

Richard Hillman's reply to Dr van Dijk's letter

Dear editor,

SPVS believes that neither passive nor aggressive behaviour is appropriate in the workplace. We believe that assertiveness allows parties with apparently conflicting needs and wants to understand each other's point of view and reach mutually beneficial resolutions. So much for the sentiments. We start by organising a veterinary student conference in Lancaster (colloquially known to students as "spivs") where we teach, guide and train students about to enter their final year how to assertively seek the job they want, write their CVs, perform at an interview and negotiate a contract of employment, as well as when to move on. We encourage good employers to appraise employees, reward performance and operate safe and ethical practices. We provide a range of services, such as the annual salary survey, which are available to all members – employer and employee – to help them negotiate pay and conditions from a position of assertive strength.

Yes, there are bad employers, just as there are bad employees, but most poor employers are suboptimal through stress and/or ignorance of a better way. Their sins are mostly of omission, not commission. SPVS encourages, trains and supports these struggling employers to strive to be better through a range of courses and services. The small remainder of poor employers may be exploitative. Some of these practices employ bad employees and, in my opinion, they deserve each other. It seems to me that these practices can only continue if good employees encourage them by not moving on, since, if these employers were not able to recruit, they would wither and die. A union of employed veterinary surgeons (UEVS) would be an aggressive and confrontational step and would not, in my view, improve relations. However, if such a body were created, then SPVS would work with it, just as it does with BVNA, VPMA and other representative bodies for the benefit of our patients and clients.

With regard to the Working Time Regulations (WTR), Dr van Dijk seems unwilling to see employers' views on this. SPVS believes that the spirit of the WTR is well founded and laudable. Employees should have adequate rest periods and not work unreasonable hours. Many employers believed this before the WTR, otherwise why would we have had the proliferation of out-of-hours clinics in the past few years that allowed practices to give rest periods between days and weeks of work? The problem SPVS has with the WTR is, as I previously explained, that the Government did not appreciate the consequences. The EU never intended "time on call but not working" (now referred to as "inactive work") to count towards working time. I believe that some allowance must be made for time on call but not working, as it is not as relaxing as time off call. However, to count it in with working time would mean that practices without access to out-of-hours clinics would have to employ more vets. For Dr van Dijk to not understand how this increased employment would be funded shows a staggering lack of knowledge of practice finances, the like of which is the reason why a UEVS would make relations worse. The facts are that our clients are very resistant to pay the fees that we currently set, so they aren't going to fund Dr van Dijk's inactive work proposals. Practices are remarkably unprofitable once property inflation is removed and practices pay commercial rents.

The only way that his proposals could be funded is by practice owners reducing their incomes. This is a possibility, as many practice owners already operate "lifestyle" practices where they pay themselves the same, or less, than their employees, but continue because they get other rewards from their job. However, if this was forced on all practices, there would be little incentive to invest long term in UK veterinary practice, and the standards of knowledge, equipment and facilities that our clients and patients currently enjoy – and that make the UK such a draw to foreign graduates – would disappear. The other way to fund these proposals would be by a reduction in employee pay. This is the route the NHS has chosen, where training budgets have been slashed and routes to promotion sealed off.

So, let's concentrate on the things that are important to us – the ethics of our profession, the professionalism of all our staff, the service we give to our clients and the welfare of our patients. Let's use the regulations to guide the best practices and punish the worst, but also focus on the spirit of those regulations to help the majority of practices that are doing their best, but could do a little better.

I like the way we do things in the UK. My employees, on the whole, like the way we do things in our practice. If they don't, then they can leave – as there is plenty of choice locally, if they have other commitments, and nationally, if they are less hampered. Let's have a UEVP if you want one, but in the meantime SPVS will continue to work hard to give employees the best that practices can afford.

Yours faithfully,

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