

# Shift in power led me to seek union protection

Dear editor,

The corporate takeover of the small animal veterinary sector may well be the greatest change to our profession in our lifetimes. This may not all be bad, but there certainly are consequences – and this letter is intended to provoke discussion and suggest a way forward.

Corporate ownership of a veterinary practice is different from previous models. The ownership is not controlled by the RCVS and its objectives are somewhat different too. Veterinary professionals, as owners of veterinary businesses, always had to balance the difficult equation of animal welfare, owner/client preferences, legal requirements, staff loyalty and the personal profit motive. However, as veterinary professionals, the overriding objective has been regarding animal welfare; the overriding commitment has been to the RCVS' rules. A corporate entity has shareholders remote from the central activities of a business. Animal welfare, staff welfare, client welfare and fulfilling legal requirements are all important to it, but all must, by its very nature, be secondary to its fundamental purpose of providing a financial return on shareholders' investments.

This is a shift in purpose for the small animal veterinary sector, and it is probably, in my opinion, irreversible. Practices bought or created by corporate businesses are unlikely to return to becoming small businesses again. There are advantages – it is likely that legal and regulatory requirements will be better met than in the past. However, I am less sure that the major stakeholders of the sector – the clients, the staff and the patients – will be better off.

What I feel is happening is veterinary employers are becoming more powerful. As a small number of corporate employers dominate the sector, there will be fewer employment choices for employees. Get a bad name with one employer and 20 per cent of the UK's employment market may be lost to you forever. Employment terms and conditions will deteriorate as employers' power increases. It has to be so – increased profits have to come from somewhere.

The corporate practices are going through a period of expansion, setting up new branches and purchasing existing businesses. This must end at some point, and they will enter a time of consolidation. Corporate businesses must always try to make as much money as possible. They will squeeze their employees' employment conditions and pay. In my view, they can do this in a more dispassionate and calculating way than traditional veterinary practices, where the bosses worked alongside their staff and shared many of the same priorities in animal welfare, care for clients and coping with long working hours and emotionally difficult situations.

The power of corporate businesses will grow. What happens when a veterinary professional is caught between the conflicting pressures of animal welfare, staff welfare and corporate profitability? Can the RCVS affect corporate behaviour other than by disciplining the individual veterinary surgeon and RVN members? Will the member stand the pressure of being caught between these powerful bodies?

The power of the employer needs to be matched and balanced by the power of employees. This means all employees – members of the RCVS, RVNs, trainee nurses, administrative and management staff, laboratory technicians and support staff – working together. Organisations already exist that provide these support services for employees. They make employees more powerful by bringing people together, ensuring their legal rights are upheld and that employees are not exploited by unscrupulous or just uncaring corporate entities. They are trade unions.

When more than 50 per cent of employees of an organisation are members of a trade union, it must be recognised by employers, and it will bargain on behalf of employees on working conditions and pay.

When there is fewer than 50 per cent membership, the union is not automatically recognised, unless the company chooses to do this. However, the union will still provide individual employment protection and other benefits to its members.

Employers' power is growing; corporate employees should similarly organise, or, in my view, they can only be exploited. As a veterinary surgeon employed by a corporate veterinary business, I considered the options and joined the union Unite. I suggest all corporate employees similarly consider their options.

Yours faithfully,

NAME AND ADDRESS WITHHELD ON REQUEST

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