

What will be the post-Brexit impact on the profession?

THIS IS WRITTEN FOLLOWING GREAT SPECULATION about the impact of Brexit on the veterinary profession – from worries about the wider economic consequences, to concerns about the loss of employment rights including the working time directive (WTD), to questions over the futures of EU nationals working within the UK.

We must recognise the worries and uncertainty for people who do

not know whether they will be allowed to continue working in the UK, and the BVU would urge the government to safeguard the right to work of EU vets, nurses and support staff already employed within the UK.

Brexit has come at a time of broader debate about the future of the profession, and many of the concerns raised relate to issues identified in the Vet Futures report. At a time when the profession is becoming increasingly disconcerted by the exodus of recently qualified vets, it seems somewhat unfortunate to gain another potential threat to working conditions.

Long hours and poor rates of pay form part of notoriously poor working conditions amongst vets and nurses. In particular, in the experience of the BVU, young, recently qualified vets and nurses often feel poorly valued, and can be pressured into accepting unreasonable working conditions because they are considered so replaceable by their employers.

A wake-up call

The Vet Futures report gave the profession a “wake-up call” – with 40% of surveyed BVA members saying they would not or were unsure whether they would choose to be a vet again; vets more than five years qualified showing the least hope about the future, and a concerning number of vets five to eight years qualified seeking a change in direction. The results about stress were similarly harsh.

The profession has become increasingly good at talking about stress and, hopefully, following changes such as the Mind Matters initiative, we should become increasingly good about acting on it as well, in ways that are relevant to the individuals at risk.

Exhausting and uncompromising working conditions play a significant role, and Brexit seems to have come at a time when the veterinary profession needs to ask itself a few important questions about what it is and what it wants for its future.

It is uncertain how much workers' legal rights would change following Brexit, and there is a question as to whether the loss of the WTD would have much of an impact on vets,

when many of us are expected to opt out anyway. But the general concerns were summed up in a previous article: “Brexit ‘good for employers, bad for employees’.”

This seems a sad conclusion to draw. Is this really the model we want for our profession? Are employer and employee aims really so separable and so opposite? We don't mean to downplay the challenges faced by veterinary practices – but we do not believe that the best business model is to grant employees only the legal minimum when it comes to employment rights, whatever that minimum may be.

In recent years there has been increasing research into employee health and wellbeing, and how this relates to productivity. While conducted in business environments that are not veterinary, the findings are conclusive and relevant.

A RAND Europe report¹ concluded that organisations that see health and wellbeing as an indicator of success have lower levels of work impairment. Interestingly, this research indicated that poor mental health is becoming the greatest reason for productivity loss.

Research conducted by the Department of Business Innovation and Skills² drew similar conclusions: increases in employee job satisfaction correlated with increases in all workplace performance measures.

The evidence-based NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) recommendations for workplace health management practices specify that employees should work reasonable hours with regular breaks, and management should make clear the link between employee health and wellbeing

and productivity.³ We must also not forget the body of research into the health risks associated with working long hours, night or shift work, and chronic lack of sleep.

Happiness an advantage

Although there aren't large studies into the veterinary workplace, many would say it is self-evident that practices that retain happy staff have an advantage – not just considering money spent on recruitment, but the advantages of client loyalty and a more constant team. We all have an excellent level of anecdotal evidence that when awake we perform better than when half-asleep. Vets who are fresh and non-stressed have better motivation, and practices with happy staff are much more pleasant places to work.

Using its Unite means, the BVU would urge the government to keep the WTD and safeguard workers' rights following Brexit. But more than that, we would encourage veterinary employers to think of the future they want for their practice, and their profession.

Let's leave the “good for employers, bad for employees” mentality behind – in reality, every day we work together,

and we achieve the best results when the whole practice thinks and acts like a team. We pride ourselves on being an evidence-based profession and we are supposed to be a compassionate one.

Whatever the legal rights might look like after Brexit, it is time to be mindful of the future we want to create, and to combat the issues that are driving more and more vets away from the profession they fought so hard to join.

If we work together to create a culture that is supportive and collaborative – where employees are respected and valued, and have reason to be loyal to their employers – surely it is obvious that our profession will be stronger, and better equipped to meet the challenges to come.

1. Hafner, M. *et al* (2015) *Health, Wellbeing and Productivity in the Workplace: A Britain's Healthiest Company summary report*, RAND Europe.
2. Bryson, A. *et al* (2014) *Does Worker Wellbeing Affect Workplace Performance?* Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.
3. NICE guidelines [NG13] (2015) *Workplace health: management practices*. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng13/chapter/recommendations>.

LYDIA CHAMBERS

from the British Veterinary Union in Unite offers some reflections on how the departure of the UK from the EU will or might affect veterinary practices



Guidelines on wildlife rescue

Dear Editor,

On 1st October the British Veterinary Zoological Society (BVZS) issued guidelines for veterinary surgeons and wildlife professionals working in the field of British native wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. The guidelines clarify the law relating to this area for all stakeholders, and promote best practice within wildlife rescue centres.

Wildlife rescue is valued by local communities, contributes to conservation, and helps to safeguard the health and welfare of wild species in the face of man-made threats to the natural environment. The guidelines have been developed by a group of BVZS members with specific interest and expertise in wildlife rehabilitation and the legal framework surrounding it, and in wider consultation with stakeholders including the BVA and the British Wildlife Rehabilitation Council.

All veterinary surgeons in practice are at some point likely to be presented with injured or orphaned British wildlife and, for appropriate cases, successful care to the point of release back to the wild requires good collaborative working relationships between veterinary professionals and wildlife rehabilitators. Wildlife casualties are covered by the Veterinary Surgeons Act and Veterinary Medicines Regulations. Therefore, MsRCVS and RVNs have legal as well as ethical responsibilities for the care of these animals. Wildlife carers and rehabilitators also have responsibilities and may benefit from clarification of these at the interface between veterinary medicine and general animal care. Failure to fulfil these responsibilities may lead to action by the RCVS as well as prosecution under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 or other wildlife legislation.

These guidelines offer support to veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and wildlife rehabilitators in order to promote and achieve the best possible care and welfare for indigenous British wild animals in accordance with UK law. We hope that colleagues dealing with wildlife species will find the guidelines helpful and would encourage them to be viewed and downloaded for practice use from the BVZS website: www.bvzs.org/position-statements. Yours faithfully,

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