

# Editorial

## Social media case has lessons for all vets

THIS week's *Vet Record* contains a noteworthy cautionary tale in the form of a news report of an RCVS disciplinary hearing.

The subject of the hearing was Natalia Strokowska, a vet from Poland who has practised extensively as a locum in the UK.

Between October 2016 and August 2017 she posted six pictures of clients' pets on social media without first gaining permission from the clients.

As the veterinary regulator, the RCVS investigated Strokowska's behaviour, and the matter was eventually referred to the college's disciplinary committee – an equivalent of a court where 'charges' against vets can be heard.

The RCVS's decision to refer the case in the first place demonstrates its perception as to the gravity of the issue at stake. Its preliminary investigation committee only refers a case when there is a 'realistic chance' of proving an allegation. Each time it opts to hold a disciplinary hearing it costs the college on average £50,000 – although the college insists cost is not a factor taken into account.

In this week's case, the respondent (Strokowska) admitted posting the images without the relevant permissions. The college alleged that her behaviour in this regard constituted serious professional misconduct. Her defence, essentially, was that she had meant well, no real harm had been done and she had merely been careless in neglecting to obtain prior consent.

At the end of the hearing – which lasted around four days – the disciplinary committee agreed that Strokowska was indeed guilty of serious professional misconduct. She was duly issued with a reprimand and warning – the least severe form of punishment available.

The finding has ramifications for all members of the profession – and that is why *Vet Record* has covered the case. The proceedings could be viewed as a 'test case' about the vexed question of what is and isn't permissible conduct for vets online. One of the pictures at issue was simply of an animal's paw. With another, the college accepted there was no actual risk of a third party identifying the owner from the image but suggested that there was a

potential for 'jigsaw identification' because of an abstract literary reference in a caption. This shows just what complicated minefields privacy and data protection rules can present.

In his submissions David Bradly, the college's lawyer, referred to passages in the RCVS code of conduct and supporting guidance about the importance of gaining 'explicit consent', ideally in writing, from clients when posting on social media pictures of – or even information about – their animals. But to what extent are vets aware of this?

Defending Strokowska, Adrian Eissa asked whether familiarising oneself with the code's content was compulsory or merely voluntary.

When vets register with the RCVS, there is, Eissa said 'no injunction to read it [the code]. No copy is distributed. It's not even described as essential reading [by the RCVS].'

Notwithstanding the committee's finding that Strokowska had committed serious professional misconduct, there are questions for the college too, therefore.

Should the RCVS have a responsibility to more forcefully tell vets to abide by the code? Since the code and supporting guidance change periodically, with changes not always well publicised by the RCVS, is it the vet's own responsibility to continually check for such changes or the college's to properly inform vets of them, or both?

Finally, it might be worth stopping to ponder the actual impact of acts such as those carried out by Strokowska. For the animals – whose interests vets must prioritise above all else – there must, surely, be zero impact, since animals are oblivious to the technology of the internet and man-made concepts such as privacy.

It would hardly be surprising, therefore, if other vets have made errors similar to Strokowska's.

**Josh Loeb**

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