

Comment

All in the same boat?

THE results of surveys of the veterinary profession are always of interest, not least because you can look at the overall findings and see how they compare with your own situation. This is certainly true of the surveys undertaken every four years by the RCVS to provide a snapshot of the veterinary profession in the UK, the most recent of which was published in September last year (*VR*, September 27, 2014, vol 175, p 288). It could also be said to apply to a survey recently undertaken by the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) which considers the situation across Europe and, therefore, offers scope for this kind of comparison on an international basis.

The veterinary profession is changing in other parts of Europe, just as it is in the UK. The FVE survey, the first of its kind, aimed to assess benchmarking statistics for the profession relating to demographic, employment and financial indicators. More than 13,000 veterinarians from 24 of the FVE's 36 member countries completed a questionnaire, and data from national surveys undertaken by two more member countries were also included in the analysis. A summary report on the survey paints a broad picture of veterinarians' perceptions of the current state of the profession across Europe while also indicating where the situation may differ in different countries. It also includes a commentary provided by an FVE task force and draws attention to areas where data are lacking.¹

Among the more positive findings of the survey are that European veterinarians are generally satisfied with their career and feel confident about their prospects. It also found that 'by far the greater proportion of practice revenue is derived from professional, non-commercial activities, indicating what would appear to be a significant shift away from practice earnings based on drug sales in many countries'.

A finding that, across Europe, average salaries for veterinarians were almost 25 per cent higher than for other workers might also be considered encouraging, although it would be interesting to know how they compare with salaries in other professions, particularly as veterinarians appeared to be less satisfied with their salaries than they were with their career. What is certainly not encouraging is the finding that, across Europe, 'a significant remunerative

differential can be observed between the replies of the male and female veterinarians – with females being paid on average 28 per cent less than their male colleagues'. Women make up more of the younger end of the profession and it may well be that, to some extent, as suggested in the report, more women take a break to raise a family, work on a part-time basis or possibly work in less well-paid areas of the profession but, even so, this finding is profoundly worrying.

Also potentially worrying are findings relating to veterinary unemployment and underemployment. Unemployment is reported at 3 per cent (and underemployment at 23 per cent), but, the survey report points out, is much higher in some countries. These, it says, tend to be the countries with larger numbers of veterinary schools producing higher number of veterinary graduates relative to their total population. The report also remarks that a high percentage of professionals are considering or have considered emigrating to work in another country, with this being more prevalent in countries where unemployment is higher.

Although this is very much a Europe-wide survey, and the two are not directly comparable, the temptation to compare the findings with the results of last year's RCVS survey of the profession in the UK is almost irresistible. It appears that a higher proportion of veterinarians work in clinical practice in the UK than elsewhere in Europe, where more are employed in the public sector. In other European countries, as in the UK,

women now make up about 50 per cent of the profession, with the proportion set to increase. In other European countries, too, the size of practices appears to be changing, with a trend towards corporatisation and the creation of larger practice groups. Veterinary unemployment is not generally considered to be a problem in the UK, although the 2014 RCVS survey did find that some new graduates were taking longer to find jobs. Meanwhile, successive surveys undertaken by the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons in the UK have identified differences in the salaries paid to male and female veterinarians: in the UK, as well as in other countries, this situation needs to be addressed.

In some respects the FVE's survey might provide the kind of reassurance that comes from knowing that 'We're all in the same boat', although some of the findings may also raise concerns about the direction in which the boat is heading. The findings certainly underline the relevance of initiatives such as the RCVS/BVA Vet Futures project (www.vetfutures.org.uk), which is currently looking at some of the challenges and opportunities facing the profession, to help steer an appropriate course for the future.

1. A summary of the findings of the FVE's survey, on which this Comment is based, is available free of charge at www.fve.org/news/reports.php. The full report is available for purchase, price €499.00

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