

# ROYAL COLLEGE OF VETERINARY SURGEONS

## PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION COMMITTEE

### LAY OBSERVERS' REPORT JUNE 2002

- 1) Unfortunately, neither Paul Marland nor I are able to attend the Council meeting this year to present our third annual report, and we would like to apologise for our unavoidable absence. We have jointly reflected on items raised in our 2001 report and considered progress made in the complaints handling process, through to disciplinary committee.
- 2) We welcome the reorganisation of the Professional Conduct department and the recruitment of additional staff to assist with the workload. On several occasions, senior caseworkers have visited complainants and veterinary surgeons in the initial stages of investigations to gather information, and this has proved useful. Furthermore these visits demonstrate the College's determination to examine every aspect of complaints concerning the facilities provided by the vet in question. However, the absence of these staff from the College has a knock-on effect on the administrative management of complaints and the Professional Conduct department is fully stretched. The appointment of a deputy head of department should ease the situation.
- 3) The pressure on the Chairman and other members of the Preliminary Investigation Committee to screen new cases in a timely manner is still a cause for concern. On the subject of screening, the introduction of a checks and balances' system offering lay observers the opportunity to look at a random selection of new cases, and to assess them either as 'no case' or 'to PI Committee' is another step forward, demonstrating the Committee's intention to ensure true independent scrutiny throughout the complaints process. This system has only recently been introduced but Council Members will be encouraged to hear that so far there is a high degree of agreement as to how each case should be progressed.
- 4) Last year, the Committee changed the interview process during complaints handling. Veterinary surgeons named may now be offered the opportunity of a formal interview, which is transcribed verbatim and might subsequently be used as evidence at a Disciplinary hearing. They have the right to refuse this. They may also be offered an informal interview, which is not transcribed. Any information offered at informal interview may not be used at a subsequent Disciplinary hearing, and again the interview may be declined. It will come as no surprise to Council members that VDS are not yet convinced by this approach, but, while we acknowledge that it is early days so far we have observed the process to be fair and to have assisted the deliberations of the PI Committee. We would, ideally, like a lay observer to be present at all interviews but practically this has not always been possible. The recruitment of a third lay observer should enable more frequent attendance at these interviews.
- 5) An issue which seems to be increasingly contentious with both the public and the profession is that of pricing, for veterinary services and also for prescribed medicines. We believe the College has a role to play here in guiding the profession as to what is acceptable, and in monitoring charges. This is a sensitive and complex

issue but nevertheless a nettle which must be grasped if the College is to maintain credibility as the leading body of the veterinary profession.

- 6) We are pleased that the College has maintained a tough line with members whose conduct has been found wanting. There are, though, some veterinary surgeons who delay responding to letters from the College, sometimes for many months, thus preventing progress of a complaint. This is unacceptable and we suggest that the College needs to get this message across firmly to its members.
- 7) Although it is not strictly our responsibility we are disappointed that a member of Council appears to have been using his position to provoke complaints against veterinary surgeons. We get the impression that this is being done in order to promote his own cause. Our concern, as Lay Observers, is that if this is the case, his activity may inhibit the future conduct/confidence of the PI Committee.
- 8) Generally, Paul and I feel this has been a challenging year for the Committee but also one of real progress. There have been substantial changes in procedures, albeit they are limited by what is statutorily possible, and we have observed the Committee to conduct itself in a manner, which is just and open. We would like to thank Committee members for their willingness to answer our many questions and to listen to and consider our opinions. The continued involvement of lay observers on the PI Committee is essential to ensure probity and transparency in the resolution of complaints against the profession.

SUSAN PYPER  
15 May 2002