

EDITORIAL

APRIL 2006

The RCVS finally made the public launch of its Practice Standards Scheme more than a year after it took over two similar programmes run by the BSAVA and the BVHA, and the event has not gone without some fairly explicit criticism from within the profession.

It is fair to say that although the scheme is intended to both raise standards and reassure the public, it stands a pretty good chance of doing neither. Vets themselves have pointed out that a voluntary scheme cannot help pet owners to draw a conclusion about those practices that do not join, that there is no indication that it will bring commercial benefits to the practices that do, and that after a year, the number of practices that are members of the PSS is barely more than the number covered by the previous two schemes. The fact that there has been no loud outcry about loss of professional independence or intrusive meddling by the RCVS indicates clearly that there is a strong body of support for *something* that will tell consumers what they should expect from vets, but this scheme is not it.

Voluntary schemes such as this suffer the double disadvantage of inconsistent participation and low credibility, and in the absence of definite financial benefit no one could blame practicing vets for saying 'Why bother?' The inspection process, whilst exhaustive in the first instance, allows for participation in the scheme for four years and thereafter renewal is in the basis of self-assessment and spot-checks. This is hardly a recipe to raise standards and improve public confidence.

The RCVS' stated commitment to raising standards is laudable and should be supported in every way, but the main player is absent.

Whilst many vets have said they would prefer a compulsory scheme, and some senior figures predict that this will become so, the real sticking point is the law. The Veterinary Surgeons Act of 1966 effectively prohibits the RCVS from making the scheme mandatory and that will remain the case until the law is changed. Where, then, is the Government?

We all know how long a new VSA has been talked about, and we are all aware of the consultations that have taken place, but until the Government makes time in the parliamentary schedule for the passage of a new Act, nothing will change: except, perhaps, a snail's progress towards full veterinary practice membership.

It's now time for DEFRA to step out of the shadows and cast aside its policy of following the profession. DEFRA has to take the lead in pressing Government business managers into allocating time for a new Act. Only in this way will vets truly raise their standards in a way that will give pet owners confidence and their pets the quality of care they deserve.