

# Employment problems: how widespread are they?

**THE clamour for a new body, such as a British Veterinary Union, to tackle grievances of staff in veterinary practices, continues unabated. It continues to be one of the most frequent subjects of e-mails as well as comments reaching VP by other means.**

But just how widespread are the problems? Are those who have reported their experiences to this and other publications, and to Dr Shams Mir who started the ball rolling, revealing the tip of the iceberg or a substantial portion of the structure?

*Veterinary Practice* invited a statistician who has spent much of her career in market research and consumer opinion surveys to go through the correspondence and see if any meaningful conclusions could be drawn.

The problems, as previously reported, fall into four categories:

1. lack of employment contracts or, more important from a legal viewpoint, a lack of the "written statement of particulars", or the provision of documents heavily weighted in the employer's favour;
2. discrimination in the workplace, both in terms of pay (in particular, women being paid less than men for the same job) and treatment;
3. unfair and frequently illegal treatment of pregnant employees (some claim to have been fired for being pregnant) and difficulties with maternity leave and returning to work; and
4. remuneration at less than the statutory national minimum wage rate.

There have also been problems in

securing the statutory level of holiday entitlement and, last but not least, with alleged bullying and harassment.

Most, if not all, of these problems have been around for quite a long time but have not previously been so well documented. Sadly, many of those bringing issues to light have wished to remain anonymous for fear of getting into trouble with their employers or for being branded as trouble-makers and finding it difficult to find alternative employment.

It is also sad that some of the complainants have indicated that they are about to leave the profession – and some have already done so.

## Illegal activity

Our statistician explained that the information provided so far is insufficient to draw accurate conclusions across the profession, but she believes that (subject to a margin of error of plus or minus 10-15% – much wider than in standard polls because of the nature of the data and the way it has been collected) somewhere between 11% and 18% of veterinary practices in the UK may be acting illegally in respect of one or more aspects of employment law.

The greatest number of breaches are in category 1, there are "significant" numbers in categories 2 and 3, but it is impossible as yet to quantify the extent of under-payment (category 4).

There has been no evidence of veterinary assistants being paid less than the national minimum wage; but there is no doubt that a number of nurses are,

although the problem appears to be greatest among junior support staff as well as part-time office staff or receptionists.

The total number of people working in veterinary practices and affected by breaches of employment law could well be in excess of 2,700, the statistician concluded. But she stressed that it had proved very difficult to get a verifiable figure of the total numbers of people employed in practice and the 2,700 was more of an educated guess than a statistical fact.

It does, however, she added, give a reasonable idea of the extent of the problems.

So what now? If everyone affected joined, a new union could be viable and a number of people unaffected by such problems have already indicated a willingness to join as well.

*The Veterinary Record* of 6th June



reported that the BVA's members' services group has been discussing gaps in the association's service provision and "has been examining the services provided by the BVA that would traditionally fall within the remit of a trade union".

The BVA has for many years negotiated the rates for LVIs so it is familiar, in part at least, with union activity. But at the very least it could be encouraging its employer members to adhere to the laws of the land.

The level of law breaking so far revealed is – or should be – unacceptable in this profession.

## How effective are you at motivating others?

A *Keep Britain Working* survey, details of which were published last month, has uncovered some unusual examples of the way employers go about trying to motivate their staff. Among them:

- a charity boss who brought in his hunting rifle and pretended to fire it at staff to make them work harder;
- a boss who made staff clean toilets because she had sacked the cleaners to save money;
- a boss who cut staff hours and pay while boasting about using his bonus to re-decorate his house;
- a public sector boss who advised a worker that people were queuing up for her job;
- a telecoms boss who chanted, "Hit this target, keep your job ... hit this target, keep your job".

According to the survey, more than half the UK's bosses (52%) have got worse at motivating their staff since the recession began. One in three bosses has increased criticism and blaming of others, nearly a third have hidden themselves away, more than one in four have become indifferent, a quarter have pretended that nothing's happening, and 17% have started shouting and raging.

Only one in six has done more to motivate staff since the recession began.

More than half of all workers believe bosses failing to motivate staff lowers productivity, and more than a third think it makes business failure more likely.

The website *KeepBritainWorking.com* has ideas to help bosses improve their motivational skills and also offers a 35% discount on Dale Carnegie's famous book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, on which the survey was based. First published in the 1930s, this book, which is claimed to have helped lead America out of the Great Depression, is now back on top of the UK best-seller lists.

James Reed, founder of the independent campaign, *Keep Britain Working*, says: "Bosses need to realise that they have a huge effect on those around them, and that no matter how they feel, their first responsibility is to do more to motivate staff. This will lead to greater productivity and help people make the most of any new opportunities. As a result it is far more likely that organisations will survive and thrive, create new jobs and keep people working."

## SURVEY

### Thank you for your help and advice

THANK you to the hundreds of readers who responded to the reader survey enclosed with the April issue. You have provided us with a great deal of information and some great ideas for the future.

Among the highlights of the results: 55% of you read issues at work (mainly) and 45% at home; you like the size (magloid) and frequency (monthly); many of you would like more clinical articles (that surprised us) and you appreciate the space given to information on products.

It's clear we have readers in all the main spheres of veterinary activity, though small animal practice naturally predominates (at over 60%); and it appears that the majority of you are under 45. We were surprised and delighted to learn that nearly a third of readers are under 30, particularly as "experts" have told us that very few people under 30 read newspapers or magazines these days.

"Nice, short sharp articles," commented one reader; "Very good, keep it up," said another, and we especially liked: "Glad to have it back – it was missed" and "Much better than it used to be." We were praised for our coverage of current affairs and for "highlighting problems" and "publishing true opinions".

A number of you want more competitions and there were requests for more on all sorts of topics, including farming and nursing.

It will take us a while to work through all the comments, suggestions and criticisms, ranging from mild to trenchant (fortunately not too many of the latter), but work through them we will.

Again, thank you for your time and trouble in responding.

- The winner of the prize draw for those who returned the survey forms is Sarah Pellet of Manchester who gets the £50 worth of M&S vouchers.