

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

Time for a new organisation – from page 27

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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had my children and I should be able to return to practice as a valuable asset to them. However, I am feeling quite nervous about it as I have hardly done any CPD since I started six years ago.

"Ever since I got pregnant all my requests to go to courses were refused (even though it said in my contract I was allowed). There is no communication between vets in the practice – hence no learning from colleagues either. Most likely I will try to get another job now.

"Having had a union that could offer support and actually be able to help in these disputes with the employers would have helped me a lot. I tried contacting the BVA in one instant, but they were of no help other than telling me that I was right, but there was nothing they could do about it.

"I believe it is important to fight your corner and stand by your rights. I also happen to love the work I do."

Tribunal

Another e-mailed: "I would totally support the formation of a union. I am a 'not so young' veterinary assistant and I am actually having to take my veterinary employer to an employment tribunal to get justice. It is very hard and time-consuming to wade through the paperwork for this by oneself, and I realise that a union would be able to

assist and support me ... except there isn't one!

"I used to work for a partnership, but it was taken over by a very large limited company which has underpaid me for a number of years. Since the head office is the other side of the country, and they do not answer e-mails or phone calls, I have had to resort to other measures.

"I have not found the BVA helpful. Please form a union, and I will join."

No contract

"I have been in practice two-and-a-half years and have yet to sign a contract," a female vet reported. "On pointing out to my employer that it was a legal requirement they drafted one; it was a joke:

1. they asked for me to sign out of the work time directive;
2. they would take no responsibility for any traffic accidents had in work hours, no matter what on call duties had been covered previously;
3. the contract rota was for a 60 hour week not including out of hours;
4. it gave the practice permission to increase the number of weekends worked with three weeks notice and no increase in pay;
5. it also stated that I could not work within 10 miles of the practice catchment area for one year; and

6. maternity leave would be addressed if and when needed only.

"The onus was then on me, they having completed their side of the bargain, it was up to me to sign it. I did sign it and followed it up with a letter of resignation.

"I am now locuming, an area of veterinary practice that needs a lot more support than any other. Lone vets on their own, supposedly self employed (but whether you can truly register as such is debatable) often in understaffed areas with questionable veterinary practice.

"Who was there to support me when one employer suddenly decided to pay

less than the agreed rate 'because the weekend was quieter than I expected'? Despite a high standard of work.

"Where's the legislation enforcement for young female vets, answering their own mobile calls to unknown clients, at night, with no tracking system or way of registering where they have gone or who they are going to meet? Who will know if they are in trouble in or out of signal area? Do we really have to wait for an indescribable incident to happen – it would be so easy!

"If there was a union, I would sign up straight away! Really, why has it taken so long?"

In brief...

■ "I'm sorry that people are having to call for a union to be set up to help them through their problems but I can understand why. These things shouldn't be happening in a small profession like ours. My only way out of a situation where I was clearly being exploited was to move practices. That may not be an option for everyone." – a male who graduated three years ago.

■ "I would certainly join a union if a suitable one existed. I don't see any point in joining the BVA; the only benefits I can see are the *Record* and *In Practice* and these are always available to read in the practice anyway." – a male who graduated four years ago.

■ "Count me in! The BVA is trying to get its act together and is certainly doing more for us 'recent' graduates but it won't ever be able to deal effectively with employment issues. Only a union set up specifically to do that will be any good." – a female who graduated six years ago.

Further comments can be e-mailed to editor@veterinary-practice.com.

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