

# Start made on dealing with employment issues

WOULDN'T you know it! Just as the last issue of *Veterinary Practice* was being printed with some gentle comments about the BVA not doing enough about employment issues, out comes a statement from the association on the very subject along with an "information leaflet" about contracts of employment.

The statement was headed, curiously, "BVA kicks off campaign on written contracts of employment". The subject had actually been kicked off at least a year ago when Dr Shams Mir first went into print about the need for a body to tackle employment problems within the profession.

The BVA reported that it had carried out a survey of the members of its Young Vet Network (YVN) which found that only 76% had a contract of employment, "leaving many exposed and less able to defend themselves should a problem arise during their employment".

More alarmingly, the statement continued, "the survey found that over 40% of recent graduates had been in a job for over six months without a written contract in place; 38% of those had asked for a contract but their employer did not address the issue while 14% did not even ask for a contract knowing that their employer would do nothing about it."

So the YVN has launched a campaign, with the help of the RCVS, the VPMA and the SPVS, to raise awareness about the importance of written contracts of employment, which set out employment rights, responsibilities and duties.

## Welcome – and overdue

It is very much to be welcomed, even if somewhat overdue and, it should be noted, responses to Dr Mir's campaign have indicated that the problem is not restricted to new or young graduates. Many older assistants have been working without proper contracts.

Louisa Rance, senior graduate representative on BVA Council, said: "Evidence was coming through on the YVN forum that a significant proportion of YVN members did not have

written contracts of employment in place. We wanted to do something positive with this information and, through the BVA, are able to run an information campaign promoting the benefits for both the employee and employer of having written contracts in place.

"This is not a finger-pointing exercise, but a concerted effort with a number of other veterinary organisations to improve the situation for all parties."

All OK, as far as it goes. But a better question to have asked would have been, "Do you have a written statement of particulars?" This is the document that has, by law, to be provided to an employee within two months of starting work.

There are 15 "particulars" which must be covered and a few more which can be covered if the employer so wishes.

It is a pretty comprehensive document and covers much of what should be in any contract of employment but it must be written down and the employee must be given a copy. It's the law!

## Stronger stand needed

Both the Royal College and the BVA could and should be taking a much



stronger stand to ensure that practices are meeting legal requirements.

To ensure clarity on the matter, *Veterinary Practice* asked for a definitive statement of the legal requirements from Matthew Clayton of Rickerbys Solicitors, a legal practice with considerable experience of the veterinary profession.

His article, on the following page, should be mandatory reading for all practice principals, partners and managers – as well as assistants and nurses.

## The RSPCA and treatment

"The RSPCA offers cut-price treatment to pet owners who cannot cope with expensive vets' bills." This statement was made on *Sky News* at the end of April, in the course of a report of a 57% increase in the number of abandoned animals. The statement also appeared on the broadcaster's website.

Does that mean that the RSPCA will not offer cut-price treatment to people who can afford vets' bills which are not expensive? Who decides what is expensive?

A section on the charity's website states: "RSPCA companion animal hospitals provide low-cost treatment for animals belonging to people in receipt of certain state benefits, or to those who otherwise cannot afford the fees of a private veterinary surgeon." Is the treatment itself "low cost" or is it that clients are charged very little? Ambiguity creeps in to so much of what this charity says.

It has used the term "expensive" a number of times in the past, the implication being that non-charity veterinary practices are expensive. Other charities are at times similarly disingenuous in their approach.

This isn't an issue which should be rearing its head and there is little evidence of any major problems in the way the charities carry out their work. But it ill behoves them to deride the work of non-charity practices, the vast majority of which offer very good value for money.

## BVA's compass is working again...

IN the slightly truncated version of this column which made it onto the pages of the last issue, mention was made of the BVA's farewell function for Chrissie Nicholls.

It referred to the abrupt end in the 1990s to more than 20 years of outstanding PR activity by the BVA when her wings were brutally clipped (they never recovered); what was not mentioned was that no blame for the long time taken to get things moving again should be laid at the feet of the current officers and the management team/secretariat.

They have been working hard to get things moving again, but to see how the situation came about, and for the benefit of the reader who might not have heard of the catalogue of misfortunes, it is necessary to take a brief look back...

In the latter years of the 20th century, the compass on the bridge of the good ship BVA was somehow damaged and the vessel started to veer off course. While a number of crew members and onlookers issued warnings, the ship sailed into murky waters and, as the new century dawned, a dangerous reef hove into view.

As the vessel ran aground, the commodore and his chief petty officer were cast adrift in a lifeboat, to the relief and joy of several mutinous crew members, and while several others chose to flee the scene, the majority stayed to serve the new captain and his successors. They enlisted the aid of an older and more experienced sea-dog to help re-float and repair the vessel which had suffered damage to both the engine room and the superstructure.

It was slow, painstaking work – hampered by a shortage of funds and know-how about working in choppy waters – to get the vessel ship-shape again and although most of the smaller support vessels stayed nearby, one or two kept their distance.

Soon after the work was commissioned, a State-owned vessel, *Maff*, sank without trace, causing more nervousness, and a rather unreliable second-hand ship, *The Defra*, was brought in to replace it. This was but one of many obstacles encountered.

From time to time an admiralty vessel, *The RCVS*, cut across its bow, coming dangerously close at times before lurching away again. Fortunately, *The BVA* and *The RCVS* are steaming along on roughly parallel courses at present, with the support vessels obediently lined up behind. Calmer waters have been reached, repair work is reported to be nearing completion and a clearer maintenance programme is being worked on.

There is, though, plenty to occupy the officers and crew, with storms on the horizon and pirates not too far away. But at least the compass is working properly once more and it is constantly being checked.



The front of the BVA's leaflet on contracts of employment.