

PRESS RELEASE

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COUNTY DURHAM VET SUSPENDED FOR PRACTISING WHILE NOT REGISTERED

The Disciplinary Committee (DC) of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons has suspended a veterinary surgeon for a period of three months for practising veterinary surgery while not registered with the College.

At a hearing which concluded on 9 September, Silke Birgitt Lindridge, of the Consett Veterinary Centre, Medomsley Road, Consett, County Durham, was found guilty of disgraceful conduct in a professional respect for practising when she ought to have known that her name had been removed from the RCVS Register for non-payment of fees.

The Committee heard that Mrs Lindridge, who qualified as a veterinary surgeon at the University of Berlin in 1997, had returned to Germany whilst on maternity leave in September 2006 but had continued to be the sole principal of two practices, the Consett Veterinary Centre, and the Winlaton Veterinary Centre in Tyne and Wear. She had continued to run the practices whilst in Germany, and had returned to the UK on several occasions during 2007, when she practised veterinary surgery on small animals and horses. She had not been registered with the College for the period between 5 June 2006 and 2 April 2008.

To practise veterinary surgery when unregistered is a criminal offence. However, after consultation with the Crown Prosecution Service, a decision was taken that it was not in the public interest to prosecute Mrs Lindridge and that the matter should be left with the RCVS Disciplinary Committee.

Mrs Lindridge claimed not to be aware that she was unregistered, stating that a fee notice and reminder, as well as a telephone call and correspondence from the College about her registration status, had not been brought to her attention by her practice administrators. The Committee accepted that she had not known, but decided that, as registration was a professional obligation, Mrs Lindridge should have known that her name had been removed from the Register, a charge that Mrs Lindridge accepted. The Committee felt that: "The failure of Mrs Lindridge to put in place proper systems for the administration of her practice, including the payment of her annual retention fee... was lamentable." The way in which the practice had paid its bills during her absence demonstrated an "utterly careless attitude to the administration of the practice".

Taking account of the fact that Mrs Lindridge had not knowingly practised while unregistered, and the positive support of her clients, the Committee decided that a three-month period of suspension from the Register was appropriate.

Beverley Cottrell, chairing the Committee, commented: "The Committee would like to make it clear that it is the personal responsibility of every practising veterinary surgeon to ensure that the annual retention fee is paid and that their names are on the Register. It is in the public interest that clients should be assured that the practitioner is a regulated person, who is capable of providing valid certificates."

She continued: "The record of Mrs Lindridge's practice during 2007 discloses that she was providing certificates for horses and small animals whilst she was unregistered. Those certificates are invalid. She was also prescribing prescription-only drugs when she was not entitled to do so. The Committee considers that a short period of suspension is proportionate to the nature and the extent of the charge, the public interest and the interests of Mrs Lindridge."

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The RCVS is the regulatory body for veterinary surgeons in the UK and deals with issues of professional misconduct, maintaining the register of veterinary surgeons eligible to practise in the UK and assuring standards of veterinary education.
2. RCVS disciplinary powers are exercised through the Preliminary Investigation and Disciplinary Committees, established in accordance with Schedule 2 to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 (the 1966 Act). The RCVS has authority to deal with three types of case:
 - a) Fraudulent registration
 - b) Criminal convictions
 - c) Allegations of disgraceful professional conduct
3. The Disciplinary Committee is a constituted judicial tribunal under the 1966 Act and follows rules of evidence similar to those used in a court of law.
4. The burden of proving an allegation falls upon the RCVS, and the RCVS must prove to the standard that the Committee is sure.
5. A respondent veterinary surgeon may appeal a Disciplinary Committee decision to the Privy Council within 28 days of the date of the decision. If no appeal is received, the Committee's judgment takes effect after this period.
6. It is a criminal offence contrary to section 19 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 to practise as a veterinary surgeon unless registered in the RCVS Register of Members. Further information, including the original charges against Mrs Lindridge, and the Committee's findings and decision on sanction, can be found at www.rcvs.org.uk/disciplinary.