

A whirlwind 2007 retrospective

Author : NIGEL WOODBINE, HARRY WADDLE

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NIGEL WOODBINE and HARRY WADDLE take a look back at the biggest stories to hit the profession over a turbulent 12 months

IT is hard to imagine how anybody could ever forget the events of the past 12 months, but as we wonder what the new year will bring, *Veterinary Times* offers a reminder of the occurrences that made 2007 such an annus horribilis for the profession.

January

Many people start off the new year with a list of resolutions, top of which is usually the intention to lose a few of those festive pounds. However, in January the US Food and Drug Administration announced its approval of a prescription drug for the management of obesity in dogs. Many UK vets thought doggy diet pills were just another example of “convenience culture” and that vets should be trying to encourage preventive methods such as exercise and diet instead.

Veterinary Times joined forces with Intervet to launch CICADA - a national survey created to investigate the opinions and awareness of practising vets with regard to 20 companion animal infectious diseases in England, Scotland and Wales. The ongoing survey aims to provide benchmarks so that seasonal and long-term trends can be identified.

DEFRA's TB Advisory Group, headed by vet Peter Jinman, published its recommendations on the practical delivery and impacts of pre-movement testing. Mr Jinman said: “We support pre-movement testing as a means of reducing the risk of spread of TB through cattle movements... We will continue to monitor progress on premovement testing and will offer further advice to ministers

and the CVO as appropriate.”

Teenager Ben Hazelwood started his year with a six-month suspended sentence and 150 hours of unpaid work, after posing as a vet and creating false practice letterheads in order to purchase cheap antibiotics, worming tablets, vaccines and anaesthetics direct from the supplier. He was also ordered to pay £500 costs.

February

A Bernard Matthews farm in Holton, near Lowestoft, was put under restriction on February 1 when preliminary tests indicated the H5 strain of the avian influenza virus was present in samples from poultry found dead on the premises. The VLA later confirmed the presence of the highly pathogenic Asian strain of H5N1. The virus was only found in one of 22 turkey sheds on the affected farm, but all 159,000 turkeys at the site were slaughtered.

DEFRA was slammed for neglecting to notify local vets of the outbreak, when a *Veterinary Times* investigation found local practices had received no official notice from the Government organisation throughout the incident. Gerard Roche, owner of the Eagle Veterinary Group in Halesworth - the only practice within the 3km protection zone - said: “I’m only about a mile down the road from the [infected] farm, yet I seem to have been missed out of the loop entirely.” What was possibly the world’s first veterinary science podcast was launched by the RVC. All episodes are available free from www.rvc.ac.uk or via subscription through tunes.

Other news in February included investigations into a “death pit” filled with the rotting carcasses of more than 1,000 gamebirds and their eggs in Beulah, south Wales, the launch of a campaign to eradicate strangles by The British Horse Society and the Animal Health Trust, and the publication of results from the Badger Found Dead survey in Wales. The results of this probe were said to be “consistent with the hypothesis that the badger is an important component in the epidemiology of bovine TB in areas where a high number of cattle are affected”.

March

Government exemptions to a ban on tail docking received criticism from veterinary and animal welfare associations. The regulations, which allow veterinary surgeons to dock the tail of a “working” dog if its owner meets certain criteria and the dog is of a certain type, were slammed as “unnecessary” and “unenforceable” by the RSPCA, but became law in England on April 6.

A European advisory group was launched to help veterinary practitioners improve the medical management of canine emesis. The European Emesis Council was formed to improve understanding and everyday management in an area that it claims to have been neglected for many years.

The first nationwide small animal pet blood bank opened its doors in March. Loughborough-based Pet Blood Bank UK (PBBuk) is a not-for-profit charity and is the first service of its kind to collect, process, store and supply pet blood products on a nationwide scale. Its services mean that in the event of an emergency, practices can have blood or plasma products on site and instantly accessible.

This month also saw condemnation of the RCAS disciplinary committee's decision to strike an equine surgeon from the *RCAS Register of Members*. A letter to Sheila Crispin, then president of the RCAS (Bob Moore took over in July), which was signed by 321 vets and equine experts, raised concerns over the "extreme harshness of punishment" received by John Alan Walker, who was found guilty of professional misconduct in January for entering false vaccination information on two separate horse passports. A subsequent appeal raised more than £20,000 for legal representation.

April

In April, the Animal Welfare Act finally become a reality in all parts of the UK and, despite various concerns over enforcement, it was heralded by many as "the most important piece of animal welfare legislation for nearly a century". However, a poll by pet insurer Petplan showed that nine out of 10 animal owners did not understand the implications of the new act - in fact, nearly half of the pet-owning public (48 per cent) knew nothing about it.

Then chief veterinary officer Debby Reynolds warned UK vets and farmers to "be on alert" for bluetongue, which she claimed was "near enough to the UK to be a real risk during the summer", following its emergence in northern Europe during 2006.

Talk of bluetongue also raised fears over "the most devastating horse disease on the planet" when equine charity The Horse Trust called an emergency briefing to warn that African horse sickness was poised to strike the UK's equine population. The disease is transmitted to horses by several species of *Culicoides* (biting midges) - the same vector responsible for bluetongue in northern Europe. A working group to tackle possible outbreaks was subsequently established. April also saw the State Veterinary Service merge with the Dairy Hygiene and Egg Marketing Inspectorates and the Wildlife Licensing and Registration Service to create a single agency, known simply (and confusingly for some) as Animal Health.

May

This month, RCVS research revealed that the average length of time a new graduate stayed with a non-PDP practice was just six months. Justin Carpenter from RIG Vet Recruitment went further, claiming that many graduates were already in their second or even third job within 18 months of qualifying, which he believed could be due to practices having no induction or formal training programmes in place.

Perhaps due to this, the BVA reported the “resounding success” of its support meetings for new graduates. Organised and run by BVA territorial divisions, these pilot meetings were created for the benefit of young vets from graduation through to five years post-graduation, allowing them the opportunity to air employment issues or difficulties experienced in practice.

May also saw the first set of results from CICADA, the launch of the Young Vet Network, and concerns raised by SPVS and BEVA over the unwillingness of younger vets to buy into practice ownership due to financial worry, unwillingness to work long hours and an uncertainty about the future of private practice.

Shambo the sacred bull made the headlines when he tested positive for bTB and officials at the Skanda Vale Hindu Temple in west Wales refused to hand him over. They claimed that permitting DEFRA to kill Shambo would be “an appalling desecration of life, the sanctity of our temples and Hinduism as a whole”. Shambo received international support via a specially created website promoting the cause, but the animal was eventually slaughtered after a protracted legal battle, estimated to have cost the Welsh taxpayer at least £200,000.

June

In June, *Veterinary Times* revealed DEFRA was no closer to making any changes to the Veterinary Surgeons Act. Despite input from the profession in 2003 to help modernise the act - which dates back to 1966 - and recommendations put forward by the RCVS in 2005, the Government agency had moved no further with creating a new act or even offered an idea of how long such an overhaul would take, despite admitting the need for an act representative of the current profession.

A DEFRA spokesman said: “We recognise that the Veterinary Surgeons Act is in need of modernisation. Significant developments have occurred within the veterinary profession over the past four decades.”

Luckily, the new Animal Welfare Act has fared a little better, and the RSPCA claimed it had enabled the charity to become more effective in influencing animal owners to act responsibly. Speaking to *Veterinary Times* just two months after the act’s launch, Tim Was, regional superintendent for East Anglia and the midlands, said: “I am personally and professionally delighted because the Animal Welfare Act is doing exactly what it says on the tin. In actual fact, it’s working beyond our wildest dreams.”

July

While the worst floods in living memory were decimating the country, veterinary practices in Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Worcestershire were forced to use temporary facilities, or closed altogether, after being affected by the torrential weather.

The veterinary profession thought it could finally stem the tide of bovine TB infection, only for the IS report to return inconclusive findings, although the King Report insisted a cull was necessary later in the year.

During the same month, UK veterinary schools announced plans to expand existing facilities, including a £10m new small animal hospital at the University of Liverpool and a £3m cancer care facility at the University of Edinburgh. The investment was described by the BEVA's then president, David Catlow, as helping to provide students with "the best veterinary education in the world".

But it appeared that education was not being passed down to owners. Numerous cases of fatal permethrin poisoning in cats were reported, following their owners' incorrect use of non-veterinary treatments for dogs, leading to a *Veterinary Times* campaign to abandon the use of the term "spot-on" and urge vets to be more specific when prescribing flea treatments.

August

The Government received rare praise in August after successfully containing an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease near Dorking, Surrey. DEFRA's contingency plan saw a surveillance zone established and a movement ban immediately enforced as investigators traced the outbreak to the Government-owned laboratories at Pirbright.

Only eight infected sites were found, leading to the slaughter of 650 animals, although Britain is still to receive FMD-free status six months on from the first confirmed case.

The outbreak overshadowed the rest of the month as Britain held its breath to see the extent of the outbreak, but there was also time for another controversy in August, as questions were raised over the legitimacy of the medicines "cascade". Pharmaceutical companies and the VMD were forced to deny criticisms from several vets, including Malcolm Wright who summed up opinion by saying the system was "only ever brought in for the benefit of the pharmaceutical companies, not the vet".

A mixed month for the RCVS saw the introduction of the long-awaited Veterinary Nurse Register, answering calls to make veterinary nursing a regulated profession. But the RCVS was forced to accept the need for a new Veterinary Surgeons Act following heavy criticism of the disciplinary committee.

September

While concerns were ongoing as to the possible consequences of the previous month's FMD outbreak, Britain was hit by the third infectious disease of the year, as bluetongue was found in two cows on September 22. The disease has since been confirmed on 66 separate premises.

Despite the restrictions placed on ruminants at risk from bluetongue, September was a month to celebrate for animal welfare campaigners, following the conviction of 26 people after an RSPCA investigation smashed a dog-fighting ring in Birmingham.

The first person to be prosecuted under the new Animal Welfare Act, Gillian Breden, 51, was sentenced to two months in prison and banned from keeping animals for 10 years after being found guilty of docking puppies' tails.

But even after the first prosecution, vets admitted they remained unsure of the correct procedure if they suspected illegal docking. This is "due to the question of client confidentiality and the possibility of upsetting or even losing the client," according to Joseph Holmes, honorary veterinary surgeon for the Council of Docked Breeds.

Leonard French, 69, was also imprisoned in September after being found guilty of impersonating a vet. The Lincolnshire-based "vet" was given a 12-month custodial sentence after a BBC investigation discovered he had made an estimated £170,000 from selling and administering unlicensed veterinary medicines over three years.

October

At the BEVA congress in Belfast, the veterinary profession was encouraged to "pull together". Incoming president Nick Blayney and MEP Avril Doyle encouraged the profession to speak with one voice to enforce legislative change in Europe.

Celebrity psychiatrist Raj Persaud also emphasised the message, while highlighting the appalling suicide rates that haunt the profession. Dr Persaud called for more research into the mental well-being of vets, as well as changes to the veterinary school syllabus, including coping and people skills to help vets to cope better when dealing with clients.

If that was not worrying enough, the decision to reduce the number of animals on the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 might have made even the most experienced vets concerned about what they could be faced with in their consultation rooms.

But if any vet needed inspiration to face animals such as racoons or porcupines, they need not look any further than Tamzin Thornton to give them the confidence to take the plunge. The *Veterinary Times* editor jumped out of a plane to raise more than £1,000 for the RCVS Trust, in just one of hundreds of fund-raising challenges undertaken by the veterinary profession that you have told us about this year.

November

After the stresses of the summer's bluetongue and FMD outbreaks, the UK's chief veterinary

officer, Debby Reynolds, could be forgiven for stepping down after four years in the post. But no sooner had she made the decision, her successor Fred Landeg had to cope with the fourth infectious disease outbreak to hit Britain during 2007.

The “highly pathogenic” H5N1 strain of avian influenza was diagnosed at a turkey farm near Diss, Suffolk, leading to a cull of 28,500 birds on five sites and the establishment of a surveillance zone.

While the Government moved quickly to contain avian influenza, the veterinary profession showed its determination to save the Veterinary Poisons Information Service. More than 800 *Veterinary Times* readers have sent in letters of support to save the service, threatened with closure due to a withdrawal of NHS funding.

Debate also raged as the profession discussed the pros and cons of electric shock training collars during November, after the BEVA and BSAVA joined animal welfare groups in condemning their use, as possible legislation was discussed in parliament.

Researchers behind the second CICADA survey report also attempted to gain a reaction from the profession, after discovering that canine and feline respiratory diseases were still the most common diseases recognised by first opinion UK companion animal veterinary practices.

December

John Alan Walker had more reason than most to enjoy the festivities during December, after receiving an early Christmas present from the Privy Council. The council overturned the RCVS' decision to strike Mr Walker from the veterinary register, following a petition, a fund-raising campaign and a 10- month appeal.

The VMD may not be celebrating, however, after a *Veterinary Times* investigation uncovered the ease in which people could obtain POM-V medication without a prescription, despite highlighting the problem to the Government department 14 months previously.

As an alternative to pipedreams - such as giving up smoking, getting fitter or reducing weekly alcohol consumption - pet owners were encouraged to remember their animals when choosing their new year's resolution for 2008. National Vaccination Month, in March, will enable owners to keep their animals up to date with their vaccinations for the price of a booster, in response to the escalating number of unvaccinated pets in the UK.

Vets must also better themselves next year, after a number of high-profile large animal practitioners encouraged their peers to improve their communication skills and arrange better herd health planning.

In conclusion

So, that was 2007. Foot-and-mouth disease, bluetongue, and avian influenza twice, yet in the face of intense public and media scrutiny, the veterinary sector has only enhanced its reputation, and proven that despite an out-of-date Veterinary Surgeons Act, the profession is flourishing.



Avian 'flu hit the headlines twice this year, with both cases occurring in East Anglia.

VETERINARY TIMES

The weekly news journal for the profession

February 19, 2007

DEFRA 'IGNORES' LOCAL VETS IN 'FLU OUTBREAK

Veterinary practice staff in H5N1 area lash out at Government for lack of notification

DEFRA has been slammed for neglecting to notify local vets of the outbreak of the highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza on a Suffolk poultry farm.

Practices in the area surrounding the infected turkey farm in Holton claim to have received no notice from the Government organisation during the incident, which dominated the UK media for

EXCLUSIVE report by
Nigel Woodbine
nigelwoodbine@vbd.uk.com

the road from the farm, yet I seem to have been missed out of the loop entirely."

Speaking to *Veterinary Times* five days after confirmation of the outbreak, Mr Roche revealed

his only contact from DEFRA arrived three days after the outbreak but on

A spokesman from Wangford Veterinary Clinic – a practice on the edge of the 10km surveillance zone – claimed to have heard nothing from DEFRA, yet had received contact from Suffolk County Council pointing the practice to the DEFRA website for further information.

Trevor Thimbleby from the Wherry Veterinary Group in Bungay, outside the immediate surveillance zone, said:

wider restricted zone imposed following confirmation of H5N1, said: "All the various district councils have come through with advice, but we've had no official notification so far... any information we've learned has been through the media, not through any direct communication from the minister."

At the time of going to DEFRA had



Gerard Roche claims...

Right: DEFRA come under fire from Gerard Roche, a vet in the 3km protection zone surrounding the avian 'flu outbreak in Holton, near Lowestoft.

TIMES



The weekly news journal for the profession

March 19, 2007

VETS SLAM 'HARSH PENALTY' FOR STRUCK-OFF COLLEAGUE

Unique show of support as 321 vets condemn disciplinary committee's decision

HUNDREDS of vets have condemned the RCVS Disciplinary Committee's decision to strike an equine surgeon from the Register of Veterinary Surgeons.

In a letter to RCVS president Sheila Crispin, the vets expressed their "overwhelming" support for John Walker, of Hook Norton Veterinary Surgeons, who was found guilty of professional misconduct on January 30.

Signed by 321 vets and equine experts, and supported by a large number of testimonials, the letter raised concerns over the "extreme harshness of punishment."

report by
Nigel Woodbine
nigelwoodbine@vbd.uk.com

first draft to gauge opinion from other equine practitioners.

Although the letter did not dispute the correctness of the committee's verdict, it expressed "very strong and well-founded concerns as to the extreme harshness of the punishment", particularly considering:

- the lack of consideration given for the first offence of a member with an untarnished record of 26 years' experience

out the UK had contacted Mr Stephenson to add their signatures to the letter. The signatories included a Baroness/QC, a CBE, an OBE, two MBEs, a CVO, two professors, eight past BEVA presidents, the BEVA president elect, 17 diplomats, 38 certificate in equine practice holders, 33 other equine certificate holders, four Horse Racing Authority officials and practising vets from most large UK equine practices – many of whom described the

actions of the committee as "savage" or "inhumane".

Mr Stephenson said: "I was astonished and overwhelmed by the response. The emails, faxes and letters flooded in. I never for one moment expected that my letter would strike such a nerve throughout the profession – and to be supported by some of the most eminent and respected equine veterinarians in the country is truly humbling. This letter

continued overleaf



John Walker will appeal against his removal from the Register.

Right: John Alan Walker received strong support from the profession and from the wider equine world following the RCVS disciplinary council's decision to have him struck off. This decision was later overturned.



Bluetongue was a major problem last year. The disease, spread by the midges pictured here, also prompted fears of an outbreak of African horse sickness.



FMD reared its ugly head again, as August saw an outbreak at the Pirbright laboratories near Dorking, Surrey.



In Tewksbury, the RSPCA rescued 16 people, eight dogs, two cats and three chickens during this year's devastating floods.

Photo: RSPCA.

VETERINARY TIMES

The weekly news journal for the profession

July 30, 2007

SHOCK AS REPORT REVEALS SPOT-ON CAT POISON STATS

Urgent calls made for better client education as one-in-10 permethrin-poisoned cat cases results in death

NEW statistics revealing the "startling" level of permethrin poisoning in British cats have sparked calls for more information to be made available to owners on the dangers of spot-on flea treatments.

According to a new report from the Veterinary Poisons Information Service (VPIS), permethrin-based spot-on flea treatments are the number one cause of cat poisoning in the UK.

Although permethrin and other pyrethroids are considered to have a low mammalian toxicity, the results are pretty

**EXCLUSIVE report by
Nigel Woodbine**
nigelwoodbine@vbd.uk.com

of the report and manager of the VPIS, said: "If you go back and look through VPIS statistics, permethrin has always been something of an issue – it has been the number-one cause of cat poisoning every year since we formally started in 1992."

He said: "For the first time, we have a really good data set. The results are pretty

With this in mind, the VPIS and the FAB have joined forces to warn of the dangers of using dog flea preparations on cats. The two organisations are urging vets to ensure that their clients know which products are most appropriate, safe and effective for use on cats.

Ms Bessant said: "Vets have got to take a little bit of time to explain to cat owners that there are different sorts of spot-on available now and to avoid

continued overleaf



Statistics show one-in-10 cats suffering permethrin poisoning die or have to be euthanised. Claire Bessant (right) believes manufacturers should make warnings on dog products larger and more noticeable so that owners are less likely to mistakenly use them on cats.



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down
under?

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Calls were made for clearer instructions for owners after it was revealed that some cats were being given dog treatments, leading to several cases of permethrin poisoning.



At October's BEVA Congress, Nick Blayney urged vets to pull together.

VETERINARY TIMES

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The weekly news journal for the profession

September 3, 2007

BOGUS VET'S THREE-YEAR REIGN ENDS IN JAIL TERM

LEADING veterinary figures have expressed their anger after a man was found to have been impersonating a vet, undetected, for three years.

Pensioner Leonard French was sentenced to 12 months in prison. He was caught selling and administering unlicensed veterinary medicines in an undercover BBC investigation.

It is estimated that he made £170,000 while pretending to be an expert in animal care and veterinary medicines.

French is the third person to be caught impersonating a vet since 2003.

EXCLUSIVE report by Harry Waddle

harrywaddle@vbd.uk.com

qualified and registered veterinary surgeons."

SPVS president John Hill was also concerned that somebody was able to pose as a veterinary surgeon, and admitted that he was worried by the duration and scale of French's activity. However, he also accepted the difficulty of finding enough

evidence to prosecute. Hill said:

old French's home in Tattershall Bridge, Lincolnshire, they found a haul of veterinary drugs and related invoices, which was added to the video evidence, filmed by BBC Look North reporter Guy Lynn.

Investigations uncovered that French had taken an estimated £170,000 of business.

In court, French admitted a charge of "holding himself out to be a vet" between March 2003 and August last year.

He also pleaded guilty to six charges of illegally supplying vet-



Bogus vet Leonard French, 69, was sentenced to 12 months in jail.

erinary products, a further four charges of attempting to import medicines, and one charge of administering veterinary

medicines. He also admitted to three counts of possessing medical products without authority, continuing leaf

Photo: BBC LOOK NORTH

Leonard French was jailed for 12 months after falsely working as a vet for three years.

VETERINARY TIMES

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The weekly news journal for the profession

October 15, 2007

ACTION CALL TO STEM VETERINARY SUICIDES

BETTER education and a widespread debate have been called for in a bid to tackle the alarming levels of suicide in the veterinary profession.

Consultant psychiatrist Raj Persaud has thrown his weight behind the latest attempt to improve the mental wellbeing of the profession and reduce the number of veterinary professionals taking their own lives.

Speaking at the launch of the Veterinary Benevolent Fund (VBF) support website (www.veterinarybenevolentfund.org.uk) at RVA Congress,

report by
Harry Waddle
harrywaddle@vbd.uk.com

Dr Persaud spoke about possible causes of the high suicide rate and highlighted the importance of coping with stress.

Afterwards, he explained: "Suicide rates are a worrying thing in themselves, but they are usually a signpost to something darker beneath."

Dr Persaud continued: "For every person who commits suicide, there will be 100 people

amiss in the psychological make-up of the profession, and, having diagnosed the disease, we have got to try to fix it."

Mr Blayney added: "The pressures of delivering a first-class product all of the time, and the expectations of your clients, are sometimes overwhelming if you allow them to be and, as a profession, we have not got to grips with that."

"I have had discussions with Raj Persaud and we hope, very

continued overleaf



"For every person who commits suicide, there will be a large number of people who are anxious and depressed, so is this telling us something about the mental state of many hundreds, if not thousands, of vets?" - Raj Persaud.

Photo: ISTOCKPHOTO

Raj Persaud called for more research and training to improve the mental health of veterinary professionals.



Debby Reynolds handed over the title of chief veterinary officer to Fred Landeg in November.



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VETERINARY TIMES

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December 24, 2007

DRUGS STILL SOLD ONLINE WITHOUT PRESCRIPTIONS

Veterinary Times' repeat investigation reveals same sellers continue to supply to UK clients

FOREIGN internet pharmacies supplying POM-V veterinary medicines without prescription are still selling to UK consumers 14 months after they were reported to the VMD.

Three online pharmacies – based in France, Australia and Vanuatu – were revealed to be selling prescription-only drugs to UK consumers during an investigation in October 2006, when Veterinary Times purchased a box of Frontline Combo for cats, a product marketed for dogs.

Exclusive report by
Nigel Woodbine
nigelwoodbine@vbd.uk.com

British Veterinary Hospitals Association past-president Bob Partridge said he was disappointed such products could still be purchased without prescription, but claimed he found the news "unsurprising".

Clamp down

said he understood the VMD's power to clamp down on internet

crime by purchasing the product. Mr Dean explained: "The law is aimed at residents in the UK, so if anyone should [buy] maliciously to use these products, they are the ones we will focus our attention on. Where we can, we will close down the source, but this does take quite a lot of effort to do, and there is the issue of resources at our end because we don't have a bottomless pit of money for chasing people who are doing this sort of thing."

continued on page three



A Veterinary Times probe revealed that foreign firms were still selling drugs to UK clients, despite the VMD being informed of the situation 14 months earlier.

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