A year of change and uncertainty

THIS time last year, in a review of developments during 2013, Veterinary Record drew attention to the changing relationship between private practitioners and the state, and the uncertainties arising from the Government’s push for more private sector involvement (or at least less government involvement) in safeguarding animal health (VR, December 21/28, 2013, vol 173, pp 590-591). In this respect, some things became clearer in 2014 but, 12 months on, a fair amount of uncertainty remains. Discussion of the changing relationship between vets and government continued in 2014, but didn’t quite dominate to the extent that it did in 2013; instead, attention focused more on changes taking place in veterinary practice and developments in the profession itself.

The Government’s plans for veterinary surveillance in England and Wales certainly became clearer in March 2014 when, having announced in 2013 that it would be reducing the number of regional disease surveillance centres carrying out post-mortem examination (PME) services from 14 to six, the AHVLA gave details of just how soon centres would close. The speed with which this was happening was underlined in June when, giving an update, it reported that one of those centres – Winchester – was in fact being closed one year earlier than planned. Although driven by budgetary cuts, the closures form part of the AHVLA’s wider plans to strengthen surveillance by making more use of practitioners and external service providers. However, with the Government having invited tenders from possible alternative providers of PME services just a few weeks before, this was not quite the orderly transition to new arrangements that one might have hoped for. By September, the AHVLA was able to report that it had secured the services of three external providers to provide subsidised PME services in various parts of England and Wales so, while it is still early days, its faith in the idea that alternative providers can be found may yet turn out to be justified.

The importance of effective disease surveillance – and of being prepared for disease outbreaks – was highlighted in November when H5N8 avian influenza was confirmed on a duck breeding farm in Yorkshire. The AHVLA had tested its contingency plans for dealing with notifiable disease outbreaks towards the end of 2013 but, in the event, it was not the AHVLA that responded to the outbreak; instead, it was the newly formed Animal Health and Plant Agency (APHA). The APHA had come into being on October 1, 2014, following yet another government reorganisation which resulted in the AHVLA being merged with various elements of the Food and Environment Research Agency. The AHVLA had itself been in existence for less than four years, having been formed by a merger of the Veterinary Laboratories Agency and the agency Animal Health during the ‘bonfire of the quangos’ in 2010. It can be hard to keep up with such changes, as illustrated, perhaps, by a photograph on the front cover of Veterinary Record of November 22. This showed APHA staff responding to the avian influenza outbreak in Yorkshire, wearing high visibility jackets labelled ‘State Veterinary Service’ and standing next to a notice bearing the old Animal Health logo. Thus, the photograph encapsulated most of the recent history of the agency in a single frame.

Uncertainty about the details of the Government’s plans to award contracts to practices to provide TB testing and other veterinary services on the basis of a competitive tendering exercise was partly dispelled in July when, more than two years after it outlined the plans, the AHVLA finally invited practices to submit formal bids. The results of the tendering exercise will be announced early next year and the new arrangements, which will involve TB testing services being provided by a small number of ‘delivery partners’ working with local practices, will take effect from April. With the results still to be announced, concern remains about the immediate outcome. In the longer term, there must also be concern about how the changes will affect the all-important working relationship between local practitioners and their farming clients, and the structure and distribution of veterinary practices.

The AHVLA also changed Official Veterinarian training arrangements in 2014. In June, following another tendering exercise, it announced that training would be provided through Improve International. ‘Unintended consequences’ of changes to UK pet travel rules in January 2012, to bring them more in line with European legislation, continued to be of concern in 2014, having been highlighted as an issue during the BVA Congress in 2013. In March, the RSPCA reported that the rules were routinely being exploited by ‘dog traffickers’ to trade in animals commercially; while in November the canine charity Dogs Trust, having conducted a six-month investigation into the trafficking of dogs from Eastern Europe, called on the Government to end what it called ‘the puppy smuggling scandal’. New pet passports and some changes to the European rules are being introduced at the end of this month and should go some way to help. However, it remains to be seen just how effective they will be in addressing the problem and allaying the concerns that have been raised.

Dangerous dogs, too, continued to be in the news, not least because, in May, new legislation came into force in England and Wales. Among other things, the new legislation introduces stiffer penalties for irresponsible owners who allow their dogs to attack people, extends the offence of allowing a dog to be dangerously out of control to private property, and makes an attack on an assistance dog an aggravated offence. Unfortunately, it does little to address the deficiencies inherent in the breed-specific Dangerous Dogs Act, which has caused problems ever since it was introduced in 1991. Nor does it contain much in the way of measures aimed at preventing dog attacks; these are instead included in a new Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act, which came into force in October. Aimed at preventing a wide range of antisocial
and criminal behaviours, this gives police and local authorities in England and Wales powers to issue ‘Community Protection Notices’ requiring dog owners to take steps to prevent dog-related incidents; however, given the scope of the Act, concern remains about how helpful it will be in dealing with specific issues relating to dogs. At a time when police, local authorities’ and other agencies’ budgets have all been cut, there is also concern about how well the rules will be applied and enforced.

Scotland held a referendum on whether to go independent in September 2014, raising questions about how veterinary activity in Scotland might be regulated in the event of a yes vote, and quite a few other questions besides. In the event, Scotland voted no to independence, but the ramifications of the referendum are likely to be felt for some time yet, not just in Scotland but in the other administrations too.

Changes in the nature and structure of veterinary practice were the subject of much discussion during the year, as were the likely implications of these and other changes for the future employment of increasing numbers of veterinary graduates. That things are indeed changing in practice was underlined by the results of the latest four-yearly survey of the veterinary profession undertaken by the RCVS, which were published in September. Among the many findings was that, while the proportion of veterinary surgeons working as either full-time or part-time assistants in clinical practice had remained unchanged since the last survey in 2010 (at 57 per cent), the proportion working as equity partners had more than halved (from 13 per cent to 6 per cent). The proportion working as sole principals had also fallen, from 8 per cent to 5 per cent. Given all the consolidation that has occurred and the variety of different practice business models that have emerged in recent years, this was not altogether surprising, but it was interesting to see these changes being reflected in the figures. Meanwhile, veterinary practice continues to evolve and the process of consolidation and corporatisation of practices looks likely to continue for some time yet.

Regarding graduate employment, the 2014 RCVS survey found that a lower proportion of veterinary graduates were going straight into practice work after qualifying than was the case in the survey in 2010 (52 per cent compared with 64 per cent) and that a higher proportion were taking time out because they were unable to find a job (17.0 per cent compared with 13.2 per cent). Concern continues to be expressed about the employment prospects of veterinary graduates but, paradoxically, employers report anecdotally that they are currently having difficulty filling practice posts. Through its Careers section, Veterinary Record continues to promote the wide range of career options available to veterinary graduates. In addition, it recently launched a new Vet Record Careers website, www.vetrecordjobs.com.

2014 was a busy year for the RCVS, as exemplified by an RCVS meeting in June, at which the Council approved new guidance on 24/7 emergency cover, a draft of a new Royal Charter, and reversed an earlier decision to stop listing members’ postnominal qualifications in the RCVS Register, all in one day. Also in 2014, the College moved forward with plans to develop a new ‘middle tier’ of advanced practitioners, began a trial of a new complaints handling process, and consulted on proposals for developing its fellowship along the lines of a learned society. The Royal Charter, which was endorsed by the College’s annual general meeting in July, and has since been approved by the Privy Council, is expected to get the royal seal of approval early next year. The new charter for more than 40 years, it sets out the College’s objects and modernises its regulatory functions, including its role in the regulation of veterinary nurses, which should now be put on a firmer footing.

The BVA, too, was very active during the year, not least in promoting the crucial role of local practitioners in disease surveillance and in helping to control bovine TB on farms. It also contributed to the final draft of the RCVS’s new charter. It campaigned particularly vigorously during the year on the issue of non-stun slaughter of food animals, which its research had shown to be of particular concern to its members. In April, it launched an e-petition calling for an end to slaughter without pre-stunning on the Government’s e-petition website (at www.bit.ly/stunB4slaughter). By Wednesday this week, this had attracted 79,625 signatures.

Concern about antimicrobial resistance remained much to the fore during the year, to the extent that, in July, Britain’s Prime Minister weighed in to the debate, with a warning that failing to tackle the problem could result in the world being ‘cast back into the dark ages of medicine’. The need to tackle resistance also featured prominently in proposals for a new EU Regulation on veterinary medicines, which were adopted by the European Commission in September. Although it aims to make more medicines available to treat and prevent disease in animals, the proposed legislation pays particular attention to combating resistance in animals and humans and, once it is agreed and comes into force, will make it possible to restrict the use in animals of certain antimicrobials that are needed for the treatment of human infections.

Bovine TB was again the subject of much attention. Inevitably, most of this focused on badgers, after Defra announced in April that it would continue with the pilot culls of badgers in areas of Somerset and Gloucestershire, following the first round of culling in 2013. Controversially, this year’s culls would not be independently monitored by the Independent Expert Panel which, in 2013, helped to evaluate the culling method used in terms of safety, efficacy and humaneness. This year’s culling operations came to an end in October and the results are awaited with interest.

The attention devoted to badger culling in England again detracted from the many other steps being taken to try to tackle TB in England, these included implementation of measures set out in the Strategy for Achieving Officially Bovine TB-free status for England, which was published in April, while in Wales they included the Cymorth TB initiative, which seeks to enhance the role of private practitioners in helping farmers deal with the disease. In July, Wales hosted an international conference on Mycobacterium bovis, which considered ways of tackling bovine TB, along with the challenges this presents.

That bovine TB is not just a problem in cattle and wildlife was illustrated by a Short Communication published in Veterinary Record in March. Written by authors from the AHVLA and Public Health England, this gave details of an unusual cluster of M bovis in cats.1

Throughout the year, Veterinary Record published a series of articles promoting One Health. That new disease challenges continue to arise was clearly demonstrated during the year by a devastating outbreak of Ebola disease in west Africa.

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) celebrated its 90th anniversary in 2014, while the Pirbright Institute celebrated its centenary. The Pirbright Institute also finished building a new high-containment research laboratory, which is expected to become fully operational early next year.

Having announced plans for a new veterinary school in 2012, the University of Surrey admitted its first students. Meanwhile, the heads of the UK veterinary schools launched a new body – the Veterinary Schools Council – to promote the interests of the UK schools at home and abroad.

Despite some positive developments, 2014 can perhaps be summed up as a year of change and uncertainty. In light of this, a joint initiative by the RCVS and the BVA, which was announced during the BVA Congress at the London Vet Show last month, is timely. Over the course of next year, the ‘Vet Futures’ project (www.vetfutures.org.uk) will be providing an opportunity for the veterinary profession to take a look at how things stand, where it is heading and where it wants to be, and to develop an appropriate strategy. At a time when things are changing fast and the profession seems subject to numerous forces, it is right that it should be taking steps to shape its own future.


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