



SPCA Reference: JG/V002/11/14

Clerk to Bills Committee on Veterinary Surgeons Registration (Amendment) Bill 2014
Legislative Council Secretariat
Legislative Council Complex
1 Legislative Council Road
Central
Hong Kong

10th November 2014

Dear Miss Kwok

Written Submission Regarding Veterinary Surgeons Registration (Amendment) Bill 2014

The Society of Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Hong Kong) (SPCA (HK)) fully supports the proposals to amend the Veterinary Surgeons Registration Ordinance (Cap. 529) as outlined in the Veterinary Surgeons Registration (Amendment) Bill ("The Bill") 2014. We recognise it as an important step forward in improving the Veterinary Surgeons Board's capacity and efficiency in handling its responsibilities.

The veterinary profession in Hong Kong has undergone major changes since the formation of the Veterinary Surgeons Board (VSB) in 1997. There are now 606 practising veterinary surgeons and over 150 companion animal clinics. This coupled with advancements in veterinary science and increased awareness and high expectations of the pet owning public has resulted in a rise in the number of complaints to the VSB. Unfortunately the structure of the VSB has not kept up with these developments and protracted delays in complaint handling has caused dissatisfaction on both sides (complainant and defending veterinary surgeon).

Veterinary surgeons have experienced waits of over two years before finding out the complaint against them has been dropped. This is incredibly stressful for the individual concerned, but even worse those which end up at a disciplinary inquiry can take over 5 years to reach the hearing stage by which time memories of the issue are often vague to say the least. This is also not acceptable to complainants who obviously expect the VSB to act in an expedient and professional manner.



Under the current VSB structure the number of available preliminary investigation committees (PIC) and disciplinary committees (DC) are woefully insufficient to deal with the high demand.

In addition the formulation of the board with appointed members only has resulted in lack of transparency and respect from the veterinary profession (it should be noted there is no explanation or criteria in the public domain to explain the selection process). By including members directly elected by the profession in a fair and open manner this would increase trust and improve the relationship between the VSB and local veterinary surgeons.

It should be noted the ratio of veterinary surgeons to non-veterinary surgeons at 2:1 is well within the remits of comparative jurisdictions such as Australia where the ratio is generally greater than 2:1 and the United Kingdom where currently the ratio is 4.25:1 (in no jurisdiction is the ratio 1:1).

When one reviews comparable boards world-wide, lay-persons are present to ensure transparency and to ensure that public needs are met from their perspective. Veterinary issues pertaining to the way the profession is run such as ethics and acceptable standards of treatment can only be judged by those with suitable training and knowledge (especially with regard to the complex nature of the complaints). Veterinary surgeons undergo at least 5 years of university training (not including post-graduate training) and are sworn by oath on qualifying to uphold their profession and act in the best interests of animal welfare. They are best placed to regulate their profession with oversight from non-veterinary members.

Finally, whilst supporting the proposals in principle (with reference to increasing the board size to 19 members (including a chairperson), direct elections of six veterinary surgeons from the profession, appointing a panel of assessors and increasing the composition of the PIC from two to three people (including two veterinary surgeons) we would like to make the following recommendations for consideration. We feel incorporation of these points would further enhance the functioning of the board with regard to dealing with complaints and performing its statutory duties:

1. We agree the number of persons sitting on the Preliminary Investigation Committee (PIC) should be expanded to three persons (from two). A further refinement would be of the two veterinary surgeons on the PIC that at least one is from clinical practice (preferably in a field relevant to the case). This is important as the majority of complaints brought before the board are those involving clinical practice and as such it is vital at least one member of the PIC have in-depth knowledge of the field in which the complaint is being judged.
2. With the increase to three members the PIC should be empowered to make a decision based on a majority vote and not on a consensus of opinion.
3. The Chairman of the Veterinary Surgeons Board should be selected by a method agreed to by the board itself. This might mean being appointed by the Secretary for Food and Health or by another method such as direct election by board members. Long-term it is also recommended the Chairman be a veterinary surgeon as in other comparable jurisdictions.



4. To consider an increased proportion of elected vets to appointed veterinary surgeons as per other professions. In the meantime a more transparent selection process would increase the general public's and the veterinary profession's confidence in the VSB.
5. Consideration to performance pledges from the VSB regarding time frames for complaint handling, registration of veterinary surgeons and replies to questions asked by registered veterinary surgeons related to professional matters (for instance on ethical veterinary dilemmas). Likewise with regard to veterinary surgeons answering queries on complaints and providing information to the VSB, these should also be done in a timely manner.
6. Ensuring there are enough administrative staff employed by the board to handle all aspects in a timely and efficient manner. An increase in board members, PICs and DCs will require increased manpower and activity on the administration front.
7. For complaints presented in Chinese the VSB should be responsible for translation of the documents to English (and vice versa) so the complaint can be consistently reviewed and processed by all concerned regardless of whether their first language is Chinese or English.
8. Consideration not only to registration of veterinary surgeons but to a licensing system of veterinary clinics to control standards and increase public confidence in the VSB and the veterinary profession.

Increasing the number of members on the board, increasing PICs and DCs together with appointing a group of assessors is a very positive step forward in improving the situation for both veterinary surgeons and pet owners in Hong Kong. We applaud the government's efforts in improving the current legislation and hope further refinements to the proposed amendments which we have mentioned above will be considered either now or in the future.

If you require further information please do not hesitate to contact me on my direct line [REDACTED] or via email [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely



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