

# Breaking silence but scared of repercussions

IN the April and May issues of this publication, excerpts from some the e-mails and letters received about the proposed British Veterinary Union were presented.

Before some more are presented here, it is worth mentioning that not all responses received can be presented, even in an anonymous format, as many of the vets telling these stories are terrified of potential repercussions.

One recently received story felt the most heart-rending of all. On asking the vet whether we could publish the story in an anonymous format, the

answer (as excerpted) was: "I feel the circumstances of my story mean that it would be immediately identifiable to my work... I fear that if I did something as huge as tell my story ... they really would make my life worse ... if I upset them I will lose a reference and still have the trouble of finding a job ... and fear I would end up out of work.... although I know for the future to change this sort of thing may need to happen.... I am very interested in the whole union however and keen to be kept up to date with things and hopefully this sort of thing is not something that will be with the future of the profession."

Excerpts from a selection of other e-mails:

• "After reading your recent slot in *Veterinary Practice*, I felt I should contact you, after 20 years of being silent... I started working in 1989, accepted £9,000 per year without question, worked almost 24/7 enthusiastically, didn't take any holidays for 12 months, when someone was ill offered to work extra, offered to work the first Christmas, etc., etc.

"Why? Because I thought that was what working in a team was about. No one ever thanked me for the basic effort I put in let alone the extra (work) I volunteered for. No one thanked me for giving a horse client my home number so I could go out to her horse with

tetanus at any time.

"When I finally succumbed to ... and guiltily rang in sick I only heard from my employers via a third party that I should contact them about my

weekend on-call. I asked my doctor to sign me back to work, even though I wasn't fit... so I could work my Sat/Sun on-call and avoid upsetting anyone.

"I continued to work and sleep for the next 12 months, continued to pour heart and soul into every case, every euthanasia left me exhausted (with hindsight, I probably had post viral

disease...). It wouldn't have taken much to give me days off in lieu of the extra (work) I did. It wouldn't have taken much to insist I took the holidays I was entitled to (and) remain physically and mentally healthy.

"What was I afraid off? I was afraid of being told I wasn't needed and not being able to do veterinary work. I once worked out I was working over 100 hours per week and per hour it was less than minimum wage.

"I decided to describe this now, because I have two gorgeous, much loved children ... and now fear one of my children wanting to follow a veterinary career and I can't think of a worse fate for them. So, things do have to change for the benefit of our children and the health of our future veterinary profession."

## Seeking employment elsewhere

■ "I read your articles with great interest; I am fully in support of a union... Unfortunately it is probably too late for me, as I am currently searching for employment outside of the veterinary profession, but I wish to register my support for the union anyway. I am leaving the profession due to unfair treatment, and a general disillusionment with veterinary work. I first left vet work about a year after qualifying, having been bullied by a

senior member of staff in one of the vet schools... I was in hospital with severe depression for two and a half months.

"I was unable to work at all for four years, and then I worked on minimum wage posts for another four years, before returning to being a vet (part-time)... My vet job was reasonable but the hours/pay became an issue after a couple of years as I felt very taken for granted; I was full-time on the OOH rota, but only being paid according to my part-time hours. I moved house ... and job.

"The boss in the new job was a nasty bully to most of the staff, myself included, and also had some very questionable views regarding veterinary medicine/surgery which the staff were expected to follow... She would walk into my consults and take over with no warning, and she would phone clients and change medication/plans that I had prescribed... I am now working part-time as a locum while I hunt for another job...

"I no longer wish to be part of this egocentric profession. I have seen too many lovely, hard-working and intelligent colleagues treated badly, and I am tired of living in a state of constant anxiety with regards to work. I wish you all the best with the union, and I hope that it will really make a difference for the veterinary assistants of the future."

## Forced to sign

■ "I am writing to confirm my support for the creation of a BVU... I have experienced a number of problems in my professional career ... in which a union would have been of much help. The list of problems is long... The one that shocked me most was ... after being employed for a couple of years for a small animal practice I was presented with a contract of employment, which I read and was "forced" to sign. The thing was that this contract was necessary for the practice to continue being an Accredited Practice under the RCVS scheme, so on the day of the inspection I was asked in an angry mood for the signed copy.

"There were a few things I didn't like about the contract. To start with, the salary was wrong ... and there was a clause prohibiting me to work in any other practice in a 10-mile radius if I ever finished my employment on my own accord. I don't even know if this is legally binding, but it would cause a serious problem if I ever decide to finish

my employment with this practice as I now have a family, my partner works in the area and my older child is starting school this year.

"This is just the last example of the problems I faced in the last six years. So, for the future of the profession and the well-being of so many vets I really hope that this project becomes a reality."

## Ridiculous situations

■ "I am appalled by the fear of employed vets to speak up about obviously ridiculous situations. I have been bullied into not publishing a letter about ... and at this moment I am involved in standing up to our principal who beats up unco-operative dogs with brutal force, making the dog and everybody in practice miserable but nobody dares to sign a letter challenging him because he regularly makes life of employees miserable to the point of them leaving.

"And most of us would be scared of being sacked or forced to leave without a reference for the next job. I totally agree that a union approach would bring a quick solution to a lot of the appalling work situations of young employed vets. Good luck, I will certainly join as soon as a union will be formed."

## Depression

■ "I have been following your articles in various publications and completely support your aim to start a vet union. I am a 2002 graduate... I, like many other vets, have had depression (and been to counselling for this) and suffer a lot of stress related to the work I do. I feel for all those people who are in much worse situations with their employers and particularly those who feel stuck in a rut and don't know where to turn. I think it is wonderful that you are working so hard to make this happen when many others want to just sweep the issue under the rug.

"Please don't give up on the idea because you have the support of so many others out there, probably many more people like me too, that have only just found the time to e-mail you, or are thinking about it."

Such stories cannot be allowed to continue to be the part of our future. In order to achieve that, your support is essential. You too can become part of the developing campaign by dropping a line on [vets4bvu@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:vets4bvu@hotmail.co.uk), expressing your support and offering any services you may be able to render.



**Dr SHAMS MIR presents more of the responses to the call for a new body to tackle employment issues**

*I have seen too many lovely, hard-working and intelligent colleagues treated badly, and I am tired of living in a state of constant anxiety with regards to work.*

## Wildlife health strategy for England

DEFRA has published a Wildlife Health Strategy, which is said to complement its Veterinary Surveillance Strategy and Animal Health and Welfare Strategy, to be implemented across England. It aims, says DEFRA, to strengthen collaborations and develop communication networks to increase the knowledge and understanding of both infectious and non-infectious diseases in wildlife.

"It will help guide everyone involved in managing wildlife health to respond in a co-ordinated, appropriate and proportionate way to wildlife disease issues when they arise," the department states.