

ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS

PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION COMMITTEE

LAY OBSERVERS' REPORT JUNE 2001

- 1) Members of Council will, I am sure, recall the oral report which I presented last year, after Susan Pyper and I had sat with the Preliminary Investigation Committee for a year. This was summarised in the RCVS Annual Report 2000 and a full written account of the presentation was subsequently considered by the Preliminary Investigation Committee.
- 2) Regrettably neither Susan nor I are able to attend the Council meeting this year.
- 3) What we want to report to Council this year however is progress on the issues which we raised in our report last year. We expressed views on a range of things in June 2000, looking at the complaints handling process from the outset through to Disciplinary Committee. Whilst broadly impressed with the way things were done we nevertheless suggested a number of possible improvements.
- 4) Some of these changes, such as the proposal to introduce fines, we appreciate will need to await new legislation. I am pleased to report, however, that a number of our other suggestions have been, or are in the process of being implemented.
- 5) The Preliminary Investigation Committee now meets more frequently. The Chairman and Vice-Chairman have a very heavy workload screening cases for consideration by the full Committee. The Professional Conduct Department has taken on additional staff which has improved its ability to handle complaints more effectively and without too much delay. Nevertheless although the numbers of complaints are thankfully not increasing the Department continues to be stretched and we may still need more staff before we can feel that we are treating both complainants and the profession as we would like to, in terms of getting to the bottom of some often quite complex matters, responding to all parties promptly and explaining our decisions.
- 6) As we recommended last year the College has been getting tougher with Members whose conduct has been found wanting, but this has we understand, not been well received in some quarters. Whilst the role of the Disciplinary Committee seems to be reasonably understood, and its decisions do not seem to excite much criticism, Members seem to be concerned about the fact that in cases which are not sufficiently serious to be referred to the Disciplinary Committee, the Preliminary Investigation Committee may now offer advice to the vet, which is disclosed to the complainant. Somewhat naively some members of the profession seem to think that if they are not being referred to the Disciplinary Committee they should be exonerated in full.
- 7) We also said in our June 2000 report that cases should be followed-up more formally. This is beginning to happen.
- 8) We believe, as we said last year, that the College must come across as tough, in order to maintain the standards of the profession and the privilege of self-regulation, which is under such attack elsewhere, particularly in the medical profession.

- 9) On the whole, however, Susan and I are happy with the progress which has been made in the past year by the Committee and by Gordon Hockey and his team. Things are moving forward and we are fully aware that change takes time. A lot of hard work goes into handling the complaints which the College receives, which may not yet be fully appreciated by either the public or the vets. The College needs to do more to explain what it has to do, to deal with the criticisms: but it must not go soft.

Paul Marland
June 2001