

UNION: HOW WOULD IT ALL WORK?

THIS is the final part in my series of three articles regarding proposals for a union for veterinarians in the UK.

In the first part (February 2 issue), I highlighted the background problems that I felt determined the need for a union – I mentioned the hypotheses propagated as the cause of such problems, pointed out the concerning real facts and outlined, under the titles of poor terms of employment and bad working conditions, a range of issues faced by a great majority of vets.

In the second part (April 13 issue), I elaborated on other components of poor working conditions as I perceived them, such as bad working practices, poor staff facilities and other complicating factors. I discussed what I felt were the limitations of existing veterinary organisations in addressing these problems, outlined the consequences and explained why there was a need for an awakening.

In this final part, I would like to submit my vision of the proposed union: what it would be like, what its aims and objectives would be, what it would do for us, how it would relate to existing veterinary bodies and whether it would serve as a potentially divisive, or unifying, force in the profession.

New organisation

A new organisation would address all issues that affect the welfare of vets. It would be fully democratic and completely transparent, and would be closely in touch with its members. It would also be fast acting in nature.

Its members would eventually decide everything about the organisation – its name, formation, objectives, policies and functions. Therefore, the following suggestions are merely my submissions, and not the final word on the proposed new organisation.

SHAMS MIR

BVSc&AH, MVSc, DrMedVet, MRCVS

outlines the potential aims and objectives of a veterinary union, in the final part of his series

Organisation's name

In my view, the new organisation should be called the British Veterinary Union. This name might sound a little less professional to some, but, given the extent and gravity of problems I feel we are faced with, as well as their ugly consequences, I think we need to be honest. We need to clearly indicate the seriousness of our purpose and send a powerful signal that, for the welfare of its members, the profession will speak with a united voice and act unambiguously through the new organisation.

For the purpose of convenience, the term union could be used to describe the proposed new organisation in the following discourse.

Members

My view is that the organisation should be open to *all* domicile practising vets on the RCVS Register of Members, regardless of their status of employment or area of work, who unconditionally commit themselves to upholding the rule of law in their particular role as veterinary professionals. They should express willingness to work towards enhancing the welfare of fellow veterinarians.

Non-practising or retired vets would also be welcome to join as supporting members without a right to vote. Once set up, the union could be expanded to include veterinary nurses.

National council

The members would elect a national council, which would run the affairs of the union. Generally, in matters relating to the entire membership, the council

could not make decisions, but would make recommendations based on consensus, which would then be put to vote by the general body of members.

Local representatives

Based on the division of the country into veterinary localities, the members would appoint local representatives, who would assist the national council in executing welfare programmes for vets in their locality.

Organisation's aims

The union's aim would be to look after the welfare of vets in the UK, addressing all issues that may directly or indirectly affect this. The union would make arrangements and develop programmes to enhance the welfare of vets at the local level. The union would assist other organisations, such as the Veterinary Benevolent Fund (VBF), to look after vets in personal or difficult circumstances. If needed, it might create other arrangements to this effect.

The union would also assist other organisations, such as the RCVS and BVA, where necessary – and as deemed fit by the national council. The union would not divulge itself into promoting the business interests of its members.

Union objectives

The union would have the following well-defined objectives:

- To ensure and enhance the welfare of vets as personnel.
- To safeguard and promote the welfare of vets as professionals.
- To set up and operate supportive welfare programmes for veterinary surgeons.

Activities

The union could carry out work in three areas, outlined below, to fulfil the aims and objectives.

Welfare of vets as personnel: improving terms of employment

- It would create awareness about relevant employment laws, flag up deviations by employers and guide and help vets to adhere to employment laws.
- It would develop a system of accrediting veterinary employers to provide a transparent picture of employers and veterinary practices as workplaces.
- Job contracts meeting all legal requirements would be actively promoted as a necessity.
- It would develop and maintain independent guidelines for a reasonable starting salary for new graduates.

Independent salary surveys would be conducted to enable vets to claim reasonable salaries and increments.

- Awareness of, and full compliance to, working time regulations would be promoted, and reasonable definitions of active and inactive on-call time would be drawn up in partnership with all stakeholders to avoid ambiguity and abuse of such regulations by individual employers.
- It would campaign for clocking of time for vets, so that a proper count of hours worked would be recorded and extra hours worked would be compensated.
- The union would educate employees and employers on the provision of breaks and rest periods at work, and holidays.
- Veterinary practices would be encouraged to create dedicated out-of-hours (OOH) services, or use existing OOH services.
- It would lobby for improved CPD support by employers.
- Guidelines and information would be made available to vets to help them regarding matters of employment.
- It would campaign for flexibility of working hours for female vets with family commitments.

Welfare of vets as personnel: improving working condition

- The union would create awareness about the need for a healthy, safe and dignified working environment for vets. It would develop models and protocols for safe working environments and conditions.
- It would ensure that existing laws were adhered to, and would lobby for any further changes to improve working conditions for vets.
- It would work to motivate employers to improve the facilities for the staff.
- The union would fight against abuse in veterinary practices and would support those at the receiving end of malpractices.



Shams Mir speculates on what a veterinary union could do.

Welfare of vets as professionals

- The union would provide independent guidelines and information to new graduates to help them successfully settle in the profession.
- It would provide the necessary information to help vets prevent litigation against them.
- It would flag up, and lobby against, all professional malpractices in independent veterinary practices, corporate groups and charitable veterinary establishments.
- A union would lobby against any regulations, from any source, that might hinder vets from rendering their services in full compliance with the RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct, other relevant laws of the land and in accordance with professional and moral ethics.
- The union would work to ensure any future Veterinary Surgeons Act met the requirements of all veterinary surgeons.
- It would lobby for an improved and just RCVS disciplinary system.

Supportive welfare arrangements

- The union would create arrangements, such as vets' clubs, and develop programmes to enhance the well-being and social interaction of vets.
- Experts would be consulted to create a pensions model, which would function even if vets frequently changed workplaces.
- The union would provide advice, help and representation to vets in the cases of disputes with employers.
- The union could also provide some advice to vets caught up in civil disputes regarding their professional work.
- The union would provide support to vets going through disciplinary procedures at the RCVS. However, it would respect the RCVS and its ultimate judicial judgement on the case.
- It would support all organisations, like the VBF, that work to help vets in difficulty.
- It might also develop, if

needed, a service to offer counselling and support to vets in need of such help.

Guiding principles

- The union would be a bottom-up democratic organisation that was completely transparent.
- All union activities would comply with the relevant laws, and its activities would chiefly focus on helping to uphold the rule of law in veterinary practices.
- The union would, as far as possible, attempt to achieve its objectives while working from within the profession – thus, essentially, being non-disruptive in nature.

Membership fees

Once the union is officially registered as a charity, vets would initially join free of charge or with some voluntary contributions. After a period of time, the membership fee would depend on what and how much the members would want the union to do for them. At least until a nationally elected council took charge of the union and decided otherwise, all vets working for the union would do so on a voluntary basis, without remuneration. Costs could be kept low by utilising the internet for communication.

Possible apprehensions

New ideas are always met with apprehension. But, I believe, as the actual face of a non-disruptive, friendly and supportive new veterinary union would emerge in the UK, any air of mistrust and fear would quickly dispel. In my view, a better-organised, law-abiding, healthier and happier profession would, in the long run, deliver better results for employees, employers, the animals under our care and our clients.

Unifying, rather than divisive, force

As the union would deal with issues that the existing veterinary bodies were not in a position to address because of constitutional limitations, the union's agenda would be unlikely to cross with

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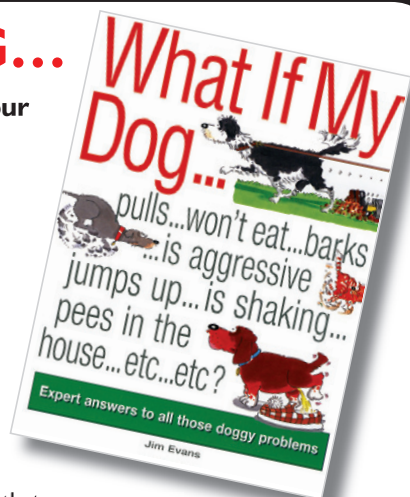
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Ensure marital bliss reigns at home and work

IT is not uncommon for members of practice staff to be married to one another.

Potentially, the impact this could have could be high, not only on other staff, but on the couple. There is also potential for it to have an influence on the smooth running of the practice and the natural balance of staff working relationships.

There are many examples of husbands and wives working together extremely well in the same practice, but there is scope for disharmony.

One of the biggest issues is, perhaps, a perception among staff that couples (in particular, those who are both involved in management) make decisions at home, excluding everyone else.

I am not, for one moment, insinuating that having married couples working together in a practice is a bad thing. Indeed, the empathy between members of a married couple who works together – for example, a vet and a nurse – can be excellent for the practice, creating a good working atmosphere for staff. But there are pitfalls that need to be avoided. It's not just the staff who may have problems, however – it can be just as tricky for the couples, as can be seen from the following examples.

Staff

There are a variety of situations where staff may feel inhibited or unhappy working with a married couple. In many cases, this is due to perception and assumption,

MAGGIE SHILCOCK

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continues her management series with a look at how married couples impact on practice life

rather than reality, but some examples of how they feel are included below:

- "I always feel I have to be careful what I say, because one of our team is married to the practice manager, and I think everything I say will be passed on."

- "Sue obviously knows more than we do about what's going on, because she is married to one of the partners."

- "You have to be so careful what you say about Peter to Jane and Jane to Peter, because they will always defend each other."

Whether real or perceived, staff can have serious worries. In a well-run practice, such worries should not have any foundation, but if staff have not been reassured about how these working relationships operate, it is inevitable that there will be times when the issue of "the couple" comes to the fore.

The couples

It's not all plain sailing for the couples either – far from it. It may seem ideal to work together and to share a common passion. Of course, it can be that way – but they may have difficulty arranging time together or they may be working on different rotas. Members of a married couple may be aware of feel-

ings or tensions caused by their relationship, but have difficulty persuading staff to be open and relaxed about working for or alongside them.

However, one half of a couple may also feel quite isolated. For instance, a nurse married to a partner may not see herself as part of "the staff", while at the same time not feeling quite accepted by the owners. Sitting on the fence, with a foot in both camps, is uncomfortable and undesirable.

Awareness

What is important is that owners and managers are aware of the potential difficulties and watch the dynamics between staff. Managers, in particular, need to listen carefully to what staff say or don't say, and look for signs of discontent.

The practice culture needs to ensure couples are treated in the same way as everyone else in the practice, and this has to be seen to operate by the rest of the staff. So, there needs to be clear lines of responsibility and clear reporting lines, which should not be overstepped, except in exceptional circumstances.

Talking shop at home is inevitable, but can, in itself, be a little dangerous, particularly if the

practice ends up being a couple's only topic of conversation. However, couples also need to be wary of making major, or even minor, policy decisions at home, without staff consultation, and then presenting decisions almost as a fait accompli to staff. It's wise to avoid the "we" word on most occasions.

The decisions may be the right ones, but staff will tend to resent the way they have been made (especially if the "we" word has been used) and it does rather enhance the "them and us" scenario.

Couples must be prepared to accept objective, just and constructive criticism of their other halves, and all personal relationships must remain at

home. When at work, couples must behave as independent individuals if they are to maintain the respect of their working colleagues. At the same time, staff must accept husband and wife relationships – rather than be inhibited by them – be prepared to be accepting and, on occasions, assertive.

From an owner or manager's point of view, the secret is to be aware of potential problems. To be armed is to be forewarned.

There may never be any problems, especially if you already have good working relationships with staff, but you should still be aware of the kind of issues that sometimes arise, and put systems in place to reduce possible problems. ■

those of the existing bodies. The union would be supportive of other organisations, such as the RCVS, BVA, SPVS and BSAVA, in many ways. For example, it could help them with rapid feedback from vets across the country on issues affecting the profession. Therefore, contrary to the fears expressed by some, I suggest an independent union would be a complementary, rather than a divisive, force in the profession.

A union, in close touch with its members, would potentially unite UK vets, regardless of their employment status.

Great opportunity

This proposal offers a unique opportunity for all of us to recognise our problems and failures, appreciate the need for a change and join hands to realise a process of reform that would help us to clear away what I feel are the dark clouds of undue stress, anxiety and depression hanging low over our profession. It would help restore our dignity as members of a great profession and enhance its reputation. In my view, this is an opportunity that the profession should not miss.

New future

I would hope to see vets, both employees and employers, working shoulder to shoulder to realise the vision of a new future that the profession deserves – a future of dignity, fairness, fulfilment, excellence and prosperity for all.

Your contribution

If, after having read the submissions in this series of three articles, you still question the idea of the union, I would be very interested to hear from you.

But should you agree with me that the new organisation would be beneficial for the profession, it is extremely important that you take the trouble of registering your support.

You should not assume that others will create the new organisation for everyone else. Therefore, you can email me on vets4bvuu@hotmail.co.uk to register your support for the cause.

- What do you think? What are your views on Dr Mir's vision for a veterinary union? Do you agree with its suggested role?

Join the debate: have your say now on the issues in this article at www.vetsonline.com ■

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