

Time to bite the bullet

QUALITY of life. Different things to different people. A big question is: Should a fully committed vet have a life outside practice? I believe the answer is an unequivocal "Yes". I would go further. Without a life outside practice I do not believe that it is tenable to maintain a high-quality professional life indefinitely.

We all, I think, agree that life in practice is stressful, but nonetheless for most part rewarding. I think there is an unspoken imperative in practice that it is unprofessional to talk about, never mind insist upon, maintaining a reasonable work-life balance. Commitment means total immersion. I think this is wrong.

For the last 30 years, vet school intake has selected for high intelligence and a proven ability to study. In other countries a psychological assessment is part of the selection process. Given the high profile of the profession over these years it is not surprising that the average undergraduate was a highly intelligent, highly empathic and often highly-strung individual.

Over the same period society has changed and the stereotypical, Herriot-esque new graduate is a thing of the past. Many of today's new graduates are far more intelligent, learned and sensitive than new grads of yore.

Missing the point

If we fail to take this into account, and continue as a profession to romance the five-minute consult, the 20-minute bitch spay, the late night C-sections, the

robust nature of a more primitive era, we miss the point entirely.

Society as a whole has changed. We as a profession must do likewise. What was good enough for us is not good enough for today's graduate, any more than the five-minute consult is good enough for today's clients. Life has changed. Horrible, but true. The dinosaurs got wiped out.

Sooner rather than later, working time regulations will be imposed on us. They are already enshrined in legislation. There has been discussion about what constitutes work and what not. Fortunately, the EU has defined it for us. On call and working is work. On call and not working is time which, when added to working time, must not exceed 60 hours per week.

I don't know where we are with derogations, but sooner or later this will be law if it is not so already. This will make it impossible for someone to work more than about five-and-a-half days and two nights on call a week.

For urban practices with group night services the problem is not acute. But the RCVS, in its given role of protecting the clients, insists we must provide a 24-hour service, and many vets agree.

Where the law insists on 48-hour weeks and no more than 60 including time on-call, a paradigm shift will be necessary where there is no local group. Regardless of the wishes of these practices, something has to change. We either give up the 24-hour commitment and force the RCVS to agree (probably need a union for that) or we price the service to pay for the extra vets.

The charities, being awash with

funds, can staff their night services and observe the WTD, but some practices will struggle. The question, though, is not if, but when, and how.

The upside of this is that if only doing the 60 hours a week (significantly more than the hours regularly worked by the great, non-veterinary majority), a lifestyle results which allows for a life outside practice, and if vets can enjoy a life where exhaustion does not preclude rationalisation and taking stock, a life where normal, healthy friendships and relationships can flourish, a life where hobbies and family and de-stressing fun has a place, maybe fewer of us will commit suicide.

Making sense

Perhaps fewer will leave the profession disillusioned, maybe fewer will be treated for depression. Maybe all of us will be happier. We may even be better vets. It makes sense. But maybe it'll take a union to police it.

Because in some practices it is only done when it has to be done, and will only be done when it is law and the individual vet who is being pressurised to work the old way will have the force of the union behind him when he has to say no.

I do not think it unreasonable to suggest that veterinary student selection should include some psychological assessment, as it does in some other countries. While there continues to be more applicants than places, this would provide at least as good a selection criterion as a purely academic measure.

'Tougher' graduates

I do not, however, mean that to address the problem of veterinary suicide we merely qualify tougher graduates. If the profession is one wherein many more than average suffer depression and commit suicide, then undoubtedly the profession has to change. It is not going to be

Steering group moves to form BVU

AT a meeting in June of a group of veterinary surgeons, including a practice principal and partner, a steering group of five employed vets was set up to press ahead with proposals to form a British Veterinary Union (BVU).

Dr Shams Mir was appointed convenor with Dr Jan van Dijk as general secretary. Recently, David Cuffe, principal of a multi-practice group in London, was added to the steering group.

The first meeting was held on 23rd August when, Dr Mir reports, a number of decisions were made: (1) in the run-up to the formation of the BVU, supporters will co-ordinate and function under a charitable structure, Vets4BVU; (2) veterinary nurses will be represented in the steering group; and (3) the group will take up the offer from the BVA to meet so that potential opportunities of mutual co-operation can be explored.

Dr Mir adds that the names of some members of the steering group are being withheld for the time being "to prevent their potential victimisation".

enough to change the personnel.

It is not an acceptable argument to say that we cannot afford to change. We cannot afford not to. There will undoubtedly be debate about how we should change, for change we will, whether we like it or not.

It will serve all of us better to embrace the societal changes around us and manage our response to them, rather than merely reacting to the inevitable.

Because we exist in a peculiar suspension between the RCVS and the BVA, we are not ideally placed to protect or mobilise the individual. This might well be the first imperative: form a Union which could do both.



DAVE CUFFE believes things have to change for the long-term good of the profession

D.J.C. Cuffe, MVB, MA, MRCVS, is in practice in Clapham, London.

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