

# We have sacrificed our personal lives too long

Dear editor,

I have some sympathy with G A Maxwell (letters; June 8 issue) when in a position of covering out-of-hours (OOH) duty for mixed and large animal practitioners. I can also understand why it must be more difficult to attract new graduates to these posts, as nowadays there is an alternative where night duties do not have to be covered.

I started off working in mixed practice in Somerset for three years. I have worked in a small animal hospital for the past seven years, and we still do all our own OOH work. However, I believe OOH centres are one of the best things to happen to our profession in a long time. I do not know how old Ms Maxwell is, but I find her attitude can be typical of many of the older generation/partners in general practice.

For too long as a profession, we have sacrificed our personal lives at the expense of our job. Our colleagues in the medical profession have been ahead of us for some time and, at last, there is some light at the end of the tunnel for us. My father was a vet who was on call as I grew up, and now I am doing the same, so I have much experience of night work, both first hand and as a family. I also knew the situation when I applied for veterinary school in 1992. However, circumstances have now changed and we must move with the times.

As time goes on, I am finding that I struggle more and more with OOH work. It is very tiring and I find that clients are becoming more demanding and that we are getting busier. Even though we have time off in lieu, this means that vets are often tired when working during the day. I firmly believe that having dedicated vets working nights and days is, without doubt, better for the treatment of the animals concerned. From a personal level, I also want to be able to enjoy time off in the evenings and at weekends, and I do not think this is selfish or unreasonable. Why should we always sacrifice our lives and relationships when it does not have to be this way?

I understand that, initially, clients will not like the change, particularly if more travelling is involved. This is a matter of re-education and being proactive in explaining changes to all your clients. There will be more acceptance if they understand they are going to the equivalent of a hospital to receive specialist care by a vet who is not half asleep, and that staff are on the premises caring for the animal all night. Almost everyone has a car, and 10 miles to drive is not exactly excessive. Some areas even have private ambulance services that will do all the transportation, which is particularly useful in cases where pets are too large or owners are not physically able to move them.

I also totally disagree with Ms Maxwell's statement that "an entire generation of small animal vets is losing vital experience of the type of cases that usually present out of hours". Yes, it would seem that

caesareans and gastric dilatation-volvulus (GDV) cases often occur at night, but that does not mean they are never seen during the day. New graduates will still see lots of these cases working only days, as I know I have, and probably gain much better experience as a result. They would also not be dealing with these challenging problems on their own, or having to drag someone else out of bed to assist. I clearly remember my first GDV case as a new graduate on my own in the middle of the night. This was not a good experience and the mere mention of "torsion" filled me with dread for years afterwards.

While I have sympathy for your predicament, Ms Maxwell, I believe your "old-fashioned concept" of animals under our care is just that. No one is suggesting that we do not provide a service for clients at night – merely that we provide a better one for the animals and keep veterinary assistants happier, healthier and working more efficiently. All the press about a veterinary union and ongoing suicide statistics just seems to highlight that assistants are feeling overworked. I feel we must embrace the fact that we deserve a life out of work. We should not give up on caring for our patients – just start to look after ourselves, and our colleagues, a bit better.

Yours faithfully,

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