

More responses to call for a BVU

IN the April issue I presented excerpts from a selection of e-mails and letters I have received 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.

Here are some more:

■ “I have been following your articles in the veterinary press and I thought I would give you some feedback. This is not as ominous as it sounds; as I have come

round to thinking you are right.

“When I first became aware of the suggestion for a Trade Union I’m afraid I rather dismissed it as the product of a disaffected individual and left it there. However, there has been more and I have read it and thought about it and now think that you are on the right track.

“The points I would like to make are as follows: (1) It is undeniable that if assistant vets get a raw deal, vet nurses get an even worse deal. I think they should be included. (2) The veterinary establishment is about as self-satisfied and reactionary as it is possible to be. When it comes to the 24-hour question we get people writing of vets wanting ‘to shed their 24-hour responsibilities for their patients by hiding behind well meaning EU legislation’.

“The problem here is that practice principals express two views: (a) we all had to do it and there is no reason to change, and (b) vets are different, and practice couldn’t run (profitably) if they employed enough staff to observe the working time directive.

“Until the profession recognises that time on-call is work in the same way as operating, consulting and visiting, and realises that 48 hours a week is more than enough, things will never change. It is true that if vets are to work 48-hour weeks and count on-call hours as a part of that (as I feel they should) then practice finances will be strained. However, it is a human rights issue and if mandated then the practices will have to price their services accordingly.

“I run three vet practices ... I invested with 19 others practices locally to set up a night service, so now we have no on-call duties. The nurses work a 39-hour week and the vets 42. It is profitable

“However, until the profession stops thinking of itself as a special case and

its assistants as drones, the generality will not change. I do not think that argument, even carefully reasoned, logical, respectful argument will succeed.

I think that change will only happen when it is forced upon the profession, and that sadly, a Union is necessary.

“Because practices are to some extent isolated and secretive it will come as a surprise to many that the sort of thing you report goes on. And some of it goes on in those very surprised principal’s practices.

So I wish you every

good fortune, and if I can help I will.” (letter from a London-based veterinary surgeon)

■ “Can I wholeheartedly congratulate you on, and take the opportunity to thank you for, speaking out on behalf of the veterinary profession in calling for a veterinary union. I have been qualified for seven years now, and during my time in practice since qualifying I have sadly progressively become extremely demoralised at the way in which I (and my colleagues at all levels within practice) have been treated as an employee (by several different practices)...

“I completely agree that the RCVS and BVA play no role in enforcing employment laws, and find myself continually questioning why this is the case. I think it is disgraceful that we do not already have a union in place...., and that as a result many of my peers, including myself, have been forced to leave the veterinary profession as the only way of avoiding being exploited and often bullied by our employers, and thus of maintaining our sanity.

“I strongly believe that giving vets a ‘voice’ through creating a union would therefore also result in a reduction in the high level of suicide in our profession which clearly needs to be dealt with – I have personally lost several friends in this way and it cannot continue.

“I have finally, after much reflection, recently left the veterinary profession to work within Government, which I feel very saddened about, but equally feel that I have been left no other choice. I do believe that if a veterinary union was already in existence then I may not have needed to take such extreme measures.

“Unfortunately, as in many other professions, taking employers to an employment tribunal is realistically not an option if you ever want to work in

that profession again... I, as many others, have dedicated a large proportion of my life since a very young age to becoming a veterinary surgeon, and it saddens me greatly that things have deteriorated to this point.

“Many of my friends that are veterinary surgeons are in exactly the same situation as me as employees but unfortunately leaving the profession is not an option for them financially or otherwise, and so I hope for their sakes and for vets around the country that we are successful in creating a veterinary union.

“There is definitely a tendency in this profession not to speak out and rock the boat for fear of risking one’s reputation as an employee, and I think that many vets in addition to myself will be truly grateful for your efforts to bring about change – which really is the only way to progress and improve conditions for the profession as a whole. Many thanks again, I really appreciate everything that you have done regarding this issue.”

In a subsequent e-mail the colleague wrote this:

“I have felt this way about the veterinary profession for several years now but have never previously had the opportunity to express my opinions, and having written this previous letter to you has been extremely therapeutic for me already! (So I am sure, via a union, it would have the same benefit for other vets in potentially even more dire situations).” (e-mails from a London-based veterinary surgeon)

■ “Firstly I would like to applaud Mr Shams Mir in bringing such matters to the veterinary press. I am a recent graduate being six years qualified but have been through a catalogue of the issues raised in the ‘stress at our workplaces’ list... I am really very disillusioned with the workplace. I wanted to be a vet for as long as I can remember, I did a degree to get into vet school, and spent £60,000 of my inheritance training for this!

“There are a lot of vets that need to move forward into modern life, and realise that women not only can but are expected to have a career and a family. The costs of living are high and surviving on one income is not an option any more: just because we have children doesn’t mean our brains drop out and all our aspirations fade away. Whilst on CPD I have spoken to many other vets who have grievances about their work places but feel there is nobody who can or indeed will help. I agree there should be some sort of

veterinary union and have offered my experiences as means of examples of how things really are in practice, and I would be very keen to offer my services to such an organisation.” (e-mail from a Staffordshire-based veterinary surgeon)

■ “I would like to add my support to your call for a union for veterinary surgeons. I am 40 years old... I have had various jobs in practice – mixed for seven years then small animal for the last decade. I have suffered from depression and insomnia for a long time, which I am sure is a consequence of working long hours and being on call.

“I have worked for an emergency OOH clinic for the last two years. This has some advantages over general practice: you get every other week off, you can usually get some sleep on your shift and you pretty much always get away on time. The down side is it can be highly stressful at times, if you are inundated with emergencies and have a kennel full of in-patients. And it ruins your social life and working nights can be bad for your health – both mental and physical as has been shown recently by studies in Denmark.

“I have quit my job and am going to do locum work... I honestly believe it is not possible to be happy and have a proper work/life balance as a full-time vet in practice. Working conditions, though they have improved since I qualified, still leave a lot to be desired.” (e-mail from a Bedfordshire based veterinary surgeon)

■ “I was excited to read that there may be some plans afoot to set up a vet union... I have long argued to my fellow assistants (and veterinary nurses) that they ought to belong to a union. I am a member of Prospect, but consider the choice between unions affiliated to a bunch of war criminals in the

Labour Party versus a non affiliated union which represents workers in the nuclear industry (and hence supports replacing Trident) to be a Hobson’s choice...” (e-mail from Glamorgan-based veterinary surgeon)

■ “As a member of the BVA young graduate support network ... I also have heard the most horrendous stories of employment abuse, which make me very angry indeed. I have four assistants and would never want any of them to feel so undermined or undervalued... I quite agree that some union is needed.” (a veterinary Surgeon from Wales)

More comments on the call for creation of a British veterinary union are most welcome on vets4bvu@hotmail.co.uk.



Dr SHAMS MIR presents a further selection of comments from readers

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