

Union could help move profession forward

I'VE watched the debate about a Veterinary Union over the last few months and I can see both sides of the argument. That doesn't mean that I'm sitting on the fence, far from it.

I firmly believe that a Veterinary Union is in the interest of the whole profession, and particularly in the interests of veterinary assistants in practice, many of whom have, for far too long a period, had an especially rough deal.

As the instigator of the debate, Dr Shams Mir has I believe put the argument for such a body in a very eloquent, rational and measured manner. He has not ranted at or berated those currently in positions of power, but has merely stated the facts and given his reasoned and considered views on why things are as they are and what it is that he thinks needs to be changed.

The amount of time that he must already have devoted to the matter should be enough to convince everyone of his sincerity.

I do not intend here to revisit all the pros and cons of a Veterinary Union in detail but should like instead to look at the matter in a wider context.

Owners of practices and the assistants that they employ may have vastly differing views of their roles and responsibilities in a veterinary practice. Salaried employees are unlikely to have the same level of commitment to "the business" as an owner, and if that is not understood and accepted by the owner it can lead to all manner of friction and ill feeling.

As an example, I can well remember in one practice where I worked being told at interview that I would have one half-day off per week in compensation for working one Saturday morning and one whole weekend on a rota of about five vets.

This sounded fine until I discovered that if any vet was on holiday then every other vets' half-day off that week needed to be forfeited to cover the normal weekday rota of consulting and operating at the various clinics. In practice it meant that for about half the year the half-day off per week was a thing of fantasy.

When I drew this to the attention of my "boss" it did not go down well. Where was my commitment to the practice? Why on earth did I feel entitled to overtime payments for the

extra half-day per week when I was expected to work? No amount of discussion enabled us to resolve this difference of opinion and I confess to having acquiesced because in many other respects it was a good job which I enjoyed.

You might, though, be able to see where I was coming from. I could see no benefit to me of working an extra half-day whereas my boss clearly

received five extra hours work and presumably five extra hours profit. That might seem small-minded to some practice owners out there but to a young, principled, self-

righteous vet, it just didn't seem fair.

My point is that if I had belonged to a Union I would have had somewhere to turn and someone to speak to. Someone who had almost certainly dealt with the same or a similar problem before and who could mediate with my employer to hopefully arrive at an amicable solution. I would not have felt completely isolated and as though I were pushing the proverbial excrement up a steep hill.

I guess the great fear of the owners of veterinary practices is that the advent of a Union will mean the start of some sort of veterinary militancy. I think this fear is groundless. Simple membership of a Union is not going to turn previously dedicated, hard-working veterinary assistants into rampant agitators hell bent on undermining the establishment so that they can inherit the earth.

Extended family

Rather, it will provide a sort of "extended family" of support and expertise to which any member can turn when they have a disagreement with their employer. If they turn to the Union at an early stage it will hopefully enable problems to be resolved before positions become entrenched, which could otherwise lead to a miserable, festering situation where everyone feels disgruntled and hard done by. A situation that cannot possibly be conducive to providing the best of animal and client care or the best of service to the business itself.

After all, happy employees are generally hard-working employees and I suspect that if a Union were formed and used to the best advantage by both employee and employer alike, it could help to defuse many a potential area of conflict before the situation became

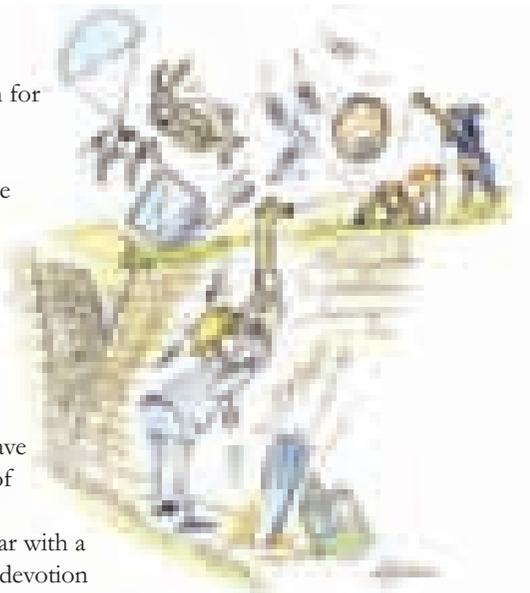
irreconcilable.

In my view there has been for far too long a tendency to a "them and us" antagonism between assistants and practice owners (there are, of course, notable exceptions to this). I can't help thinking that this is created in part by practice owners' sometimes unrealistic expectations of their employees.

Many practice owners I have come across appear to think of their practice as some sort of living, breathing entity, on a par with a child in terms of the level of devotion they are prepared to give to it. Whilst most assistants working in jobs they enjoy will develop and demonstrate a not inconsiderable degree of practice loyalty, they are unlikely to want to invest an equivalent amount of time or energy into it as the owner.

As an analogy, most assistants would be only too pleased to give the practice owner's kids a lift if they were heading in the same direction but would almost certainly object to picking them up from a party at three in the morning, except in the direst of emergencies.

My advice to practice owners is not



to run scared at the thought of a Veterinary Union. Instead, see it as a means of helping to move the veterinary profession forward by challenging some of the antiquated practices that have developed and bringing them up to scratch for the 21st century.

Approached in the right way, I think a Union could bring benefits in lifestyle and job satisfaction to employees and employers alike, and hopefully start to turn back the truly dreadful levels of substance abuse and self-harm that dog our profession today.

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