

'Strength in numbers' or feeling lonely in the crowd

IN her article entitled "Strength in numbers..." in last month's issue, the president of BVA, Mrs Nicky Paull, interpolates that the "debate in these pages and elsewhere about a veterinary union" reflects that there is "more that can be done" to solve the problems faced by mainstream vets. However, she thinks that the proposed British veterinary union "is not the way forward" because the way BVA supports its members is "very similar to a union".

In view of its constitution and mandate, BVA is not a union nor has it ever sought to be legally recognised as union for the profession. Therefore, it is important to examine this claim.

By definition a trade union is "an organisation of employees, which acts collectively for mutual protection and assistance and is often concerned with wages and conditions of employment".

The claim that the BVA is "similar to a union" would mean that even though it is not a recognised union, it however performs like one and produces the results a union would achieve. But, is there any evidence to prove that case for the BVA?

Legal helpline

The BVA often cites its "legal helpline" as the most important means of helping its members like a union. In this regard it must be remembered that this is not a specialised veterinary employment helpline, and when questioned on employment issues will often suggest that you seek further advice from either ACAS, a solicitor specialising in employment law, or a trade union representative.

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VIKKI MORAN takes issue with the BVA president that the BVA could do the job of the proposed new body

Such legal helplines are provided as benefits in other ways too, for example through house or car insurances. You might even find you are contacting the same people in the same office, through a different helpline number!

Providing representation at disciplinary hearings with employers or at employment tribunals is one of the most important functions of a union. It is quite possible that BVA may have occasionally sent out a representative to mediate between vets and their employers, but how many vets have

BVA represented at employment tribunals? I think the answer would be negative. The fact is that without being a recognised trade union, BVA has no legal standing to make any sort of representation but may pay some goodwill visits.

With regard to BVA's aims of recruiting the Veterinary Association of Arbitration and Jurisprudence (VAAJ), which seems to be primarily involved in the expert witness sector of the profession, to provide a conciliation service for employees and employers, it should be borne in mind such facilities exist in the form of ACAS, which anybody can use free of cost.

Such a service from BVA might well benefit partners of practices in dispute, but for employed vets, reaching a point where conciliation and arbitration is needed means that the employee's position in that environment would be rather untenable. Therefore, such a system is not of particularly great value to employed vets.

There is no doubt that BVA provides guidelines for veterinary employers but such guidelines are already available from a variety of governmental sources, the Business Link for example. But, BVA has no jurisdiction to monitor or enforce implementation of any guidelines it may issue. Therefore, its guidelines lack the teeth to produce any results.

In spite of above limitations, had

BVA indeed been acting as a union for vets, it is surprising that in the wake of mounting criticism on BVA that it has failed the mainstream vets, not many members of BVA or the profession have come forward to testify that they have been helped by BVA so much that they do not feel the need for a union.

Contrary to that, colleagues across the country have shown great support for the proposed union, which the readers of this publication have witnessed in all the issues since the start of the year.

A question of determination

The BVA may see "strength in numbers", but there are too many of us feeling lonely in the crowd of our profession. It is not a question of numbers but of determination to give hope to those who are feeling helpless, show them the way out of their situation and empower them to improve their lives and those around them.

But, in trying to pose as a union, when it is not one by any stretch of the imagination, nor has the legal standing to act as one, BVA appears to be trying to bluff about its true position. It might well be unintentional, but this would reflect BVA's attitude of apathy towards the members of the profession, who have in representation of so many of us allowed their concerns and pains to be made public in the pages of this publication in the past months.

As against the fictional claims of BVA, the proposed British Veterinary Union is going to be a legally recognised organisation with a well-defined aim of looking after the welfare of vets as employees and as professionals, as preliminarily outlined in an article entitled "Union: How would it all work?" (*Veterinary Times*, 18th May 2009).

It would be a proactive organisation primarily working towards continuous internal reformation through education of employers and employees, but it will

also have the legal authority to oversee that veterinary workplaces uphold the law of the land and it will have the ability to stand up for its members to provide them the support and representation needed, ranging from workplace disciplinary procedures to employment tribunals.

It is true that BVA has the infrastructure, an organisation, and "numbers", which it has had for nearly a century. But, if that is all that is needed to bring about a change, then we wouldn't be discussing this subject at all. BVA may well have the structure to take on the issues faced by vets, but what they lack is the teeth, the legal empowerment necessary to make an impact.

Unfortunately, BVA does not have the genetic constitution to grow the teeth and in any event it is too old and too rigid to do so.

Were BVA to really consider obtaining the necessary legal empowerment, which is theoretically unimaginable and practically impossible, the amount of work involved in transforming BVA into a union is fundamentally no different to that of

setting up a new independent BVU.

In spite of all the limitations and deficits, which the proposed union would

fill, BVA is playing an important role in representing the profession to the outside world.

'...too many of us feel lonely in the crowd of our profession.'

Complement BVA

The proposed Union will complement BVA by looking after the internal affairs of the profession. The Union should not, and will not be in competition with BVA. As such the BVA should not feel threatened, but should continue to do what it is good at, representing us to the world – represent our voice, and let the proposed BVU represent us to each other – represent our conscience. Both can work hand in hand for the benefit of the profession.

In view of the above, it is important that rather than trying to beat about the bush with regard to the realities of the profession and problems we are facing, BVA needs to honestly admit its limitations and support the formation of a new, complementary organisation to help improve the welfare of vets.

Vets who are in favour of the idea of the proposed union and want it to become a reality are requested to express their support by dropping a line to Dr Shams Mir on vets4bvuv@hotmail.co.uk and if possible offer any practical help they may be in a position to provide.

Revised practice standards to come into force next year

THE RCVS Practice Standards Group has updated the manual for the Practice Standards Scheme. A draft was put on www.rcvs.org.uk/consultations for a brief consultation period last month.

When launched in 2005, a commitment was made that the standards would not change for five years. The aim is that revised standards will be implemented during 2010.

Jill Nute, chairman of the Practice Standards Group, says that greater emphasis is being placed on clinical outcomes and training. For example, performance review has been introduced for all clinical staff, including the Professional Development Phase for new graduates.

One recommendation is that the "tiers" should be dropped but that categories retain their descriptive names, such as Small Animal General Practice or Equine Veterinary Hospital. Feedback suggested that clients, and the profession, found the tiers to be misleading.

A new format for the manual clarifies the derivation of each standard, so that legislative requirements are distinguished from those required under the RCVS *Guide to Professional Conduct* and those indicated by better practice.

There are now more than 2,350 practice premises under the ambit of the scheme – approximately 50% of the total number of premises in the UK.