

**ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS**

**V**

**MR PETER GEORGE HANLON MRCVS**

**DECISION**

- 1) Mr Peter Hanlon appeared before the Disciplinary Committee on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 2007 to answer the following charge:

*'That being registered in the Register of Veterinary Surgeons:*

*On 8 December 2006 at the Cambridge Crown Court he was convicted upon his own confession upon indictment of causing death by careless driving whilst under the influence of drink or drugs, and that on 15 January 2007 he was sentenced to 30 months imprisonment and disqualified from driving for four years. Extended driving test to be taken.*

*And that it is alleged that this conviction renders you unfit to practise veterinary surgery.'*

- 2) Mr Hanlon admitted the conviction and that it rendered him unfit to practise veterinary surgery.
- 3) Mr Hanlon qualified as a veterinary surgeon in 1991. At the time of the road traffic accident giving rise to the conviction for causing death by careless driving, he was employed as a full-time veterinary surgeon by Pet Doctors in Soham, Cambridgeshire. He had been employed at the practice since February 2005. He had previously been employed by the Letchworth Veterinary Centre between 1993 and 2004, where he had met his partner, who was employed as a veterinary nurse. They have two sons, one who is five years old, and the other who was born in May of this year whilst he was in prison.
- 4) The evidence before Cambridge Crown Court was that at about 7.15pm on 21 February 2006, Mr Hanlon was driving his silver Ford Mondeo motor car to Ely railway station to collect his partner and son who had been away. It was the second time that he had made the journey that evening because they had not been on an earlier train from Stansted to Ely. On the road between Little Downham and Ely, Mr Hanlon's vehicle drifted into the opposite carriageway colliding with a green Ford Mondeo motor car being driven by Mr Barber who was accompanied by his wife. Mr Barber was a retired gentleman who was driving to a dance class which he was teaching. Mr Barber was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident and both Mr Hanlon and Mrs Barber sustained injuries.
- 5) Accompanying the inquiry bundle are copy photographs of the two vehicles following the collision which show substantial damage to both vehicles. Copies of the first police interview with Mr Hanlon indicate that he may have been using his

mobile telephone at the time. However, the transcript of the sentencing hearing at Cambridge Crown Court indicates that the prosecution accepted that after the collision he was unable to account for his actions before it.

- 6) He provided a specimen of breath at the roadside before he was taken to hospital. From the analysis of a subsequent blood sample a back calculation established that the likely reading was 175 microgrammes per 100 millilitres of blood, which was more than twice the legal limit of 80 microgrammes per 100 millilitres of blood. He admitted in interview that he had drunk two bottles of wine on the previous day and three quarters of a bottle of wine on the day of the accident. He had not eaten for three days before the accident because of colitis.
- 7) Copies of victim impact statements from Mrs Barber and other members of her family were available to the Crown Court Judge but are not included in the papers available to this Committee. However, they are summarised in the transcript of the hearing, in particular, the impact on Mrs Barber who understandably was finding it difficult to cope with the loss of her husband. She had also lost the confidence to drive as a result of the accident.
- 8) Following receipt of a letter from the RCVS Professional Conduct Department, dated 26 April 2007, informing him of their formal notification of the conviction, Mr Hanlon replied on 15 May 2007 admitting the conviction and expressing his remorse for the accident in which he had caused Mr Barber's death. In the letter and in the oral evidence that he has given before the Committee today, he has outlined his personal circumstances including details of a longstanding problem with alcohol and the measures he has taken to seek professional assistance since the accident. He has told this Committee that he has not drunk alcohol since the accident, now 18 months ago. Before he received a custodial sentence he had sought assistance from his GP, Drinksense and The Cogwheel Trust, and since being in custody he has attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. He has expressed his anxiety about losing his ability to practise as a veterinary surgeon and support his family.
- 9) On his behalf, a number of witnesses have given evidence to the Committee, both personal and professional, as to Mr Hanlon's personal and professional qualities, which the Committee accepts. Mr Turley, Managing-Director of Pet Doctor told the Committee that Mr Hanlon was a fine veterinary surgeon who was respected amongst his colleagues. He confirmed he was willing to re-employ him following his release from prison. Mr Gillon, for whom Mr Hanlon had worked for 11 years, told the Committee that Mr Hanlon was a very competent veterinary surgeon whose clients missed his compassion. Mr Dawkins, a local bistro owner, explained that Mr Hanlon was well-regarded in the community as a veterinary surgeon, describing him as "the best vet he had come across". He said that he came before the Committee today with the support of many of his customers in the local community. Mrs Adams, a work colleague, spoke of the fact that he was very professional and popular with clients. Mrs Loughran, a cat breeder, drove two hours from her home to take her cats to Mr Hanlon for invasive procedures. These witnesses are supported by written testimonials, a letter from his partner, Jenny French, and a copy of the pre-sentence report available to the Crown Court Judge. The testimonials from people he has known and worked with attest to the fact that he is well-liked by his friends, professional colleagues and clients. He was described by several witnesses as a quiet and private man.

10) The Committee is required to consider the appropriate direction under Rule 18 to protect the welfare of animals, maintain public confidence in the profession and declare and uphold proper standards of conduct. The Committee was directed by the Legal Assessor that it should first consider whether it wishes to exercise its power to postpone judgment for a period not exceeding two years, and that in the event that it decided not to do so, to go on to consider the sanctions in Rule 18.4 starting with a reprimand and/or warning as to future conduct. The Committee was directed that it is only if it determines that it is not sufficient to protect the welfare of animals and serve the public interest to impose a sanction at a lower level that it should go on to consider the next level.

11) The Committee has given detailed consideration to all the evidence in this case, the submissions of Counsel and has taken account of the advice of the Legal Assessor before reaching its decision. In accordance with Rule 11.1 it has considered the nature and circumstances of the offence and also the *RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct 2006* which states that:

*The RCVS is required to consider any convictions against a veterinary surgeon in the criminal courts ... which 'may render him unfit to practise veterinary surgery'. It looks at only the fact and the nature of the conviction.*

The Committee has concluded that it would be in the public interest to postpone judgment for a period not exceeding two years, subject to undertakings.

12) The Committee fully accepts Mr Hanlon's remorse for the road traffic accident which caused the death of Mr Barber, and the personal mitigation put before it. It has concluded that it is in the public interest that judgment in this case should be postponed for two years. In reaching this decision, it has weighed the circumstances of the accident: in particular, the quantity of alcohol which Mr Hanlon had consumed in the period before he drove his motor car, and the effect on the Barber family of his actions, against his personal mitigation as well as the oral and written testimonials put before it. It fully accepts that Mr Hanlon has made significant attempts since the accident to address his alcohol problem and that he is committed to continue practising as a veterinary surgeon. The Committee has concluded that by postponing judgment for two years, subject to undertakings from Mr Hanlon, it can properly maintain public confidence in the profession by taking measures to monitor Mr Hanlon's abstinence from alcohol and continued practice as a veterinary surgeon.

13) The undertakings that it requires from Mr Hanlon are as follows:

- a) he abstains from the use of alcohol;
- b) he submits a full medical report from his general practitioner to Mr Jennings, chairman of this Committee at quarterly intervals, the first report to be submitted on or before 1 July 2008; and
- c) he submits a copy of his CPD record card to Mr Jennings at six-monthly intervals, the first card to be submitted on or before 1 October 2008.

In the absence of Mr Hanlon, who had to return to prison earlier this afternoon, the Committee requires Mr Hanlon to give those undertakings to this Committee in writing within 21 days.