

Editorial

Hands up who wants voting in public

'IT'S not enough to say that new technology exists so therefore we must adopt it, you should have good reasons for doing so.'

That advice came not from a latter-day Luddite but from the head of a technology start-up company discussing telemedicine at the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons conference in January.

Her point was that decisions to move from an established way of working to a new one should be taken with care. The new should be favoured over the old only in cases where it is superior. Its essential 'newness' should not, in and of itself, be a factor.

That's something members of RCVS council may wish to consider when they come to vote next week on plans to adopt a new system for taking important democratic decisions (see also *VR*, 26 January 2019, vol 184, p 111).

Traditionally, votes at council meetings have been conducted via a show of hands following debate on the issues at stake. This had the advantage that all council members and (since council meetings are held in public) any observers could see who voted which way on any one issue.

If, say, a journalist wanted to know whether a particular individual on council was voting for or against adopting a new position on homeopathy, or raw feeding, or Brexit, they could simply trot along to the relevant meeting and see if that person raised their hand to vote at the relevant time.

Now the RCVS proposes to mandate a new system under which votes could routinely be conducted via electronic ballots – meaning council members would press a button and their votes would be anonymous to observers.

The rationale underpinning such a fundamental alteration is unclear, and the RCVS has not revealed who called for the move.

Some council members have previously reasoned that using a show of hands is just not modern enough. This implies that doing things electronically is always intrinsically better, but surely by that line of thinking council meetings should henceforth be conducted totally electronically, perhaps even virtually. No one would ever need to attend in person or communicate verbally, electronic messaging being a newer form of communication.



Is a system of secret electronic ballots transparent?

Another argument is that whenever votes are particularly close the show of hands method could potentially be open to human error. However, since there are only a few dozen members of RCVS council, a recount would surely solve that problem.

One council member has even privately suggested that if the RCVS were to persist with the old method then most council members would simply copy the voting decision of the person sitting next to them. In other words, they would look and see if that person's hand was up or down and do whatever they did. But this implies that council members cannot think for themselves, which surely is not the case.

The issue of which voting method should be used might seem excruciatingly tedious but is in fact of fundamental importance.

RCVS council is the governing body for the institution at the apex of the veterinary establishment. It takes decisions on everything from rules around remote prescribing to whether or not to let lay people help official veterinarians certify products for export.

It is also committed to transparency via its code of conduct and should restrict information only when wider public interest clearly demands.

Council members are obliged to be 'as open and transparent as possible about the decisions and actions that they take' and 'should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands'.

Is a system of secret electronic ballots consistent with this?

Perhaps a simple, unifying solution is at hand. In future when there are votes at RCVS council, members could both press their button and put their hand up at the same time.

The system could thereby be modern and transparent. The two are not, it turns out, incompatible after all.

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