Future prospects for general practice

I qualified three-and-a-half years ago and I just don’t think that there are any prospects for career progression in first-opinion practice. So my choices are either to try to specialize or go off and become a locum.

The unnamed young woman in the audience at BVA Congress on 16 November personified an issue affecting alarming numbers of veterinarians in the under 30 age group – they are dissatisfied in the job and feel they have made the wrong career choice.

In the session entitled “What will we need from tomorrow’s vets?” Royal College Senior Vice President Chris Tufnell said that addressing this apparent mismatch between the expectations of new entrants into the profession and the realities of life in practice was a key aim of the RCVS graduate outcomes project.

The problem was a major finding of the Vet Futures initiative, and developments since have demonstrated that any solution would have to tackle both aspects – by ensuring that newly qualified vets have a better understanding of their future role and try to change general practice to provide a more satisfying career. “There is no quick fix,” he warned.

That is possibly because the issue is not unique to the veterinary profession. Joanne Reeve, Professor of Primary Care Research at Hull and York Medical School, and a member of the graduate outcomes working group, said that human medicine was facing the same problems. “There is a crisis in the recruitment and retention of general practitioners within the NHS,” she said.

“None of us can see a newly qualified one in 8 to 10 minute slots for the rest of their working lives. We need to offer a portfolio career that will enable them to maintain the ‘head space’ that will sustain their intellectual curiosity and allow them to make better use of their professional judgement. So we need to reimage what it means to be a generalist,” she said.

BVA past president Harvey Locke said it was important to appreciate that any newly qualified clinician was a long way from being the finished article. They would need to serve an “apprenticeship” in which they would learn the soft skills needed to succeed in general practice, such as communicating with clients.

They would also need further work on their technical skills, but as one speaker warned, this was becoming increasingly difficult. A lack of confidence in many new graduates and concerns over the dangers of litigation meant that most of the more demanding cases would be referred on. Neither the inexperienced vet, nor many of their clients will benefit from this in the long run. “It is fine for the wealthier clients who can afford pet insurance and those on benefits can go to the welfare charities – but what happens to those in the middle of the income scale?” asked one senior practitioner.

Another long-standing problem is that practice owners are unlikely to have received any training themselves in how to mentor their new members of staff. They are also running a business and so can they afford to offer the same salaries to new recruits, who will not yet be able to make an equal contribution to practice turnover as an experienced vet?

Dr Tufnell reassured colleagues that this transition from undergraduate to practitioner was one of the key areas that the working party would be examining. “It was expected to offer its initial response next year, and after consultation with the profession would produce a final report in 2019. The group were open-minded about possible solutions to the challenges highlighted in the debate with one exception, he said. It was unreasonable to propose that practices should be able to pay new graduates a reduced salary to compensate for the costs of supporting them during this early phase. He pointed out that veterinarians emerge from university with substantial debts and to reduce their earnings even further below those of other professionals would exacerbate the existing recruitment problems facing first-opinion practices.

However, answers to some of the problems raised are already available, according to other participants in the debate. In recent years, corporate practices have developed ways to address many of the career concerns aired in the debate. These companies provide both a properly funded and structured training phase for new graduates and a satisfying career for more experienced clinicians that does not involve the stress of management responsibilities, said one.

Meanwhile, RCVS past president Bradley Viner argued that the issue of a perceived lack of career progression in general practice noted by his younger colleague had already been examined and a solution found.

“Historically, we have been very poor at recognizing the importance of general practice and the qualities needed to develop as a first-rate GP, but now we have the Certificate in Advanced General Practice which develops the associated skills that are really important in primary care. We have a career structure there but we have failed to publicize the fact that these options are available, or recognized that they will be vital to the future of the veterinary profession.”