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Key issues set to shape 21st century practice life

A NUMBER of issues are testing the profession's practical resolve – and SPVS sees these topics as pivotal to the way veterinarians operate in the 21st century, says president Richard Hillman.

Round the clock cover

The issue of 24/7 cover has been contentious for some time. However, it rose to the top of the SPVS agenda due to market research commissioned by the RCVS' advisory committee into whether vets should be required to make 24/7 provision, as part of the *Guide to Professional Conduct (GPC)*.

SPVS Council discussed this issue at length, both in meetings and by email, and I collated a position statement, which was submitted to the RCVS.

I have to say that our links to the college are better than I have ever known them. I have tried to tread a narrow path between outright opposition and insider collusion, such that the practitioner's view is seen and heard in a robust but constructive way, and I am grateful to the college registrar, Jane Hern, for her time, energy and understanding.

There are fundamentally irreconcilable conflicts in this issue that revolve around the welfare of animals, compared to the welfare of vets.

Ethical standards

In my view, it is the RCVS' duty to promote and sustain public confidence in veterinary medicine

in the UK. It seems logical that this is only achievable by the college being the guardian of animal welfare. It has no duty towards veterinary welfare, the policing of Government regulations or the economics of practices, even though it might have sympathies towards all of these conflicting tensions.

I am disturbed that the college seemed prepared to change a moral position to fit custom and practice. While I recognise that ethical standards change with time (abortion, gay rights, etc) there has to be a new, higher moral position to replace the old one and there should never be a dumbing down of ethics, just because it is popular, expedient or convenient.

I look to governing bodies to do the un-popular thing, if it is the right thing. We don't do these things because they are easy: we do them because they are right.

While I would be the first to lobby the college to be mindful of the stress any *GPC* provision puts on individuals or practices, I do not want it to compromise basic ethical tenets. It is the duty of the college to set ethical standards, and the obligation of vets and practices to fit their practice within those standards.

Home and farm visits

I believe that all vets in all areas of the UK should be able to decline a domiciliary visit where they have performed a reasonable risk assessment, and I don't think this is a gender or geographical issue.

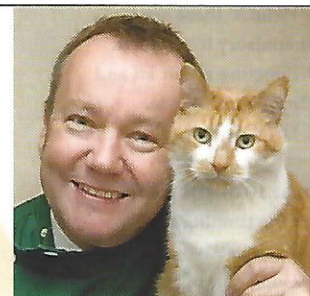
If a vet is called to account before the preliminary investigations committee for declining a visit, part of the evidence should be that there were special reasons for declining, and that a mechanism was in place for visits when those special reasons do not apply, including evidence that visits were performed in the past.

These arrangements would be no different for a single-handed practitioner, a vet in an on-call rota, or a dedicated out-of-hours clinic, and so the SPVS has called on RCVS Council to reaffirm vets' moral requirement to provision of 24/7 cover, including home visits.

Working Time Regulations

The provision of 24/7 care appears to conflict with Working Time Regulations (WTR). It is the duty of employers to ensure their businesses comply with legislation. The SPVS never has, and never will, encourage employers to find loopholes in regulations. We are firmly behind the spirit of the WTR and are constantly working to find ways for employees and employers to square the circles of 24/7, work/life balance and the law.

I believe there are ways in which the spirit and letter of the WTR can be satisfied within current 24/7 regulations, without putting undue stress on practice profitability, which is essential to drive standards and maintain vets' incomes. Practices that are



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Richard Hillman, SPVS president

either large enough to provide 24/7 themselves, cooperate with other practices, or out-source their 24/7 cover, will be able to comply with the WTR.

Employee vets' salaries may well have to suffer a substantial drop to fund the improvement in their working conditions, since there seems to be little disposable profit in veterinary practices, especially in these testing times. Employee vets will have to decide if they are content to work in these better conditions with lower pay or seek alternative industries.

It is the responsibility of the SPVS to advise employers on how to run viable and legal practices, and advise employees on how to find responsible employers who work within both the law and the *GPC*.