

Latest discussions on Veterinary Surgeons Act review

7 March 2005

Following last week's extraordinary meeting of RCVS Council, Roger Eddy, Chairman of the RCVS working party that framed the proposals on a revision of the Veterinary Surgeons Act, provides an update on the discussions.



Two years ago the RCVS consulted veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses on the review of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. Now the RCVS Council has given a fresh steer.

The consultation paper of February 2003 raised major questions about the constitution of the Royal College and how it does its job, in order to identify changes which would be desirable if the Act were to be updated. Council took stock of the outcome in a special meeting a year ago and commissioned further work.

Events have moved on since the consultation. In September 2003 the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published its own suggestions for modernising the Act. The Department has said that it hopes to introduce new legislation as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

There has also been a significant development in the neighbouring field of human medicine, with the publication of the Fifth Report of the Shipman Inquiry in December 2004. The report came to the stark conclusion that the General Medical Council has not, in the past, succeeded in its primary purpose of protecting patients.

The Chief Medical Officer for England has been commissioned to report to Ministers this year with recommendations for stronger procedures to protect patients, an effective system of revalidation and a reconfiguration of the role, structure and functions of the GMC.

Whatever is decided for the medical profession is liable to set the benchmark against which the regulatory arrangements for veterinary surgeons are judged. The profession needs to be ready to say how standards for veterinary practice can be set and enforced more effectively for the protection of animals and the public interest.

Over the last year the main focus within RCVS has been on the regulation of veterinary nurses and the other groups which aspire to become professions complementary to veterinary medicine.

At its special meeting in March 2004 Council took the view that the legislation should provide for the regulation of the training and conduct of veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and a range of other occupations providing veterinary services.

We have therefore had discussions with organisations representing veterinary nurses, bovine ultrasound scanner operators, physiotherapists, equine dental technicians and cattle foot trimmers to find out how they see the way forward.



Two messages have come across loud and clear. One is that all these groups wish to be regulated as professions, with recognised training and qualifications, arrangements to ensure continuing competence and regulation of professional conduct.

The other is that they are willing to consider arrangements for regulation alongside the veterinary profession. Not surprisingly, they do not want to be regulated by veterinary surgeons, but there is a general readiness to look at ways of managing the different occupational groups side by side.

This response was encouraging, but it has not been easy to come up with a workable proposition. The challenge is to find a form of organisation which will give each of the different professions control of its own affairs, while promoting consistency and presenting a coherent face to the public.

The proposition that Council favoured at its recent extraordinary meeting would mean separating the setting of standards from the task of ensuring that they are observed.

Under the suggested model, the RCVS would continue to supervise the education of veterinary surgeons, set standards for continuing professional development and competence and issue guidance on professional conduct.

A separate, parallel body would do the same for veterinary nurses, and perhaps for other professions complementary to veterinary medicine. In effect this would be the Veterinary Nurses Council standing on its own feet, instead of reporting to the RCVS Council as now.

The two bodies would maintain the registers of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

Neither body would deal with complaints against individual professionals. A new, free-standing Veterinary Services Board would receive and investigate these, and where it was decided that there was a case to answer it would refer them to an independent Conduct and Competence Committee.

The standard-setting bodies and the board would be free-standing, but with close links. There would be scope for them to share staff and accommodation in order to minimise costs and promote liaison.

Would a scheme on these lines work? It would offer veterinary nurses and other groups full professional regulation independently of RCVS, but the aim would be to regulate all the different professions on consistent lines and offer the public a single portal for complaints.

Clients should know that their animals will be treated by people whose competence and behaviour are assured, and not have to worry about the different responsibilities of different members of the veterinary team or how they are regulated.

Members of the profession will soon have a chance to put their views, because Council agreed that there should be a fresh consultation spelling out the details of the new proposition. Individual consultation papers will be mailed to members in the next few weeks.