Editorial

Moving beyond words on diversity

MANDISA Greene has made history by becoming the first black president of the RCVS.

As she said at her inauguration, this would have been unthinkable for any woman – let alone a black woman – when the college was set up in 1844.

While her presidency is a visible symbol of progress on a road to making the profession more diverse, many will no doubt agree with Greene that there remains plenty to do to widen access to vet surgeon degrees and careers.

This week, in an interview with me, Greene describes how she is keen to see the vet profession become truly reflective of diverse 21st century Britain (see pp 52–53). She brings a positive message – she doesn’t think the profession is institutionally racist, and, since the UK has no shortage of gifted black and minority ethnic people, she believes positive change will happen (albeit not overnight).

Her tone is refreshingly upbeat – ‘Yes We Can,’ rather than ‘No We Can’t’.

Meanwhile, in a column (p 76) BVA president Daniella Dos Santos acknowledges that increasing diversity is a ‘long game’. She hints at how class disparities are as important to bear in mind as ethnic representation (vets are disproportionately likely to be privately educated) and she discusses the idea of using quotas or targets – an idea she personally doesn’t favour.

Substantive discussions are welcome because, while generalised conversations about diversity in the profession have been ongoing for some time, these have rarely crystallised into specific policies. The RCVS diversity and inclusion working group has been in existence for well over a year, but what has it actually done? So far it hasn’t even published any minutes of its meetings, let alone made recommendations.

The time has come to move beyond merely stating the case for diversity towards setting some tangible goals and pinpointing ways forward. That’s certainly what a number of readers have contacted Vet Record recently to suggest.

For example, it is widely known that just 3.5 per cent of vets in the UK are from black or other minority ethnic backgrounds, meaning these groups are underrepresented compared with their representation in the UK population at large. Yet veterinary leaders have heretofore steered away from making any recommendations about the profession mirroring the ethnic breakdown of the UK population, as reflected in census data. This question about what the ‘right’ level of ethnic minority representation is was posed by Vet Record last year (‘Diversity – time to spell it out’, VR, 17 August 2019, vol 185, p 185) but remains unanswered.

Surely a specific goal would help – since if we don’t know what the goal is, how can success or failure be measured?

If the goal is simply to increase ethnic diversity in the profession above the 3.5 per cent mark using all means possible, there are already new immigration avenues that could be explored further. As we report in this issue (p 51), there are new opportunities for émigré vets to come to the UK from Hong Kong, for example. Planning is also underway to provide support to vets who arrive as refugees from elsewhere. If Brexit will, as suggested, mean the UK vet profession moves away from over-reliance on vets from (majority white) EU countries after 31 December, and if there is a concomitant increase in arrivals of vets from Asia, one would expect the ethnic demographics of the profession to change.

Then there’s positive discrimination (see p 50), which would require a change in the law. Different views on it exist, but might it, too, at least be worth considering?

Finally, on the subject of class, are there simple steps that could be taken to widen access to veterinary careers? Could the RCVS, for example, use some of the £19 million in its financial reserves (see p 48) to fund scholarships for pupils from areas of economic deprivation?

The suggestions above are proffered merely in order to prompt discussion and to illustrate how, while it’s easy to talk in general terms about diversity, pinning down specific goals and policies for achieving them can prove somewhat thornier and more contentious. And yet (perhaps paradoxically) it could ultimately prove more fruitful.

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