

RCVS' own house is in need of modernisation

Dear editor,

In his letter (April 13 issue), Richard Stephenson attempted to drum up interest and urged members to vote in the forthcoming RCVS council elections. I know that he means well, but there must be reasons, other than those he cites, why 83 per cent of the electorate chooses not to exercise the franchise. Speaking as a general practitioner, some of my own concerns are outlined here.

On the governing council of the RCVS, 16 of the 40 members are appointed and their presence alone must be viewed as a permanent counterweight to any radical re-evaluation. The process whereby six members are elected annually is also unfair and undemocratic, and seems designed to impede political change and preserve the status quo. Therefore, we are denied the opportunity of assessing the performance of council as a whole over a four-year term, and denied the possible option of voting for the removal of all 24 en bloc.

Under the stewardship of this body, we now have a profession in crisis: unhappy, blighted by suicide, riven with factionalism, hidebound by onerous and expensive regulations, and in imminent danger of pricing itself out of the market due to escalating costs. The assumption that the insurance industry will continue to underwrite our fees is based on a shaky premise. The disciplinary process seems increasingly compromised, and frequently challenged, by successful appeals to the privy council. It appears that managers in corporate practice can act with impunity, while the appetite of the RCVS for prohibition, compulsion and inspection engenders fear and loathing.

The recent signing of a memorandum of understanding with the Veterinary Medicines Directorate is incomprehensible. The head of this body – a veterinary surgeon previously employed in the pharmaceutical industry – has, in my view, behaved like a fox in the chicken coop and appears immune to both reason and criticism. It seems absurd that the profession can embrace homoeopathy, yet the use of cheap and effective generic drugs has become a criminal offence.

This is even more frustrating when members are already bound to uphold the highest standards of conduct and probity, which I fail to see reflected anywhere else in society. The profession's practising arm includes some of the country's brightest and best people, who have decided to devote their lives to the care of animals. They are an exceptional human resource and deserve more respect and better government. Yet the RCVS, currently funded by the membership to the tune of more than £5m annually, appears to exist only to protect animals and the public from their depredations.

The college usually manages to deflect and trivialise comment such as this by simply refusing to dignify it with a response, but the future looks dismal unless changes are made to its regulatory architecture. It is ironic that it has failed to recognise that its own house will need modernisation before the electorate is willing to engage. If this long-overdue reform was to be the first item on the agenda when it next asks for a new Veterinary Surgeons Act, it might get a fair hearing and the support that it seeks.

Yours faithfully,

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