



RCVS

Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

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PROMOTING AND SUSTAINING PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

SURVEY OF THE PROFESSION 2006

Nearly 50% of you replied to our *Survey of the Profession* this year but what do the results tell us about the way veterinary work is changing? How and where do you spend your time? What are your views on veterinary life today and your aspirations for the future? This issue of *RCVS News Extra* offers an overview of the survey's findings.

It was a comprehensive survey and although it is impossible to get a completely representative view, the response rate was good. The results offer a snapshot of the profession today and an insight into its potential future and, by tracking data over our previous surveys (1998, 2000 and 2002), some useful trends can be established.

We will build on the findings to develop a strategy for the future of the profession, in consultation with bodies such as DEFRA and the BVA (both of which supported this survey), the first step towards which was our recent Postcards

from the Future Symposium (see back page for more information). DEFRA will also be using some of the data to help establish a stronger evidence base on the current state of, and potential changes facing, the provision of veterinary services in rural areas.

Overview

So what does the survey tell us? There are actually a few surprises. The benefit of carrying out a survey of this size is that we gain some concrete evidence about the state of the profession, which compares interestingly with some of the opinions that are fed back to the College.

Despite anecdotal evidence to the contrary, the dynamics of the profession remain relatively stable. For example, the impact of the so-called 'feminisation of the profession' seems to be less marked than anticipated, given the very real rise in the number of female veterinary surgeons. In fact, the number of part-time workers has risen by only 2% since 2002. Meanwhile, 23% of sole principals, practice partners or directors are now female, putting paid to the suggestion that women are unwilling to invest in practice. The average hours worked in practice are down on the 2002 findings, at 42.8 per week in general/first opinion practice, compared with 51.6 in 2002 (figures are for full-timers only). Other findings were less surprising: the trend for practice time spent on cats, rabbits and horses is going up, whilst that for dogs, cattle and sheep is going down.

The following sections look in a little more detail at who replied, where they are working and how they are spending their time. For the first time, we also asked questions about continuing professional development (CPD) and support for new graduates, and sought opinions from members on a range of attitudinal statements.

Who replied?

Respondents matched the RCVS database of members fairly closely in terms of age, ethnicity and year of qualification; however, there was a slight over-response from female vets and a clear under-response from vets who qualified overseas.

Respondents range in age from 22 to 95 with a mean average age of 44.9 years. There is a big difference between the genders: the average age of male respondents is 51, while for female respondents it is only 37.5. This year, 45% of respondents are female compared with 37% in 2002 and 34% in 2000. If we look at only vets working within the profession, i.e. removing members who don't work as vets, and retired members, women comprise 49% of respondents – and if we look simply at vets in practice, women are in the majority for the first time, at 51%.

The issue of career breaks is linked to feminisation. Although some male vets are on a career break, mostly it is women who take such breaks, and their reasons are mainly related to having children and raising a family – no surprises there. As Table 1 (overleaf) shows, proportionally ten times as many women as men are on a career break. A 'typical' break appears to last 12 months.

Women are also more likely than men to work part time which also has implications for future workforce modelling. However, at 25%, the proportion of women working part time is perhaps not as high as might be



The dynamics of the profession remain relatively stable.

SHORT OF TIME? HERE ARE THE HIGHLIGHTS:

- Despite anecdotal evidence, the profession remains quite stable
- Part-time work has gone up – but not as much as might have been expected
- The number of members spending at least some time working in practice is going up – 89% of respondents (compared with 80% in 2002)
- Based on members' assessment of where their time is spent, cats, rabbits and horses account for an increasing amount of time, whereas time spent on large animals and LVI and meat hygiene work is going down
- The number of hours worked (taking account of full-time members only) is going down
- The number of hours on-call is also going down – explained in part by 22% of practices using out-of-hours service providers
- If they had their time again, 53% would still be a vet

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Table 1: Employment status of all respondents by gender: %

	Male	Female
Full time	70	64
Part time	5	25
Partially retired	5	1
Total employed	80	90
Unemployed	0.5	1
Career break	0.5	5
Fully retired	18	4

anticipated and although part-time working is increasing slightly (from 11% in 2000, to 12% in 2002 and 14% in 2006), full-time working is still the norm for both male and female vets.

Working outside the profession

Some vets with RCVS membership work outside the profession, in employment that does not require RCVS membership or involve the use of veterinary skills. Many vets who leave the profession also opt out of RCVS membership, but some choose to keep up their registration and they have been included in the survey. Only 4% of respondents say they work outside the profession: management, research and office work are the most frequently mentioned, with 40% in the private sector, 25% in the public sector and 5% in the voluntary sector ('other employment' categories include self-employed).

Working within the profession

Vets in the profession are the main focus of the survey. Table 2 shows that the proportion of vets working in practice has increased, while non-practice work, especially government work, has decreased.

Looking at working hours, although 37% of respondents believed that a better 'work-life balance' would improve the profession, it seems that the trend is already falling in terms of both working and on-call hours. Full-time respondents in practice now work 42.8 hours per week on average, and are on call for 21.6, compared to 48 and 23 hours respectively in 2000. Figure 1 illustrates the working and on-call hours of full-time vets in different practice areas. It is interesting to note that, at 45.7 hours per week excluding 'on call', those working in UK vet schools claim the longest hours.

Changes to the *RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct* in March 2005

stressed that members must 'take steps' to provide 24-hour emergency cover but are not necessarily required to provide this cover themselves. Although on-call arrangements are still largely being handled solely by the practice (63%), 22% of practices are now using an out-of-hours service and 11% have a sharing arrangement with other practices. On-call is an important feature of work-life balance, so this is an issue that will be flagged for future monitoring.

Practice roles

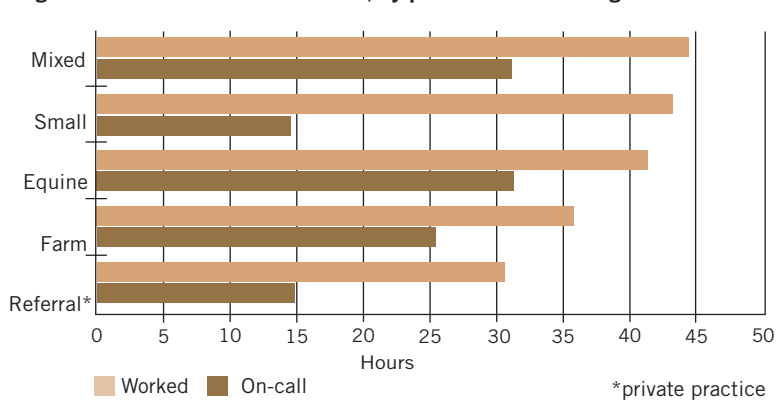
Table 3 shows that women are starting to take senior roles in practice, with 23% of sole principals, practice partners and/or directors now female. As practice

Table 2: Area of work: %

	2006	2002	2000
Government	10	14	15
University	7	9	7
Commerce and industry	4	4	3
Charities and trusts	2	3	2
Other	1	-	-
Total non-practice	24	30	27
Practice	89	80	81

Note: Percentages total more than 100, as some respondents work in more than one area

Figure 1: Hours worked and on call, by practice area: average (mean)



role is likely to be a function of age, the proportion of principal/partner positions being occupied by women may well increase in line with the average age of female vets.

Ownership of practices still appears to follow the traditional model, in that 50% are owned by a partnership, and 29% by a sole principal. Only 2% of respondents say they work in a practice owned by a corporate concern, although 15% say their practice is owned by a limited company.

“23% of sole principals, practice partners and directors are now female.”

Where is time spent?

Respondents were asked about their typical time breakdown on different activities in the practice. Linking this to previous surveys (Figure 2) it seems that the movement towards small animals and away from farm animals may have reached a plateau. Vets were also asked to

WHO REPLIED?

- Survey issued to all 20,479 members in January 2006
- 9,671 replies, representing 47.2% response rate (up from 29% response in 2002)
- 88% completed on paper; 12% online
- Gender: 55% male; 45% female (34% female in 2000, 37% in 2002)
- Age: range 22-95, mean 44.9
- Ethnicity: 98% white
- Veterinary association membership: none 25%; British Veterinary Association 64%; BVA territorial division 17%; non-BVA associations in UK 5%; international associations 23%

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Table 3: Position in practice: %

	Male	Female	Total
Sole principal	17	5	11
Partner/director of limited company	16	4	10
Salaried partner	2	1	2
Partner	25	7	16
Total partner	43	12	28
Full-time assistant	28	52	40
Part-time assistant	3	20	11
Consultant	2	1	1
Locum	5	8	6
Other	1	2	2

compare five years ago (2001) with their expectations of five years in the future (2011). Here, vets believed that the trend will be down for dogs, cattle, sheep, meat hygiene and LVI work, and up for cats, rabbits and practice management.

CPD

With November 2005 seeing RCVS Council agreeing that CPD should be considered mandatory, it was interesting to see how the profession is tackling the issue. The majority of vets (82%) are not involved in providing CPD, but almost all respondents say that they engage in CPD activities, typically for five days in the past year (the 35 hours-per-year RCVS recommendation).

A variety of CPD methods are in use, with reading being most frequently cited. When asked about their preferred CPD

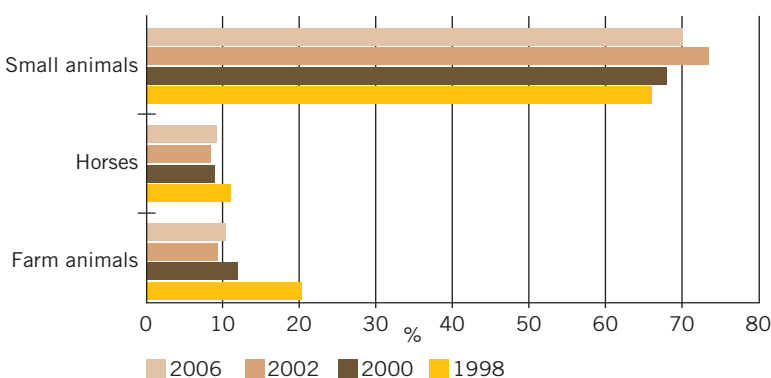
methods, members indicate that they like courses (day/weekend/evening), perhaps because this gives them the opportunity to meet fellow professionals. Most CPD (67%) is funded by the employer/practice.

Recent graduates

For the first time, recent qualifiers (those who graduated in 2000 onwards) were asked about their early experiences. Most (87%) say they went straight into practice. Just over half of those entering practice (51%) received further training, although



Figure 2: Percentage breakdown of practice time: trend over time



Respondents recognised the importance of issues relating to the decline in UK farming.

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only a third of these (36%) received any formal appraisal or performance review, a fact that supports the introduction in 2007 of the RCVS Professional Development Phase for new graduates.

Veterinary viewpoint

Another 'first' for the 2006 survey was the inclusion of a section asking vets about their attitudes, perceptions and opinions on the profession. Responses indicate that vets enjoy their work and find it varied (but also stressful); however, part-time opportunities and family friendliness are not rated highly. There is general agreement that farm work is on the decline and small animal work increasing, but disagreement that demand for veterinary services will increase over the next ten years. Further analysis shows that women are particularly likely to have concerns about part-time working, stress and family friendliness, while men are more positive about farm work - and older vets are more positive about everything! When asked whether, if they could start their career again, they would still opt for the veterinary profession, the majority (53%) said yes.

Finally, vets were asked to describe the best three things about being in the profession, give three suggestions for improvement, and identify the three biggest challenges facing the profession.

“Average weekly hours worked in general practice have fallen by 17% since the 2002 survey.”

The results reflected the findings of elsewhere in the survey: vets enjoy their work, but have concerns about work-life balance and recognise the importance of issues related to the decline of the farming sector in the UK.

OTHER TOPICS:

- Distances travelled to see cases
- The size and scope of the veterinary team
- Career plans
- Unemployment
- Country of work
- Specialisation and further education
- Use of paraprofessionals and consultants
- IT in the practice

For the full report, visit RCVSonline at www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys, or for a hard copy please contact Fiona Clark on (020) 7202 0773 or f.clark@rcvs.org.uk.

“Vets say they enjoy their work, but have concerns about their work-life balance.”



Those working in UK vet schools claim to work the longest hours.

WISH YOU'D BEEN THERE?

Postcards from the Future Symposium

The Survey of the Profession gave an indication of where the profession is now and where it may be heading. But it is up to the profession to decide if this is where it wants to go. A seminar held at Belgravia House in June explored potential visions for the future by asking a range of thought-provoking speakers, representing small and large animal practice, the views of animal owners, veterinary nursing, academia, industry and the state, to send us a postcard from the year 2020. The views of other professions were also shared, including dentistry, pharmacy and the optical sector.

Introducing the meeting, the then RCVS President Lynne Hill said if the veterinary profession wanted to shape its future it had to adopt a positive attitude to the challenges it was currently facing. The Survey of the Profession showed that the pace of change was not as extreme as many claimed and she warned against the prevailing pessimistic mood – “gloomy pictures may become a self-fulfilling prophesy”.

In the small animal sector, there will be a continuation of the trend towards larger multivet practices offering a wide range of specialist clinical disciplines and hosting the services of skilled paraprofessionals such as physiotherapists, nutritionists and osteopaths, suggested Peter Watson, Managing Director of the Vets4Pets Group.



Formerly, business development manager of the Specsavers Optical group, Mr Watson pointed out that the challenges facing the veterinary profession were often very similar to those experienced by other healthcare professions like opticians. He predicted that some of the solutions will also be similar, highlighting the transformation of the optical market over the past 30 years with the emergence of corporate chains.

However, in the coming years, greater public acceptance of the value of pet insurance will allow veterinary surgeons to continue raising standards of veterinary care. They will also be able to charge a realistic professional rate allowing them to provide better salaries for themselves and their support staff. And should disputes arise over veterinary fees, there will be an independent body in place to act as mediator, suggested veterinary consultant Dr Eric Jackson.

Charging a proper rate for their professional services will also be essential for the future survival of farm animal practice, particularly in view of the changes underway in veterinary medicines distribution, observed Jonathan Long, Livestock Editor of *Farmers Weekly*.

He foresaw the current decline in the numbers of farm animal practitioners levelling off in the future. Livestock farmers would still need the input of their veterinary advisor although most work would take the form of pre-planned health checks rather than emergency visits, which would become increasingly uneconomic.

A new working relationship would also be necessary between neighbouring practices if they are to continue to provide the range of services and out-of-hours cover that farmers will need, believed Leicestershire practitioner Peter Orpin. However, these changes in the structure of farm animal practice must be properly handled by the profession, its clients and government. “Market forces alone may produce a system of change without progress with higher disease risks, poorer welfare and reduced overall veterinary service if this is not managed well,” he warned.



Yet while most speakers were optimistic about the future of the veterinary profession over the next decade, some current issues were likely to cause continuing problems. Equine practitioner and recent graduate Huw Griffiths warned that solutions must be found to the problem of mounting debts among veterinary students. This was already discouraging young graduates from taking up a low paid appointment in academia. If left unchecked, the trend would result in the intake of veterinary schools becoming increasingly dominated by the offspring of well-to-do parents, he said.

The symposium will inform our ongoing review of the RCVS Strategy Plan and we hope to be able to work with bodies such as DEFRA, the BVA and others to build a plan for the future of the profession. A full report of the event can be downloaded from RCVSonline on www.rcvs.org.uk/postcards or, for a hard copy, please contact Fiona Clark on 020 7202 0773 or f.clark@rcvs.org.uk.

Looking ahead: the then RCVS President Lynne Hill (centre) at the symposium with CVO Debby Reynolds (left) and BVA President Freda Scott-Park.

2007 INTRODUCTION FOR MODULAR CERTIFICATES

Following Council's approval in June of the bye-laws and rules for administration for the new modular certificates, information packs have been sent to veterinary schools and some other universities inviting them to apply for accreditation for the modules they wish to offer. We will hold a meeting in October to consider the first batch of applications.

Following approval, some modules will be available for enrolment from early 2007, with others becoming available throughout the year. Details on the enrolment process and module providers will be published after the October meeting. Meanwhile, the current RCVS certificates remain available for enrolment up to 1 November 2007 to allow time for the new modular system to get established.

Although assessment will be under the ambit of universities, CPD providers are strongly encouraged to work in collaboration with universities in the provision of courses. We will be running a seminar on 25 January 2007 to explore these possibilities in more detail.

Please visit www.rcvs.org.uk/modcerts for more information, including copies of the bye-laws, rules for administration, accreditation application forms and copies of the modules, or contact the Education Department on (020) 7202 0791 or education@rcvs.org.uk.