

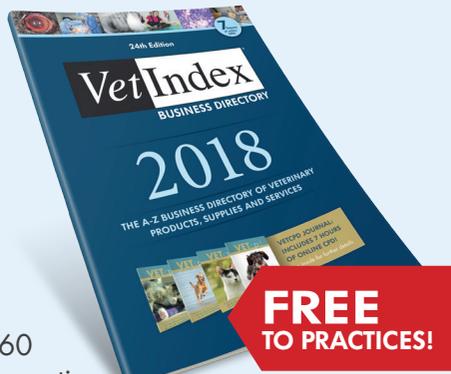
Vet Index

VetIndex A-Z Directory
Client Newsletters

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Reconsider traditional norms of working hours

WE HAVE ALL HEARD concerns repeatedly voiced about long working hours in the veterinary profession, with significant worries about the impact on our quality of life and patient care, writes Lydia Chambers, member of the Organising Professional Committee (OPC) at British Veterinary Union in Unite (BVU).

The EU legislation specifies that employees cannot be expected to work more than 48 hours per week on average. It is possible for an employee to volunteer to opt out of this limit, but they cannot be sacked or treated unfairly for refusing to do so.

An employee who has opted out can choose to opt back in again at any time, although they may have to give three months' notice to their employer. Employees cannot be discriminated against for the choice to opt back in, even if the opt-out agreement formed part of their original contract of employment. There are also further EU regulations regarding breaks and holiday allowance, etc.

With the threat of the UK leaving the EU and the current protections given within EU legislation, notably the Working Time Directive (WTD), the BVU undertook a small survey to investigate veterinary professionals' worries and current situations.

This was an exploratory survey with 45 respondents: 49% veterinary nurses, 44% veterinary surgeons, and 7% working in other roles such as practice management. Nearly 90% of those surveyed worked in small animal practice, and 76% were working on full-time contracts.

The findings paint a remarkably clear picture of a profession which feels the strain of long working hours, and which for a striking proportion of members does not currently feel the benefits of the legal protections supposedly in place to safeguard our welfare.

Among our respondents, less than 5% had opted out of the WTD. Nearly 30% did not know about their WTD status, while two-thirds had not opted out. Of the two-thirds who had not opted out, 13% worked more than 48 hours per week on average.

Of those who considered themselves outside the WTD (13 respondents), only 8% felt it was their own free choice to opt out. Over half had never specifically been asked about it and 23% were expected to opt out as part of their employment offer.

An overwhelming majority of respondents (over 95%) said they felt that their work was affected by tiredness arising from long working hours. For 62% this was an occasional occurrence, but 20% felt this happened

often and 13% frequently. All respondents considered long working hours to be a problem in the veterinary profession, with 84% feeling that this affects both their own health and patient care.

Thus there was overwhelming consensus on the problem, although the solution seems less clear-cut. Views on the impact of EU legislation were split: 56% felt that the potential loss of the WTD after Brexit would not affect their working conditions whereas 44% thought it would.

Many of the comments given in our survey painted a picture of significant stress and strain from working hours. Responses included: "all staff are expected to work unpaid overtime every week"; "I think this is a real problem and this is why I am now part-time"; and "I have worked out of the Working Time Directive hours before without actually signing an agreement at an out of hours clinic. It did feel like it was expected. It had a negative effect on my health and I'm sure it affected my nursing standard". There were many more, describing similar situations and concerns.

Need to keep protections

The impact of Brexit is uncertain, particularly given that the WTD seems very poorly enforced in practice at present, but it is clear that we cannot afford to lose any more protections.

In the experience of the BVU, many vets and nurses feel forced into accepting working conditions and hours that are detrimental to their health and their work, because fundamentally the (employer-driven) norms of the profession are at odds with the wishes of its members. Given that there is widespread concern about the exodus of experienced vets and nurses from the profession, it seems very obvious that this is a problem that employers need to address collectively.

Many individuals cope with the problem by switching to part-time work – where, perhaps, they risk being underpaid and under-rewarded for their efforts, and lose career advancement opportunities – and others regretfully respond by leaving the profession that they would otherwise love.

Our survey was small, but the results are remarkable. In an economically uncertain future, we would urge employers to reconsider the traditional norms of working hours and remember that a sustainable workplace needs employees to work in conditions where they can remain happy and healthy, and have the energy to invest in patient care.