Women in the workplace

With unprecedented numbers of young veterinarians wanting to leave the profession and fears that Brexit will cut off the supply of EU-trained vets to replace them, there have been claims that UK practice is facing a manpower crisis. John Bonner reports.

During the November BVA Congress in London, delegates were told about the research that the BVA has commissioned to try to understand the factors driving this apparent disenchantment among vets around 5 years after qualification, and to develop strategies to stem the flow of those leaving the profession.

The BVA is working with Michelle Ryan, Professor of Social and Organizational Psychology at the University of Exeter, in a study of the attitudes of young UK practitioners towards their chosen career. The project is looking in particular at the effects of increasing feminization of the practitioner arm on job satisfaction.

Professor Ryan said that her findings from interviews with BVA members support many widely held assumptions about differences in attitudes among male and female clinicians. They have confirmed, for example, that male vets are generally more confident in their professional skills and decision-making abilities than their female colleagues. However, "the overall picture is more complex and nuanced than the stereotypes would suggest," she said.

Her research does show that greater ambition in male vets may be part of the reason for the gender imbalance within the profession in senior managerial roles. But female vets are just as ambitious as their male contemporaries at the start of their careers, it is only later that they begin to lose this drive. But these changes are not confined to the veterinary profession; studies have shown a similar loss of career focus 3-5 years after starting training in other groups including policewomen, trainee human surgeons and even science undergraduates.

It is often assumed that women become less career minded when their biological clock kicks-in and they become more interested in motherhood. Professor Ryan said. But as the same trend occurs in women pursuing different careers, aged from their late teens to mid 30s, then other explanations are needed for this phenomenon.

Professor Ryan said her research suggests that these women lose their passion for the job because police stations, operating theatres and science labs are all macho environments in which they are made to feel that they do not belong. There is currently a lack of role models to demonstrate to these women that they do deserve to be there, she said.

The problem is compounded by ideas that still pervade society about how ambition should be expressed. Men who make it clear that they want to progress in their job are seen as ‘go-getters’ whereas a woman in the same position will often be condemned as ‘pushy’, she said.

The responses of employers can help to perpetuate these inequalities, she said. There have been many cases in which women feel that their work-life balance is wrong are allowed to go part-time with a commensurate reduction in salary. But when male colleagues are in the same position and are feeling overstretched, they are more likely to be offered a reduction in workload with no change in their salary.

She said this reflects the traditional belief that the male partner in a couple will always be the main bread winner and that a woman works to provide the funds for childcare or for pin money. That notion disregards the obvious truth that in most cases it requires two salaries to support the family unit, she said.

These continuing inequalities are part of the reason why women employees report being less willing to make personal sacrifices in order to advance their careers, she suggested. There is a feeling that women are not treated fairly, which is born out by the continuing discrepancies in the salaries earned by men and women working in the same jobs. However, recently published research has rejected one of the reasons often cited for the wage gap – "women are just as likely as men to ask for a pay rise – they just get told, no," she said.

Gudrun Ravetz, Senior Vice President of the BVA, first proposed that the association should work with external academics to better understand the career trends within the veterinary profession. She told members that the joint project with Professor Ryan’s team would continue. In the next stage, the investigation would examine the attitudes of veterinary students towards their career and also look at the expectations of the senior vets who would be employing them.

The BVA was still collecting and analysing the data being produced by Professor Ryan and her research team and it is hoped that this will allow evidence-based interventions to be designed and implemented to improve job satisfaction amongst practising veterinarians, she said.