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RCVS' ROLE IN HANDLING MENTAL HEALTH QUERIED

'Are our regulators doing a good job when we disclose mental health to them?' – VDS member

A MEMBER of the Veterinary Defence Society (VDS) has raised concerns the RCVS' regulatory role puts it at odds with being able to look after its members' mental health.

Martin Hosegood, a claims consultant for the society, made his comments at the Mind Matters Initiative (MMI) symposium, held at The University of Edinburgh, following a plenary talk on "protecting and improving mental health at work" from the Mental Health Foundation's Chris O'Sullivan.

He said: "Chris, you made a compelling case – as businesses – for looking after the mental health of our employees, but, as you say, we are also a regulated profession. Are our regulators doing a good job when we disclose our mental health to them?"

"And, I don't believe the way we have been structured under the Veterinary Surgeons Act, and the way the profession is, shall we say, disciplined, is necessarily fit for purpose when it comes to that.

"Clearly, the MMI is a fantastic step forward, but we do come across time and again people who have disclosed their mental health problems to their profession, to their regulator, and have been disappointed by the way they have been handled.

"I suppose the question is, do our regulators handle mental health problems and disclosure as well as we do?"

GMC's approach

In response, Debbie Cohen, another plenary speaker on the day, cited research and actions done by the General Med-

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ical Council (GMC) to look after doctors undergoing investigation.

"We recently had [a report] about the number of suicides in relation to people being investigated under the GMC. So, it did one piece of work where it said 'oh yeah, there's a problem', but the stats are quite difficult because this is complex and messy work.

"[Mental health expert] Louis Appleby did a further piece of work about how to support people more effectively and said every part of the [investigatory] journey has to be mentally health aware?

He said: "The GMC has taken this on board completely, so there are multiple changes happening about how we manage any investigation... from the point of when the letter goes out to that individual to who responds to that – it now funds a service anyone who is under investigation can access for free, [for example].

"It is doing multiple things to address those issues and I would suggest you have a look at that report, and have a think about how you can go into your organisation to see how it could change, because it is possible."

Closing discussions, MMI chairman Neil Smith insisted there was, in fact, not a duty of disclosure of mental health

problems to the RCVS, "but rather a duty of seeking help".

"Secondly, there is an audit going on of the professional conduct department, which is a regulatory piece on how these cases are being dealt with – there are different ways in which they can be done, and we await the outcome of that.

"Certainly, with my MMI hat on, I am quite keen on several things [Prof Cohen] has just mentioned that we really need to look at to improve the way we do things," he said.

'Much to be done'

After the symposium, director of the MMI Lizzie Lockett said the day made the college realise although a lot had been achieved, "there always remains much to be done".

"The good news is there is a fantastic will among members of the veterinary team, and those who support them, to continue this journey towards reducing mental ill-health and stigma within the profession," she added.

"The positive and collaborative spirit was inspirational.

"It's quite unusual for a regulatory body, such as the RCVS, to invest such financial and human resources into a programme like this and it has become a model for similar programmes in other professions – at home and overseas."

Confirming Col Smith's comments, she continued: "We embarked on a review of the impact of our professional conduct process on the mental health of our members in autumn, which will report over the coming months.

"In fact, this is a key action in our

strategic plan and contributes to our ambition around moving the profession from a 'blame culture' to a learning culture. Organisations, such as the VDS and Vetlife, have been engaged with this process, for which we are grateful.

"There is actually no requirement for a vet or nurse to disclose a mental health issue to the college; there is an expectation they will take steps to address any problem that could impair fitness to practise or may result in harm to animal welfare or public health.

"We hope through projects, such as the MMI, we will help to reduce the stigma associated with mental ill-health so people feel more able to take those vital steps."

References

1. Horsfall S (2014). Doctors who commit suicide while under GMC fitness to practise investigation, *General Medical Council*, <http://bit.ly/13kE3Bj>
2. Appleby L. Draft proposals to reduce the impact of our fitness to practise processes, *General Medical Council*, <http://bit.ly/2djrWE>

NEWS

2 Minimise
and CIAs in
sector, urge

3 Benefits
imaging "p
shared at c

FOCUS

8 OA treat
options in

PRACTICAL

12 Intesti
body case i

REVIEW

14 Equine
from Switz

SPOTLIGHT

18 Therap
and owner
advice for
hyperthyro

Research highlights locomotor risk in dogs



A STUDY has established gun dog breeds, such as retrievers, are straining their locomotor systems by carrying shot game back to their owners.

The motion study, by scientists from the University of Veterinary Medicine Vienna, showed dogs tilt forwards like a see-saw when they

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