

# Evolving landscape of practice environment

Future Trends stream – Saturday, April 11, 2.05pm, Hall 6

**THE landscape of the veterinary profession is changing constantly. This can make it difficult to anticipate what the geography of the professional landscape will be in three, four or 10 years time. The short term can usually be dealt with, while subtle movements in the sector offer clues as to what's ahead. However, change often has an unpredictable nature.**

In the face of potential unpredictability, the Future Trends talk at BSAVA Congress will consider the current landscape, where it may be headed, and the best ways to position yourself and your practice, so as to stand firm in the shifting sands of the profession.

Looking at topics such as interdependence, and diversification, speakers Andrew Curwen and Brian Faulkner will offer their views on having a solid foundation during the inevitable changes in the profession.

One thing everyone seems to agree on is the rapid nature of the changes. Mr Faulkner, vet at Saxon Vets, psychologist, and SPVS officer, says it is something the profession has to deal with.

"Some will say the increased corporatisation of the profession is a good thing and others

**“If as a profession we are trying to guess what the future holds, well it's partly within our grasp to actually decide what the future is by setting out to create it.”**

Andrew Curwen, chief executive, XLVets

a bad thing. At the end of the day it is a thing,” said Mr Faulkner.

“It is happening and I don't want to come down hard on [corporates or independents], but either side of the equation has to learn to be competitive and adaptive to its very rapidly changing environment.”

To adapt and be competitive, Mr Faulkner believes a good clinical outcome is not the be-all and end-all.

“My view of veterinary practice is, irrespective of the structure, it has to achieve four things: clinical resolution; client satisfaction; financial resolution; and team harmony and happiness.

“You may do them differently depending on your structure and environment, but you will need to achieve them.

“The point of that is, yes, good clinical outcomes are an important objective as always, but it's only one objective in organisational terms. [The other] is client satisfaction, whereby clients feel they have been advised to do the right thing for them, and charged a fair price.”

Andrew Curwen, chief executive at XLVets, thinks practices should take the chance to have more control over their future and be more proactive, rather than reactive.

He said: “If you're being asked to predict the future, one of the best ways to do that is to try to create

the future. One of the messages I'd like to deliver is, if as a profession we are trying to guess what the future holds, well it's partly within our grasp to actually decide what the future is by setting out to create it.

“We are, as a profession, historically, extremely good at reacting to what our clients have asked of us. But sometimes, we just keep on reacting, keep busy, and we don't stop to make time to be proactive.”

## Thinking ahead

Mr Curwen explains practices may not be thinking far ahead enough.

“We react in the short term to everything. Maybe the danger is we are reacting to what we thought clients wanted yesterday, and perhaps we aren't very good at thinking about what clients will want the day after tomorrow, which doesn't make us very good at dealing with change.”

Being able to move with the times, or even be ahead of the times, often relies on being able to spot trends in the market in which you operate. In the US, practices have tended to lean towards specialising in services, according to Ernie Ward, vet and founder of Seaside Animal Care in North Carolina.

“The trend for the past decade in the US has been for veterinary clinics to attempt to stand out from a crowded marketplace. Most relied on location and facilities to be different.

General practices that continue to grow typically micro-specialised. In overall terms, the trend is toward traditional specialisation in the form of speciality clinics, specialised imaging centres combined with large (10-plus) veterinarians, species-only practices, and price segmentation in the form of low-cost clinics.”

He explains that “micro-specialisation” is an area where smaller clinics can compete with the corporates and warns against complacency.

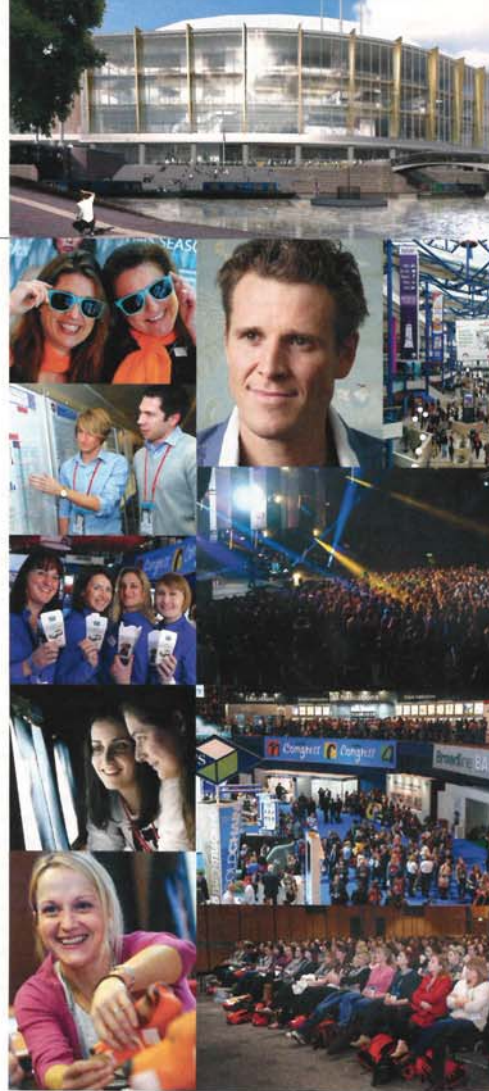
“Micro-specialisation is where smaller clinics can gain an advantage over larger clinics. Find your passion and pursue it with all your heart and mind. Of course, if your passion is alpaca theriogenology and you practise in central London, you may not find financial success. The goal is to match your passion with locally unmet demand.

“If your clinic is standing still in terms of offering new services and improvements, you're probably already financially dead.”

## Stand-out service

Mr Faulkner believes the best option is to ensure you offer stand-out service.

“There is a common mindset within veterinary practice that the way to stand out from your competitors is to be better clinically – and while I am not saying being poor clinically is acceptable, I've found the way to stand out with clients is to focus on customer care, service and building relationships. There are many more practices competing for clients nowadays – I call it the war for active clients – and



**“Diversification and specialisation are a small part of the package – there's customer service skills and value offerings that are probably going to be a much better part of the answer when you've got so many practices competing on the same ground.”**

Brian Faulkner, SPVS junior vice-president and CPD officer

while diversification and 'specialisation' can help in that war, I have found that customer service is always a more powerful weapon.”

In terms of the evolving practice landscape, Mr Curwen sees an increase in veterinary models, particularly

for independents wishing to increase their competitiveness.

“We will see more models, but that isn't to say there isn't going to be consolidation. Interdependence, and the XLVet model, is a model for those businesses that

## My Congress...

Congress affords practitioners with the newest developments in different areas. It also reminds me critical thinking and high standards of practice are not confined to a referral setting.

– David Cain, vet

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wish to remain independent, owned by vets – they are working collaboratively in an extended national group and they're sharing skill sets, ideas and knowledge to sustain their ability to be veterinary-owned independent businesses.

"It's about retaining their independence, but collaborating effectively through working with others, gaining strengths to effectively deliver value for their clients."

### Delivering value

And it's offering value that appears to be the running theme.

"For me, it's all about what the customer values.

It's a combination of the process they're buying, the person they're buying from, and the product they are buying. What we have to do is understand how we ensure the process we're delivering, the people delivering it, and the products we are offering, how all those things meet the needs of our clients and meet what they value," Mr Curwen said.

"[Value] is a critical thing – what we need as a customer will also change at any given point in time. So, in terms of diversification/specialisation, I may have a requirement for a consultation in the middle of the night, so what I'm truly valuing there is the availability of the vet.

"We need to remember

clients will value different things at different times and places."

Mr Faulkner sees service and value as the offerings that underpin the practice. "Diversification and specialisation are a small part of the package – there's customer service skills, and value offerings that are probably going to be a much better part of the answer when you've got so many practices competing on the same ground.

"Just diversifying or specialising therefore thinking 'we are safe' is dangerous.

"For me, it's how to blend clinical in among the other outcomes, the clinical, the client and the financial. Clinical is just one, essential

## My Congress...

↳ Virtually every lecture had some new technique that was applicable to first opinion work or complicated medical cases. ↳

– Steve Leonard, vet

dimension. How do we use that necessary portion to the maximum, but blend it with those other outcomes? It's great to specialise or diversify into cats or exotics, but we've got to be able to turn that into client satisfaction and financial productivity, and there's the challenge for me."

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● You can listen to Brian and Andrew's talks in the Future Trends stream – Saturday April 11, 2.05pm in Hall 6.