

# Responses to the call for creation of a veterinary union

**SINCE the publication of my first letter calling for creation of a union for veterinary surgeons (in June 2008) a large number of colleagues from across the country e-mailed or wrote to me supporting the idea of the union. There has been another huge surge of such responses following the publication of several articles in this regard in the past three issues of *Veterinary Practice*.**

I will present excerpts from a selection to give readers an idea of the seriousness and magnitude of the problems faced by vets and their dissatisfaction with the existing organisations – in their own words. More will follow.

There are many other vets, whose letters in favour of the idea of the union appeared in various veterinary publications, who have written to me as well. In order to avoid duplication, such letters have not been included.

The contents of the following excerpts have been anonymised to protect the identity of correspondents.

■ Thanks for your article ... I think (even as an owner of three surgeries!) it was accurate for a large percentage of the working vet population. (veterinary surgeon and practice owner from London)

■ Just wanted to let you know I agree 100% with your letter. I am not sure how realistic a veterinary union is, but I agree that the lack of debate is doubtless due to the stranglehold that business owners have on our institutions and publications. (veterinary surgeon from Southampton)

■ Most interesting and you certainly have my support. With regard to a vets' union, the RCVS is totally out of the frame, whilst the BVA is ineffective as by its own admission, it is a professional association and not a union – its greatest weakness and also its greatest strength. I am all for a vets union, but you may find that the organisational skills and the sheer volume of work involved may be too great ... May the force be with you!

(veterinary Surgeon from Middlesbrough)

■ I read your letters ... with interest and in recognition of many of the problems that you describe. Given that the largest single employer of veterinary surgeons in the UK is now a corporate practice, who are happy to take advantage of the RCVS' fudge over working time regulations, I would agree with you that the time is nigh to set up a British Veterinary Union. (veterinary

surgeon from Somerset)

■ I read your article ... and agree totally with your sentiments in regard to forming a veterinary union. As with every practice I have ever had any dealings with, the welfare and rights of veterinary staff are grossly overlooked. I personally work a 47.5 hour week plus 1 in 4 rota and yet have never been asked to sign away my European rights relating to working time. Vets working in different departments of the practice, working hugely different hours and under different conditions, are expected to be happy on the same salary scale.

The list of offences is endless, and these practices somehow manage to escape unscathed (beside a high staff turnover) and you are correct, this is due to there being no organisation interested in the working conditions and welfare of the country's veterinary staff. (veterinary surgeon from York)

■ I would like to congratulate you on your sharp analysis of organisations pretending to represent the veterinary profession. I don't think I can add a lot to it, I just know it is a bit nerve-racking to put your name out there like that so I just want to say I fully agree. It should of course be the RCVS which deals with these things. But who, why and where is the RCVS? ... Unfortunately, BVA is not really in touch with its members either. It cannot speak with a strong voice and does not really seem to know what it wants... You are right, we need to unite and form a body, which speaks with the profession's voice, a force to be reckoned with. (veterinary surgeon from North Wales)

■ I just thought I would e-mail you to register my support for everything you wrote ... I am a small animal

veterinarian with 20-plus years experience ... It seems the only thing that can stem the level of exploitation and abuse prevalent is for employed veterinarians to unite and form a body that adequately supports and represents their needs. (veterinary surgeon from Surrey)

■ I wholly agree with you: my experience in practice was that no organisation within the profession represented the "assistants". We were well aware that any form of complaint would seriously damage our chances of employment in other practices as a result of the "old boys" network and failure to get a decent reference. As far as I was concerned ... there was no one to turn to for redress for appalling management, hours, conditions, pay and in-practice bullying. I don't know how the BVA reckons it is our "union" as I have never (and I am a BVA member) read

anything in the *Vet Record* about pay and conditions of assistants. (veterinary surgeon from London)

■ How refreshing to find someone equally concerned about the employments rights of vets. Having been at the centre of a dispute over issues that were entirely non-clinical I know at first hand how there is absolutely no support from any department to help the individual. I had to pursue my claim for over a year at the cost of tens of thousands of pounds in legal fees and extreme cost to my

mental health via an industrial tribunal... There is no government body to ensure employment rights are adhered to and each individual has to fight their case. I think people are very naive about how the law stands until you are involved. Who has the time and money to fight as an individual especially if your health is affected? I could find no one to help me from the RCVS other than to warn me I must not speak disparagingly about other vets. (veterinary surgeon from Scotland)

■ I resigned from a corporate group earlier this year [2008] because of my dissatisfaction with the management and their practices and lack of transparency (being generous in description!)... The facilities are not bad, although some equipment is out-dated, they scrimp in many areas; the staff are by and large

lovely people, but the morale is not surprisingly poor and turnover of qualified staff substantial. (veterinary surgeon from Bury St Edmonds)

■ I sent (a letter) to all the large veterinary organisations a month ago. The letter was concerning quality of life, employment rights, tribunals, depression and the lack of help from the

veterinary organisations. I'm afraid to say that the response you got from the BVA is exactly what I expected. I believe something drastic needs to be done to protect the rights of the average vet in this country! (veterinary surgeon from Southampton)

■ We as profession need a representative body other than the BVA and RCVS. I write to express my support for your concept of a union for practising vets. (veterinary surgeon and practice owner from County Down)

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## Further comments from readers...

*Veterinary Practice* continues to receive comments from readers on the issue of forming a new union. An edited selection from recent weeks...

■ After three years working for the same practice, my "contract" of employment was hastily presented to me on the eve of the RCVS inspection for our tier 2 status. It mentioned that I would have to "work to the practice's needs" and nothing more. I refused to sign it but it didn't matter anyway as the RCVS inspector didn't ask to see it. So much for the RCVS being interested in our working conditions. Needless to say, I am all for the formation of a union although it may struggle with our expectations of it!

■ I have been trying to avoid contributing to this issue but I feel now that I must also say something as it seems all too common... I know everyone is currently having financial problems but that is no excuse for how people are being treated – this does not happen in other professions. I certainly support the need for a union but must say that I have found ACAS very helpful during my times of difficulty and making my rights clear.

■ I certainly see the need for the implementation of a union. Vets are, Europe wide, the worst paid professionals with the longest working hours, and enormous pressure in work.

■ There is clearly a human relations problem in some practices but it is difficult to be sure just how big the problem is. It could be the tip of an iceberg but until one has a reliable measure of the proportions of assistants who are satisfied with their lot compared to those who are dissatisfied, one cannot really be sure just how big the problem is.

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