings of delight to the mix. Neither the BVA nor SPVS mentioned the possible consequences for the other proportion of vets in this country – veterinary assistants. It would have made sense if, in the past few years, the BVA and SPVS had done their best to ensure veterinary employment complied with the law. Instead, they have just waited for the law to be changed. Would both organisations have stood by and done nothing for years if it had concerned any other matter affecting practice income? Annually, assistant members of the BVA pay £130 to £200 in membership fees while those also wishing to join SPVS pay £20 to £118 on top. To me, this, added to the stiff RCVS annual fee, seems a lot of money to pay for not being properly represented.

The pattern emerging is that, on matters that concern employees in the first instance, employees are chronically not heard while employers always are. It is time employees in veterinary practice united. Within the current set up this is not going to happen, so I therefore support calls by Shams Mir for a British veterinary union.

Yours faithfully,

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