

'Time to create a new organisation..'

SINCE the publication of my letter calling for creation of a union for vets (*Veterinary Times*, 2nd June 2008), I have received a rising stream of e-mails, letters and phone calls from colleagues across the country offering support.

The interest in the subject is also reflected by the unprecedented and continuing series of letters published in the veterinary press. Subsequent to the publication of an article in this regard in its January issue, this magazine was "inundated with responses" and "almost universally in favour" of the union as portrayed in its February issue.

While the idea of the union is still in the process of being unfurled in *Veterinary Times*, there appears to be some misgivings which need addressing.

Some colleagues have pre-emptively started to brand it as "a

union for employees".

There is absolutely no doubt that the proposed union would, with its full strength, defend the rights of employed veterinary surgeons, but as I pointed out

in last month's issue of *Veterinary Practice*, according to my vision the mandate of the union would be much wider than what the conventional wisdom can contemplate at this stage.

In essence, the union will look after the welfare of *all* vets as personnel and as professionals regardless of their status of employment, and all vets with

unconditional commitment to upholding the law of the land, the code of the RCVS and ethics of the profession in their respective roles would be welcome to join.

Another apprehension expressed is that the union will "split the membership" of organisations like the

BVA and SPVS, which wrongly implies that the union is going to be a divisive factor in the profession. Such fears may be natural but they are illogical and unfounded.

As the proposed union would primarily commit to its objectives the areas of concern for which the existing organisations have set themselves no mandate and are inherently incapable of dealing with such issues, there is no reason that the agenda of the union would clash with that of any other organisation.

The union would, in principle, be supportive to the existing professional bodies and will fill a crucial gap in the profession. Therefore, rather than being divisive, the union will indeed serve as a unifying force for the profession.

Are we a small profession?

Some allege that we are a "small profession" and hence we do not need yet another organisation: this is an untenable argument. A profession with over 16,000 strong membership of

working veterinary surgeons and about 7,500 nurses, not to speak of the numbers of trainee vets and nurses and other ancillary staff, cannot be called a small profession.

Even if the profession was to be considered small, does it mean the people working for it cannot be given the right to have an organisation to look after their welfare? We are not small but a scattered profession in need of a proper system of internal watch and regulation.

Calling ourselves a "self-regulating profession" under the present circumstances is a myth. If we are, how do we organise that self-regulation? Remember, the RCVS regulates us as professionals and not as a profession.

Any sort of regulation would demand at least some organisation of the units. Is there anything that binds our veterinary practices together other than the RCVS' directory of practices?

There is so much animosity amongst veterinary practices that it is hard to get



Dr SHAMS MIR believes the misgivings about the proposed union are unjustified

The union will fill a crucial gap in the profession ... and will serve as a unifying force...



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What our readers state...

MANY more comments on the proposed union have come in since the last issue of *Veterinary Practice*, the vast majority supporting the proposals and giving reasons why. A considerable

number have expressed dissatisfaction with the BVA. As last time, most correspondents have asked us not to publish their names.

There follows a small selection of

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a town's vets for an evening together. On this, though, I would love to be proved wrong. The insidious stress, tensions and frustrations run high in the profession at all levels. It may be worth bearing in mind that the victims of drug addiction, mental ill health and suicides are not just restricted to employees alone. We are all affected, perhaps not quite equally.

High-level dealings

Our existing veterinary organisations are vertically orientated, trying to reach the skies. Their sights appear to be fixed only on high-level veterinary politics. They appear to deal with nothing less than parliamentarians, their lordships, the government ministries and the European and world organisations.

Rightly so, I would say. It is another thing that their effectiveness is sometimes seen with suspicion.

But it would not be fair to discredit them for their efforts and achievements.

But, we also need an organisation that would be horizontally orientated, which would reach out to help us on the ground and be accessible and ready when we need help. We need a voice when we feel like shouting.

The problems faced by our nursing staff are perhaps no less and no more obscure than those of the vets and deserve equal attention. Once a union for vets has been set up, it will not be difficult to incorporate our nursing staff into the organisation, if they so wish.

The response to the call for creation of a union is the writing on the wall for the profession. It is time that we leave behind our fears and join hands to create a new organisation to help us look after ourselves and our future.

extracts from the letters and e-mails received.

We'll start with a letter written directly to Mike Nelson (*author of Nelson's column*) from a female graduate of the late 1960s, which perhaps opens up a wider debate: "One of the problems of today's new graduates is that, unlike previous generations, they mainly come from salaried, not entrepreneurial backgrounds. They therefore lack the instinctive knowledge of the difference between turnover and profit ... the lack of significant practice background, especially at managerial level, amongst their teachers is no help and this may contribute to an unjustified sense of ill-usage."

Long overdue

Norman Leslie of Middlesbrough wrote: "Dr Shams Mir is advocating and explaining the need for a British Veterinary Union. I would like to state that I view this as a long overdue and necessary step in the evolution of our great profession.

"It will not be divisive, but should rather be seen as complementary to existing institutions, which for a variety of reasons are unable to adequately and completely fulfil such an ambitious, necessary, and worthy role. *Fortitudine vincimus* – by endurance we conquer!"

Another correspondent (the only female vet in a practice) wrote: "I'd like to add my name to the ever growing list of people in favour of a union. I have thought about the need for this for a while.

"My list of complaints from my current practice is rather long. I have been there for over six years in a mixed practice with three partners. I was given a contract of employment, but on closer scrutiny this appears to be designed to protect the partners only."

She went on to talk about problems both before and during pregnancy, with no risk assessments made "and I had to fight the whole way through to get the partners to understand that a lot of veterinary work simply isn't suitable for pregnant women (I'm talking about risks of injuries, zoonoses, x-rays, etc.).

"There was an extreme pressure from the partners to do more, and if I refused work this was questioned. As I have always liked to work hard, I found it very stressful to be constantly questioned."

Later she learned that a junior male vet was receiving a higher salary, despite doing the same work and having joined the practice after her, but her objections were brushed aside. She states that she had to seek legal advice to get her holiday entitlements.

"I am now at the stage where I have

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