BVA Workforce roundtable
19 July 2018

On 19 July, the British Veterinary Association (BVA) facilitated a roundtable discussion of the CEOs and HR directors of the largest ‘corporate’ veterinary employers and a large community of ‘independent’ practices. The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS), the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) and the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) also took part in the discussion to consider what are the drivers for the current workforce crisis and what needs to be done to tackle it.

The roundtable was chaired by Gudrun Ravetz (BVA). Representatives included: Richard Parker (IVC), Simon Innes (CVS), Tim Shearman (VetPartners), Fiona Briault (Pets at Home Vet Group), Arnold Levy (Medivet), Kirsten McLeod (VetsNow), Vicky Greenard (Linnaeus), Tom Flynn (Goddards), Andrew Curwen (XL Vets), Peter Brown (SPVS), Chris Tufnell (RCVS), and Wendy Nevins (BVNA).

It was agreed to hold the meeting under the Chatham House rule and report the meeting without attributing comments.

What people wanted to get out of the roundtable
- Desire to hear about the challenges other employers are facing and discuss how everyone can work together to find solutions/how we need to adapt and change
- Acknowledged it is a complex issue and that there is a competitive advantage in getting it right

What’s already being done?
In order to frame the discussions, the group considered the many initiatives, campaigns and projects that are already underway, led by BVA, RCVS and others, to address the workforce issues. A graphic was circulated to provide an overview of activities (see attached).

THEMES AND ISSUES

1. The future workforce: training vets and attracting people into a veterinary career

“Brand Vet” – discussion over whether the perception of veterinary careers is positive or negative. Do the negative stories outweigh the positives? Anecdotally vets advise their own children not to pursue a veterinary career. On the flip side – concern around the expectation gap between people wanting to be a vet and the reality of the job. Need to be realistic about the positives and the downsides/challenges. We need to change both the expectation (to make it more realistic) and the reality (to make it more attractive). We also need to celebrate the GP vet.

Selection for vet schools and diversity – vet schools are not as oversubscribed as they were, and they are looking hard at selection. Do we need to rethink the entry criteria? Is it too focused on academic attainment and not enough on vocational desire? How do we increase diversity in vet school applications? Does the interview process select for clones? There is an argument that the vet schools should recruit students with a spread of academic achievement and those from the local communities that need vets (ie people who may want to return home to practise) as well as looking at people skills and problem-solving skills. (NB the Vet Futures graduate outcomes project led by RCVS is exploring these issues and will be consulting later this year)

Expectation/reality mismatch and the role of EMS – vet schools have a role in better preparing students for the realities of veterinary practice but there was a feeling that universities are not always adequately equipping students for the world of work. EMS should help to prepare students but there remains a reality mismatch. Some employers felt they
could do more to offer placements and support EMS students, but employers may need support to deliver good EMS.

**Motivations** – pay is not the only motivator for people entering the profession but may become a demotivator at some stage in the career. Interest in the job is a motivator and routine/mundane tasks can be demotivating.

“**If the profession can meet the needs of people that will change the brand. Think about what people are looking for out of their career. Look at what they want and embrace it.”**

“The expectation needs to change but we also need to change the reality so that it is more attractive…. Focus at the moment is around recruitment into the profession rather than recruitment into practice.”

“**[On EMS] The ones that build a relationship return again. People get more invested in them if they keep coming back.”**

**Recommendations and actions:**
- Look at “Brand Vet” and address the expectation/reality mismatch.
- Use the ‘My Vet Future’ online careers hub (when launched) to get the right messages across and get group case studies and data to help people understand different routes to achieve career progression.
- Raise awareness of people being motivated by different things which may impact their career choices.
- Look at diversity in selection for vet schools.
- Change the culture – are vet schools perpetrating the idea of the “big, bad corporates”?
- Engage with to the RCVS graduate outcomes consultation later this year, which will include some radical ideas to provoke debate.
- Review support needs for employers to deliver good EMS.
- BVA to facilitate a roundtable discussion between the large employer CEOs and the deans/heads of the vet schools.

2. Recruitment and retention challenges in the current workforce

**Supply/comparison with other professions/salaries** – discussion around trends in other professions that have seen a shortage and how the response has led to oversupply and suppression of salaries. On salaries – large employers are noticing that salary expectations increase when a practice is bought.
Corporatisation – why are people selling? Partly because they can’t fill vacancies which leads to longer hours, unhappy staff, no holidays etc. The workforce shortage is driving people out of their practices.

The significantly greater shift from employers to employees – should BVA’s role change in light of this shift? Whose role is it to protect veterinary salaries?

Gender – there was disagreement over whether and how the ‘gendered nature’ (ie the changing gender balance) of the profession was having an impact. Some employers expressed concern that women are less interested in farm and equine positions, but this was challenged by others. As women in society continue to undertake the lion’s share of childcare within families, there is a practical knock-on effect for majority-female professions. There needs to be a societal shift in providing flexible working for families. Within the veterinary profession we need more women in senior teams.

Shortage of specialists – instances of clinics being cancelled because of lack of specialists. The shortages mean that existing specialists can command very high salaries and practices are in competition with one another to poach from rivals. This salary inflation may lead to costs being passed onto pet owners directly or via insurance premiums.

The impact on patient care – some employers are starting to see gaps in service provision, particularly with specialist clinics and services not being delivered due to the shortages. Some employers have not held surgeries because they have not had a vet available, and client bookings are full which can be exhausting for vets.

Geography – geography was described by one employer as the “biggest issue”. Employers generally find it harder to recruit in more rural areas.

The need for more data – we have more vets than ever qualifying but do we have enough to cover the FTE requirement? It is possible to map the FTE hours needed across all of the sectors? In the context of people wanting more flexibility and work/life balance, what is the real headcount need? What is happening to salaries?

Locuming – people are cherry picking their hours (ie choosing not to work evenings and weekends) and increasingly able to name their price.

“There are examples of where we can’t treat as we didn’t have neurologists. There are issues around cost of treatment and having enough specialists to do the work. It impacts on fees and cost of treatment.”

“It takes months to recruit a vet. We have to get locums in between.”

“Looking forward if you do need visas for EU graduates don’t think that will solve everything. Some countries also have vet shortages.”
Recommendations and actions:

- BVA to lead the campaign to return vets to the Shortage Occupation List – redouble and coordinate efforts, including potential joint/coordinated letter(s).
- Employers to share anonymised data and case studies to support the evidence base for SOL.
- Create workplaces that meet the needs and expectations of vets, including in relation to flexible working.

3. Working patterns, work/life balance and wellbeing

Work/life balance – stress and long hours are still widespread. The profession is not currently in a position to offer work/life balance because of the shortage of vets – described as a “chicken and egg situation”. Data shows increasing desire for better work/life balance and more flexibility; the biggest growth in desire for P/T working is within middle-aged men.

24/7 and OOH – the requirement for OOH provision does put pressure on practices and on individuals, especially in rural areas. However, it is considered a central element of providing a service to clients. For some practices is it a matter of pride to cover their own OOH; for others, being able to outsource provision has been critical to their survival. What is “reasonable” means different things to different people.

‘Fear’ of the RCVS – there is a role for RCVS and the vet schools to prepare vets for future complaints and for employers and colleagues to support people through the complaints process. Can the process for handling complaints be speeded up? The reality is that very few complaints result in a disciplinary hearing.

Recommendations and actions:

- Support RCVS’s ongoing work to address the perception of fear of the regulator.
- RCVS to continue working on reducing the time taken to complete investigations.
- Publicise the statistics on complaints and disciplinaries to help myth bust.

4. Veterinary nursing

Veterinary nursing – there was general agreement that veterinary nurses should be better utilised by practices and should be supported to develop in their careers. Some employers were experiencing veterinary nurse shortages, but not all. Any change to allow RVNs to undertake first vaccinations would require legislative change and could give rise to questions around the definition of “under my care” for the practice. More clarity around schedule 3 of the VSA is welcome.
Recommendations and actions:
- BVA to facilitate a further roundtable discussion on the role of vet nurses, schedule 3 and other allied professionals

“There are practices where nurses are glorified cleaners and others where they don’t get enough to do.”

“Can’t talk about vets in isolation from vet nurses. The nurse should be allowed to do more. Give them more sophisticated work to do.”