

I learned hard way to be strong and move on

Dear editor,

As an old (literally) and deeply wounded veteran of injustice at work, in a large veterinary organisation, I can sympathise with others who have been similarly hurt. In my youth, I was a keen proponent of the idea of an organisation to support veterinary employees. I had a starry-eyed faith in both the law and human nature.

However, various attempts to set up such an organisation were stopped again and again by the fact that those enterprising and hard-working enough to set up and run such an organisation quickly set up their own practices and left the organisation to fold. I am, therefore, relieved that there has been some sense in joining up with an existing union that has more resources.

I joined a union because I thought it would help me to keep my job. It did not. The union official did answer my enquiries, but really didn't help. I did go through a tribunal, because I thought it was the right thing to do. I thought I would feel better and the organisation concerned would clean up its act and put measures in place to protect its employees. It did not. I was accused of being frivolous and vexatious, and told if I wished to continue, I would have to pay all the costs. Having lost my job this was not an option. The representatives did ask to talk in the lunch hour, but, unfortunately, I could not face the stress without food, and when I got back the panel would not allow us time to talk. The union official did not make a peep on my behalf.

The tribunal only served to extend my grief and stress, and did those on the other side no good either. However, they were in a position of power, and had insurance to cover any losses. It seemed to me at the time that they went away feeling justified and pleased with themselves. I then ran a helpline for about six months for vets being bullied at work. One half of all the callers were from different branches of the same organisation I had worked for. I got figures from the veterinary helpline, which said at that time 60 per cent of its callers were distressed by workplace disputes. Before long I couldn't cope with the distress of my callers any more, as it reminded me too much of my own. Within six months I had a serious mental breakdown, and have received acute psychiatric care, including in hospital, ever since. I could no longer work as a vet and have failed to find and keep any other employment. As a committed workaholic, the loss of my career and self-respect has been devastating.

However, the workplace is not the only place where injustice happens, and the mental health service is not a good place to be if you want respect and dignity. I have learned the hard way that legal rights mean nothing, trying to get them is a great way to completely stuff up your life and good relationships are extremely precious.

I studied bullying in the workplace at a post-graduate level, and did my research on those who were accused of it. I heard some really horrendous stories. I heard that many people, like me, end up with no job, a mental health problem and no prospect of ever working again. This is not justice either.

These situations are seldom simple. Many employers or bosses probably stumble into them without realising what they are getting into. Escalating the problem through an official process usually only makes things worse. I felt I had to go through the tribunal because I knew no better, but please, don't make my mistake yourself. Believe me, nothing is more important than your mental health. It is better to walk away with your head held high than to stay with someone who is hurting you, either by asking too much or by abusing you. And it is terrible to be responsible for hurting others. Legal processes are arbitrary and being right does not mean that you will get the result you think you deserve.

An employer will learn more from a high staff turnover than from

a dispute. At the end of the day, not looking after your staff will cost you dearly. Management education and support for employers, as provided by SPVS, is far more likely to make the workplace a better place than legal wrangles, and professional mediation is a process far more likely to deliver you a solution that you can all live with. If you are unhappy at work, keep positive, decide whether you have more to gain than lose and do whatever you need to do to keep relationships sweet until you have another option, even if that is to look for another job. As a locum, I worked for dozens of practices and can guarantee that most of them are brilliant places to work. Hard though it may be to face, for some of us the veterinary profession is not the right place to be. I found out recently that I have a disability that makes it hard to learn practical skills and to work quickly. I was simply too slow and too clumsy to ever be commercially viable. It was too easy for my employer to assume that my slowness was a mark of laziness and bad attitude.

It is easier to judge than to be judged. Life was never meant to be free of suffering. How you deal with your difficulties shows your strength of character far more than anything else. The strong thing is to forgive and move on. I was weak, self-righteous and insensitive, as was my boss. From what I have heard since, we have both paid for this. The organisation I worked for, seeing what I had suffered, recently offered me a hand of assistance to "face my demons". Perhaps there is something in the value of human nature after all?

Yours faithfully,

NAME AND ADDRESS WITHHELD ON REQUEST.

VT 41(38);47 26.9.11