

# Union could be catalyst for additional action

Dear editor,

Regarding the various letters that have appeared in the past few months, I support, in principle, Shams Mir's proposals for the British Veterinary Union (BVU). Dr Mir has certainly started something, as he has struck a deep vein of discontent, and he claims to have received much email support from a disillusioned sector of our profession. I disagree with a number of senior members of the profession who have dismissed the idea as divisive. It is clearly not intended to be so, and may only become divisive if it is forced into that position by a dismissive and negative response from our establishments.

In that regard, SPVS' final year seminars at Lancaster are brilliant, but this function ought to be taken on by the veterinary schools with adequate funding and interchanges of students between schools. This would free up SPVS to take on other tasks. Currently, just about the only positive response has been from BVA president Nicky Paull, who is not afraid to think and act outside the box. In my view, the BVA's reincarnation after near meltdown at the turn of the century, and its survival of the apocalyptic crisis of foot-and-mouth disease in 2001, have been remarkable.

The Young Vet Network is an admirable innovation that poses challenges and opportunities to its struggling territorial divisions (branches), some of which predate the BVA in historic terms. One must also question whether the RCVS has let the profession down by allowing unrestricted corporate ownership of clinical practices, whose governance may possibly conflict with the noble ethics of a free, independent, and learned profession. Are veterinarians in industry, and more importantly in Government service, always allowed freedom of ethical conscience and activity? In the latter case, it is a taboo subject that normally remains unspoken.

There have been some interesting letters around the BVU concept, some of which have been analytical, constructive and positive. Bruce Jones (August 24 issue) cautioned against the repetition of past mistakes, but I can recall a historical success from the mid-1970s. After joining the then EEC, inexperienced local veterinary inspectors were needed for certification duties in EEC-approved meat plants. Managers of a multi-site industry were taking advantage of regional variations in MAFF's interpretation of new directives and regulations, so the goalposts were constantly moving.

The BVA's division, the Veterinary Public Health Association (VPHA), had a small membership of academics and senior MAFF officers, but it was set in its ways, moribund, and out of touch. Consequently, in 1975, a small group of involved practitioners met together at the annual seminar of the Association of Meat Inspectors, and founded the non-affiliated Veterinary Meat Hygiene Group under the chairmanship of the late Frank Jagger. Some years of frenetic and fruitful activity followed, and the late Pat Turner, then secretary of the BVA, was most helpful. Eventually, however, the BVA said it could no longer help a non-affiliated group, and so we were encouraged to merge with the VPHA. The late Henry Carter, Frank Jagger and I met at a BVA congress in York; bargaining and horse-trading ensued, and a breakthrough was made. Later meetings thrashed out the details of a merger or takeover of the existing VPHA. The resultant hybrid vigour gave rise to the born-again VPHA, which has since become a strong and growing BVA division (sorry, branch). Archived documentation exists that proves the veracity of this story. Later, I managed to move sideways from clinical practice (for which I was unsuited) into meat hygiene, food safety and public health.

As a self-employed contractor to a district council, and latterly at a large integrated meat plant with the Meat Hygiene Service, I learned many valuable lessons in management, although I had little, if any, formal training. Learning was on the foot, the hoof or the trotter.

More recently, another example may be found in the Veterinary Association for Wildlife Management (VAWM). This originated from the politically incorrect Vets for Hunting, and has since evolved and expanded its activities and interests to a wider field. It has sought recognition as a BVA division, as it meets all the defined criteria. Sadly, it has had a mixed reception from BVA council, and has been turned down by the BVA board. Meanwhile, it continues to actively flourish, and so I hope that, in time, wiser and less prejudiced opinions will prevail. The Round Table motto of "Adopt, adapt, improve" should not be forgotten, and the BVA and its divisions ought to be broad-minded, and large enough, to accommodate many different shades of opinion.

There is a realistic possibility that Dr Mir's BVU will become a catalyst and a spur to greater action by existing bodies. Dr Mir's small band of committed activists have taken on an immense challenge, but I conclude by wishing them every good fortune.

Vincimus fortitudine (by endurance we conquer).

Yours faithfully,

NORMAN W LESLIE, BA, MVB, MRCVS,

55 Cambridge Avenue,

Marton-In-Cleveland,

Middlesbrough TS7 8EG.

VT 39(49):23

14.12.09