

We need to value our time and services

WHY do vets work so hard? And if what they do is of value, why do they earn so little money?

The first question is prompted by the veterinary journals (*Vet Record* included) whose pages tell us of the disconnection, burnout and attrition of vets, young and old. Long and challenging work hours have been attributed as a major contributor to this problem.

The second question comes from my own experience of (a) owning a practice for 15 years, (b) acquiring a bankrupt practice and turning it to a profitable one, and (c) working with hundreds of veterinary practices around the world that struggle with revenue, growth or profitability to the point of subsidising the business (this is done either by the practice owners taking a far reduced salary compared to what they are paying their employees, or taking little or no money for their own remuneration from the business).

Research tells us that our predominant veterinary temperament or personality trait is typified by emotional sensitivity, and being task focused, hardworking and risk adverse. Added to this are personal, societal and professional expectations of perfectionism, altruism and anti-commercialism provided by a cultural background (eg, James Herriot) and reinforced by our veterinary education and training.

Now, you would think that bright, intelligent and well-educated folk would feel the pain of working so hard and earning so little and change the system. And some do. But so much of this is so ingrained that we don't even realise this is the 'normal' world we live in. We build adaptive systems to dull the pain and shift the blame. We not only live with the consequences, but we glorify them by relabelling ourselves from 'victim' (poor me) to 'martyr' (I'm doing this for the clients), 'poverty' (I don't charge enough for what I do) to 'persecutor' (it's the clients' fault as they demand cheap services).

Vets tend to wait and see what happens to them (eg, from legislation, internet, competition, and so on) and then react emotionally to the consequences. As a result,



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life in practice can be chaotic, reactive and stressful – many vets working far too hard for too many hours for too little return.

A principal cause of this is the failure of vets to charge profitably for their professional time. Reacting to an ill-defined, demanding and fickle client base, whose demands and motivations are only occasionally aligned with the vet's desire to practice high-quality medicine and run a proactive and

profitable business, means the vet is constantly working reactively and inefficiently.

Often vets don't know what their professional time is worth – they only understand it in terms of the consultation or surgical fee, and these are often determined by what other practices charge rather than being based on the costs, investments and profitability of the practice they work in.

Then they often 'give away' time (the free consult) to appease the client, discount their professional time (the repeat consult) to appease themselves and miss real opportunities to sell their professional time because they are 'too busy' or 'have a fear of selling'. This results in a failure to offer the full range of veterinary services, leaving the needs of both the client and their pet unfulfilled. These omissions have serious financial, clinical, and customer service implications for the clients, the practice and the veterinary staff.

However, I know from experience that all this is fixable – but only if vets want to change. Sadly, after my 40 years in both clinical (as a vet) and practice management (as a consultant) roles I have seen this ambition is lacking.

So maybe 'Why do vets work so hard?' and 'Why do they earn so little money?' are the wrong questions to ask. Maybe the question is whether what they do is of value.

I believe it is. Do you?