Editorial

The RCVS needs to reflect on its conduct

EARLIER this year Vet Record published a news article about proposed changes to the RCVS disciplinary system (VR, 22 February 2020, vol 186, p 199). It relayed information from a confidential RCVS ‘concept paper’ showing proposals to fast track minor cases, which could result in fewer vets and vet nurses being subjected to full disciplinary hearings.

The news story made it clear that the information was leaked and, while the story may have painted the RCVS as a compassionate regulator, things soon turned somewhat less merciful.

The RCVS commissioned a former senior police officer to interview council members in a bid to pinpoint the source (or sources) of the article. When further alleged leaks to other third parties materialised, the probe snowballed.

Information obtained by Vet Record shows the college justified the probe on the grounds that it needed to ‘ascertain whether it was necessary...to exercise its statutory functions in section 15 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 and paragraph 3A of Schedule 1 to that Act’. In other words, it held out the prospect of launching disciplinary action and/or expelling from council whomsoever it deemed responsible for the alleged leaks.

But the investigation – thought to have cost tens of thousands of pounds (the RCVS has refused to provide costs) – found no culprit and was wound down.

The episode warrants serious reflection. It is, of course, right for the RCVS to maintain discipline within its council – members are obliged not to disclose information designated confidential by the college.

However, under the college’s code of conduct, they must also be ‘accountable for their decisions and actions to the public’ and ‘as open and transparent as possible about the decisions and actions that they take’. They should ‘give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands’.

As the college appears to appreciate, the person or persons responsible for leaking information must have had a motive. Perhaps they wished simply to provide members of the profession with information as a matter of public interest.

RCVS CEO Lizzie Lockett has denied that the college is quick to keep information under wraps. But there is evidence of a culture of secrecy. Numerous current and former members have recently made that criticism (VR, 8 February 2020, vol 186, p 138). And, at the most recent council meeting, several members expressed discomfort at the continuation of mechanisms to take decisions on some matters outwith normal processes (see p 206).

Tallies of council agenda items over the past year show that over the eight meetings there were 82 unclassified or open agenda items and 35 classified or confidential ones – equating to 70 per cent of business being conducted openly and 30 per cent behind closed doors.

While that may appear to be a healthy ratio, the unclassified tally includes all procedural items, for example apologies for absences. At one meeting, most of the agenda (seven out of 13 items) was conducted in private.

Whether critics are right or not about the RCVS being secretive, perceptions matter and the college should be more careful to guard its reputation here. It sometimes falls over itself to be untransparent – for example, having ordered the investigation into council members, it refused to confirm it had done so until this journal had published details of the probe (see p 208). Why?

As part of the resolution of this whole affair, council has agreed to explore in more detail the potential motivation of the person(s) leaking information in the first place as well as the underlying culture of council, which might have influenced their behaviour.

This is a good move. Hopefully, this will help rebuild trust and reinforce the very important role that council members have in holding the organisation to account. New president Mandisa Greene has pledged to hold as much future council business as possible in public. That is very sensible – and this journal will continue to monitor progress on this.

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