

# Why a veterinary union is needed

IN his column in the January issue, Mike Nelson writes that it is over 20 years ago since a paper describing high suicide rates amongst vets appeared in *The Lancet*. Mr Nelson appears to conclude from this that we should simply accept it as a fact that our profession is, and always has been, disproportionately represented in terms of mental health problems.

I would argue that the statistics in *The Lancet* presented back then underline my point that the veterinary workplace still does not seem to be a healthy environment to be in and that change is very urgently needed.

If "our profession is a cross section of society" and we therefore "should expect increased demoralization", how come, in the 21st century, the suicide rate within the profession is four times that of the other part of "society"?

When people work in a particular environment for a long time, they begin to lose sight of any flaws within that environment. They may also become convinced that the way things have always been done is the only way, which stalls the process of change and improvement. However, continuing change is necessary for progress.

As significant change is less likely to emerge from inside, today's forward-looking large companies and organisations are regularly seen to recruit executives from different backgrounds, often with no or little experience of the concerned area, to induce what they call "fresh blood" into their organisations.

On the above lines, some would perhaps argue that a vet approaching retirement age or already retired may not be in a position to appreciate the problems of younger generations of

vets and hence not best qualified to comment on the need for change. Mr Nelson clearly does not seem to think that I am qualified to do so either.

However, I feel that it might just be possible that people with wider experience in different environments, who come in fresh, and listen to other people, may easily pick up the flaws in the system and recommend a change. Eventually, it is beneficial to concentrate more on listening to a speaker rather than looking at him. I realise not all of my

observations are highly palatable but I feel it is important that somebody speaks out.

Whether I am a member of any organisations I may criticise in the process is neither here nor there. By Mr Nelson's logic it would not be fair for Conservatives to criticise a Labour Government because they did not vote for it!

If we openly compare our working conditions and terms of employment with any other professionals or any other employed workers in the UK for that matter, we have to come to the conclusion that we are significantly worse off. These matters cannot simply be brushed aside by stating how appalling working conditions used to be 30 years ago.

## Is this what we want?

"If you grin and bear it, stress and all, you can be appreciated," Mr Nelson writes. Is this really how we would like to think about our working lives in the 21st century? Do we have to work 70 hours a week because it has always been that way? And what if most of us do not want to?

Where can we turn to when confronted with an employer who, like Mr Nelson advocates, tells us they will rather write us a reference after we have had to ask for a pay rise ourselves? How long do we have to continue writing anonymous letters to veterinary periodicals?

At least until the next paper on the state of the profession is published in *The Lancet* perhaps.

In order to bring about a change, we can be quite powerless as individuals. But together we can make a difference. We need a voice to



**Dr SHAMS MIR**  
argues that change  
is needed, regardless  
of who calls for it

Shams Mir, BVSc&AH, DrMedVet, MVSc, MRCVS, graduated from India in 1985 and worked as assistant professor of veterinary medicine in Kashmir where he won the state's first ever Young Scientist Award. Some time after completing his doctoral studies in immunology from Germany in 1997 he worked for a short period for DEFRA. He has since been closely associated with or working in small animal practices in the UK.

## Body needed 'to guard our rights'

Mike Nelson's column last month, headed "Who wants a veterinary union?", prompted more readers than usual to respond, nearly all of them calling for a new organisation to be established. Several scolded Mr Nelson for his references to Dr Mir's background and VP for publishing them. Among other comments were a number from veterinary surgeons who outlined bad experiences and wished to preserve their anonymity.

One vet, in her 40s, said she loved her job but remained an assistant with no prospect of partnership or practice ownership. "Life is hard," she wrote, "and the rewards are few. It is my experience that I work longer hours than most of my employers (contrary to at least one published letter I have read) and I sadly believe that much of the profession is governed by people who have one large income or no family commitments, and do not understand the reality of my life.

"In the past 10 years I have been sacked twice for things I haven't done. After the first dismissal I discovered that I was the fourth female vet to have been summarily dismissed from the practice in only a few years. It was, I believe, the inaction of my predecessors that allowed my subsequent dismissal. So I have decided to once again fight my corner, partly to protect other employees from the same fate.

"I joined a union as a last resort, but when I recently had cause to ask for their advice I was told that as they were so busy and that I wasn't a member of a large organisation I was not considered a priority, and nobody ever bothered to ring me back. So I have decided to cancel that membership. It does make it all the more important to have a professional body set up to guard our rights.

"I went to a local CPD event in the summer and met a vet with five years' experience. Of the six friends that she qualified with, four had already left the profession and the fifth was considering her options.

"I don't suppose vets are the only people who suffer with poor employment rights and political apathy. I doubt, however, that there are many other professions who work as hard as we do and put up with such a poor quality of life."

represent us all, which we don't have – as yet.

In contrast to Mr Nelson's suggestions, a union does not have to necessarily deal with individual practices to be effective. A union can do powerful work by flagging up issues, campaigning for change, educating the employees and employers regarding their rights and responsibilities.

The mandate of the proposed union is envisaged to be much wider than Mr Nelson might contemplate. It will look after the welfare of vets as personnel and as professionals, regardless of their employment status. It is expected that a detailed article entitled "Why we need a union for vets" will appear in another veterinary publication shortly. This article will elaborate on the objectives and functioning of the proposed union and, hopefully, alleviate any doubts and fears in this regard.

"Would a new organisation attract more members or do a better job?"

[than BVA], the editorial comment alongside Nelson's column asks? I guess this depends on how you define the job. Currently, the BVA's mandate is as vague as its functioning and certainly does not include anything to ensure or encourage veterinary practices to improve the working

conditions for vets and uphold rules of employment law, for example.

## Incapable of changing

Due to its constitutional limitations, compounded by potential conflict of interest at the level of councillors, BVA is inherently incapable of radically changing its function with regards to the protection of employers. Therefore, it is an unrealistic demand on BVA to act as the "profession's union".

"God help us if the recession is as bad as it

is forecast," Mr Nelson writes. God, however, is known to help those who help themselves. Vets urgently need to unite in order to bring about a change long overdue in the British veterinary profession, change being the source of life.

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