

'Confusing' tone on health and well-being in Futures report

THE VET FUTURES PROJECT IS A REMARKABLE INITIATIVE

to address the future of the veterinary profession.

It has many valuable recommendations for the profession's future: for instance, encouraging vets to take a proactive and leading role in animal health and welfare, in scientific advancements, and in communicating and demonstrating the value that we can bring to society as a whole.

On subjects like enhancing well-being in the profession, however, we feel the recommendations do not go far enough, hence more focused action is urged.

Although we are pleased to see that the report devotes a section to the health and well-being of veterinary professionals, we find the tone of this section somewhat confusing.

Unmatched expectations

According to the surveys cited in the report, "half of vets who graduated within the last eight years reported that their careers had not matched their expectations" and "10% said they wished to leave the profession entirely". Furthermore, "vets who were qualified for five years or more were least optimistic about the future, rating their opportunities for career progression less positively". The report rightly recognises these figures as a "wake-up call"!

Referring to various surveys included in the report, it states that (1) "nearly 90% of vets ... considered veterinary work to be stressful", (2) "stress of veterinary work came high on the agenda for vets and veterinary nurses and others in the veterinary team", (3) "survey of BVA members found that reducing stress was the single highest priority for many – vets in small animal practice, younger vets and women [vets]", (4) "better veterinary wellbeing was the top goal for ... veterinary students and recent graduates", and (5) "many vets in practice, and

veterinary nurses, emphasised stress in the telephone interviews and focus groups".

Surprisingly, after emphasising all the above, the report subsequently appears to seek to downplay the issue of stress – stating, for example, that

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looks at the Vet Futures document on behalf of the BVU and finds that as far as dealing with stress is concerned the recommendations do not go nearly far enough...



"stress is not always a problem in itself" and that "we do ... counsel caution around allowing the profession to become defined solely in terms of the stress" and it goes on to quote figures from other high

stress professions as if to legitimise the stress experienced by veterinary professionals. Surely the reaction should be to address the issue, rather than seek to justify or normalise it?

The report focuses on questioning vets' ability to cope with stress and recommends looking into changes in the selection process of veterinary and nurse students, and the inclusion of stress management modules in veterinary curriculum. The only "targeted" and "proactive approach" the report puts forth to address workplace stress in veterinary practice is "regular appraisals for all members of the veterinary team, as well as the importance of personal development plans".

We agree that some improvements in selection of the veterinary and veterinary nurse students might help, as might the introduction of stress management in veterinary education. Indeed, workplace appraisals and personal development plans are important in any workplace setting, but in practice they generally deal with ensuring efficiency and productivity rather than identifying and addressing the level of stress faced by a worker.

In fact, in its entire discourse on well-being, stress and suicides, the report fails to make any mention of industrial (employment) relations¹ in the profession, which we consider to be quite a worrying omission. The report refers to vets as "following a vocation", which implicitly suggests

that they are supposed to put up with whatever their job throws at them.

In a conclusive remark, it further states that: "Many actions needed to tackle stress fall to employers to deliver. Any investment employers make here should reap rewards in the long term." Of course employers will benefit if their workforce is mentally and physically fit, but should not the focus here be on the well-being of veterinary professionals rather than the "rewards" for the employers?

Previous surveys have established that a great majority of veterinary professionals enjoy their

professional work, so what factors then lead to stress, mental health issues and sadly in some cases to suicides? We would suggest these have to be the circumstances under which vets deliver their professional services.

Appalling mistreatment

The BVU has previously published stories in this periodical of appalling mistreatment of vets and nurses at their workplaces. We believe the issues around working contracts, poor working conditions, unreasonable working hours, restricted clinical freedom, fears of litigation and professional misconduct complaints, lack of support, bullying, excessive profit-related pressures, problems with sick and maternity/paternity leave, poor financial rewards, isolation and

stagnation are the issues at the heart of the stress and mental health problems. There is no mention of any of these issues in the Vet Futures report!

If stress and well-being-related problems are to be genuinely addressed, rather than continuing to brush issues under the carpet, the profession has to change its mind-set and be open and honest in

investigating and identifying the root causes of these problems and develop strategies to address them.

We do not question the intent of the Vet Futures project,

but the approach and means being adopted, which leave room for real improvement. The project has got the potential and momentum to make a real difference to the state of well-being of our profession.

We hope that the project takes on board our above considerations in a constructive spirit and we assure the project implementers of our full support.

1. In the words of Lester, "Industrial relations involve attempts at arriving at solutions between the conflicting objectives and values; between the profit motive and social gain; between discipline and freedom; between authority and industrial democracy; between bargaining and co-operation; and between conflicting interests of the individual, the group and the community."

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New referral hospital planned for home county

PLANS have been announced for a new referral hospital, The Ralph, close to the A404 between the M4 and M40 motorways in south Buckinghamshire.

The Ralph Veterinary Referral Centre Plc is a new unlisted public company set up to develop the hospital.

According to Shailen Jasani (*right*), a Cambridge graduate of 1999 who is leading the project and will be the clinical director, it aims to be the UK's second largest referral emergency and critical care (ECC) hospital and intends to work closely with a new affiliated charity operating from within the premises to provide low cost basic and specialist healthcare to stray, shelter and other eligible companion animals.

The team behind the project is currently seeking investors and raising the funds required to develop the hospital which is expected to open in 2017. For details, e-mail shailen@theralphproject.com or go to <http://theralph.vet/>.



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