

ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS

PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION COMMITTEE

LAY OBSERVERS' REPORT JUNE 2000

- 1) I apologise for Susan Pyper, who was unable to attend as she is Chairman of the Sussex, Weald and Down NHS Trust, which had a board meeting today. What I say has been agreed between the two of us. Both Susan Pyper and I are proud to be associated with RCVS. We believe in high standards and want to help you maintain yours.
- 2) We have no criticism of any members of staff of this College, in fact quite the reverse. We are impressed with their dedication, commitment and sincerity. All of them have the College's best interests at heart.
- 3) We are impressed with the time, care and trouble that is taken in handling complaints about veterinary surgeons. The investigation system is fair and detailed but it does take a long time. PI meetings do seem to defer some cases due to lack of time and many letters contain an apology for delay. Is it lack of time; are there more cases coming in, or is it just that there are a lack of facilities to cope?
- 4) And so my first points are: -
 - a) Are the facilities adequate for handling cases?
 - b) Should PI Committee meet more often?
- 5) The Disciplinary Committee in full session is a most impressive procedure, but again it is very time consuming and costly.
- 6) Mrs Pyper and I recognize that the consequences for a wayward veterinary surgeon in these circumstances can be very grave and that as a self-regulatory body you must be seen to be fair within the law. You must also be seen by your 18,000 members, as well as the outside world, to be doing your job properly.
- 7) However, we believe that when it comes to 'punishments' for wayward veterinary surgeons, your hands are tied. You do not have enough scope.
- 8) It is perfectly fair that after a case has been investigated and the veterinary surgeon has not been found at fault then a simple letter is sent out dismissing the complaint.
- 9) If some fault has been found with the veterinary surgeon or his practice premises or his procedures we think that the letter sent to the veterinary surgeon should be a lot sharper than those that are currently being sent out.
- 10) The PI Committee must come over to the veterinary surgeon concerned as an informed enforcer and not a buddy.
- 11) Furthermore we feel that when a veterinary surgeon is called in for an interview this interview needs to be much tougher and a lot less friendly. The visiting veterinary surgeon should not be told that there will be no further action until the end of the interview.

- 12) Mature men (and women) should tremble at the thought of coming for this interview – in other words the Preliminary Investigation Committee should be seen as being exceptionally stern.
- 13) Additionally following either an interview or stern letter, a follow up should be carried out, to discover whether
 - a) The surgery was cleaned up
 - b) After care has been improved
 - c) All drugs dispensed within recommended date
 - d) The acupuncturist set up 24 hr cover
 - e) The elderly vet ceased to practice.
- 14) Self-regulation is an onerous task and in the City self-regulation has fallen into disrepute. This morning, the General Medical Council was criticised for handling of complaints, as well as for incompetent doctors.
- 15) The RCVS is here to maintain standards and must come across as tough. Currently there is too much of a gap between letters, interviews and suspension. Suspension is a heavy blow and there is little other recourse.
- 16) By now you would have realised that Mrs Pyper and I feel you must be tougher. But we also think that you need greater flexibility in dealing with the wayward vets.
- 17) At this stage I would like to tell you that I have spoken to my local vet about this matter and he agrees in principle that the 18,000 members of the RCVS would support the College in being a lot tougher with the genuine offenders in the 800 complaints that the College receives each year.
- 18) The College's duty here is to protect the patients.
- 19) Mrs Pyper and I would like to propose that the College should consider introducing a system of discretionary fines for wayward veterinary surgeons. We believe that money talks.
- 20) If this facility were available, we believe that it would have a beneficial effect on the profession. It would ensure a drop in the number of cases coming forward, it would speed up the system and the proceeds could be used to finance the Disciplinary Committees procedures where suspension was being considered.
- 21) There would, of course, have to be an appeals procedure but a fined veterinary surgeon would have to finance his own case.
- 22) We recognise that new legislation is needed to implement this suggestion but this College has many friends at court and perhaps we should start talking to them.
- 23) As I told you, Mrs Pyper and I have discussed this between ourselves and would be very happy to discuss it further with you if the Council thought it appropriate.
- 24) Can I finish by saying that to maintain high standards this excellent College needs the ability to "put the wind up" the "naughty" veterinary surgeons because once they know the ropes they can "cock a snook" and some do.

Paul Marland
1 June 2000