

Time for open debate on employment issues?

Dear editor,

I would like to thank Richard Hillman and Jon Herrod-Taylor for taking the time to respond (February 9 issue) to my letter (January 12 issue). In my letter, I flagged up the fact that, when it comes to matters concerning employment rights, the voices of veterinary assistants are chronically not heard. As, over the years, I have spoken to many assistants who were unhappy with their terms of employment, I have often wondered why we do not hear these matters discussed openly more often. My view is that the current veterinary establishment does not like people asking difficult questions. Those who do are pictured as frustrated people who do not understand what veterinary life is all about, who can't be bothered to serve on councils of existing bodies and who get their facts wrong. Meanwhile, amid a lot of pedantic rhetoric, the real issues are side stepped. "Put up with it or leave" seems to be the credo dealing with most employment matters.

I do not write because I feel hard done by or want to better myself. I would like to reassure both Mr Hillman and Mr Herrod-Taylor that I am not frustrated at all. In fact, I have never been more happy in my working life. The only reason for this is that I have always moved on as soon as I was no longer happy. However, I know many people who find the prospect of starting a different life somewhere else too daunting to even contemplate. Others are restricted to finding work within a certain radius of their partner's workplace, or have children at a nearby school. To tell these people to shut up or leave when they ask questions is, I think, nothing less than bullying. It is also short sighted. Has anyone ever measured the costs of constantly recruiting and training new staff, or clients' attitudes towards invariably seeing a new surgeon when they come into a surgery?

Mr Hillman tells us that SPVS has constantly worked to further the joint objectives of both employers and employees. To me, this does not sit comfortably with his strong conviction that full enforcement of Working Time Regulations (WTR) would have to result in a "substantial reduction in assistant salaries". Only in the veterinary workplace would an employer say to his employees: "I currently do not want to know about employment laws, but if I am forced to adopt any regulations, I'm going to charge you for it." Mr Hillman's justification for not wanting "wholesale pedantic WTR implementation" is even more baffling: "Many assistants already work below 35 hours a week." So, if "many" people adhere to certain laws, we can scrap them? Firstly, I would like to know where Mr Hillman gets his figures from. Secondly, even if many assistants are currently working less than 35 hours, it would be good to look at the situation of those who are not. Mr Hillman's response has hardly convinced me that SPVS is looking after veterinary assistants.

I very much agree with Mr Herrod-Taylor that it is good to regularly count your blessings. I also agree with him that our profession is perhaps focusing too much on money matters. However, I feel he brings this up in the wrong context. Although charging for services may have been "professionalised" in the past few years, it is unclear how this has benefited assistants. It is grossly unfair to suggest that those having to ask for a pay rise are being too money driven. Mr Herrod-Taylor recalculates what I earned a few years ago to a salary package of between £35,000-£38,000. I would like to point out that not all assistants receive a housing allowance, that they often get very heavily taxed on private use of a company car and that CPD and employer's National Insurance contributions can, of course, not be calculated towards a salary package. In all other businesses, when staff need training to carry out their work, it will be provided by the employer. Strangely enough, in veterinary UK, a CPD allowance is normally seen as a "nice gesture" by the practice.

As the February issue of *Veterinary Practice* suggests, it may be time for employers and employees to engage in an open debate on terms of employment. A "shut up or leave" mentality will only serve to widen existing rifts in thinking between employees and bosses, while new generations of graduates will be less inclined to fit in with employment packages on offer. Communication is always the key but, at present, an open conversation may not be possible. Formation of a union would facilitate a debate likely to bring employers and employees more in line in the longer term, and both would benefit.

Yours faithfully,

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March 30, 2009
Vet Times
Vol 39, No. 12
P. 43