

General Secretary's Report



Hello to you all.

On the 21st April the Association met with Steve McGrath in what could be considered as the resurrection of the bi-annual meetings between us and the FSA. These meetings will now occur post AGM and Seminar, thus reflecting the current opinion of members at that time. In this way, it is to be hoped that issues can be addressed while they are topical.

This meeting was called by Mr. McGrath as there were things that he had taken issue with and was seeking further clarification upon;

The first of these was a joint letter with UNISON, signed by us back in February 2009 and to do with the issues of MHI's trimming contamination. 65% of MHI's in a UNISON survey had admitted to trimming some contamination at some time.

Mr. McGrath had stated in a letter to the Association that while he could understand UNISON's position in job preservation, he failed to see why the AMI would sign such a letter. He

enquired if it was in the thoughts of MHI's that this was to do with the protection of public health?

Our response was that although there may be an element of this, we suspected that the real reason was possibly far more "human" than that.

I stated my belief that there is not an MHI anywhere that does not appreciate that it is the FBO's responsibility to produce clean carcasses, but that if 2/3rds of MHI's admit to compromising their position, there must be a very real issue here. I explained that the role of the MHI is one of enforcement, but also one dealing with the same people day in and day out. Calling an FBO/operator to trim contamination is the correct thing to do but to keep on calling/detaining carcasses for "tea-leaves" could often lead to a very fraught relationship in a very short space of time. Nobody wants to go to work in a constantly hostile workplace (and that this could go some way to accounting for the current low morale and high sickness levels) and the Association suspected, through feedback from members, that MHI's were removing minor contamination to alleviate this situation.

It was this situation that had lead us to co-sign the letter, in order to highlight the problem and invite dialogue to try and find a way of removing the

inspector from this position of compromise.

Steve McGrath's position was unequivocal. The FSA's position is that the production of clean meat is the responsibility of the Food Business Operator and that trimming by the MHI masks any problems in the process that causes the contamination to get onto the carcass in the first place.

Therefore Meat Hygiene Inspectors MUST NOT trim any contamination, no matter how minor it may be.

This should be taken as a direct instruction from the boss. He is the man that pays the wages and he is the man where the buck ultimately stops if things should go awry.

If this stance should subsequently cause issues with abuse/harrasment or bullying then the matter should be referred upwards and onwards through the OV in plant, the LOV and the business manager if necessary. Mr. McGrath qualified this by stating that if he needed to get involved personally, then he was more than prepared to do so, and that full support from the top could be taken as a given.

Welsh Assembly Inquiry

Mr. McGrath stated that the evidence put forward by the AMI had uncanny parallels with the evidence put forward by UNISON. I stated quite categorically that there had been no collusion with UNISON in our stated opinion but that we if we had access to the same information we were quite likely to draw similar conclusions. I also pointed out that the evidence submitted by some other organisations

was very similar, some making exactly the same points as ourselves. I then ran through the process of how these sorts of reports are created to reflect the opinion of the membership, and with full ratification from council.

I also drew attention to the fact that the AMI, certainly since my tenure, had not criticised the MHS or the FSA and has and still does offer its support to an independent, centralised control body, the TMHS and now the FSA. Mr. McGrath said that he would welcome active support from the AMI and it was agreed that it was to be hoped that this was a new beginning.

That said, when it is felt by the Association that comment/constructive criticism is merited, then we would not shy away from doing so in an honest and straight forward manner. This is one of the areas where we can offer valuable information to the FSA, conveying opinion direct from frontline staff that might not be so readily forthcoming from other sources.

Line speeds

In a similar vein, Mr. McGrath informed us that he had in the past been made aware of some MHI's complaining that line speeds were too high; sometimes to the point that that they felt that they could not do their job properly. Independent auditing/verification teams had been sent to these plants and he informed us that in every case, they had reported back that the line speeds had been adequate. He suspected that in some cases these allegations might have even been made with "malicious" intent.

He did however state that if any MHI genuinely felt that the line speeds were too high then the correct course of action is once again, to discuss the situation with the OV in the first instance, then the LOV and even the business managers if necessary. If it is then found to be necessary to reduce the line speed, full back up and support would be forthcoming from the FSA.

I believe it is the case that line speeds are stated in the business agreements in each plant.

Management

Mr. McGrath referred to the current management structure and stated that he required local managers to control local management issues. He went on to state his belief that “this structure has served to remove the issue of privatisation from the agenda”. He is aware of the allegations that some contractors are “reluctant to rock the boat” but stated his belief that any such incidence would come to light and be dealt with in the severest manner. He encouraged all personnel to highlight any such thoughts/fears with the relevant person in the chain of command.

We did voice our concern that if this were to happen then it could severely compromise working relationships within individual teams because it could entail MHI’s going over OV/LOV’s heads.

Mr. McGrath was adamant that if discussion within the teams failed to resolve issues in question, this was the correct course of action.

Professional Recognition

With Mr. McGrath having initially called the professionalism of the AMI into question at the start of the meeting, and with us having countered this by explaining our position, the meeting moved on to the matter of the AMI securing professional recognition.

He informed us that he was aware that we had created a professional register but felt that this record was inaccurate and did not tally with FSA records.

We informed him that the record of membership and the professional register were two separate entities and that a person registered on the professional register would remain listed unless we received written instruction to the contrary, or notification of the persons death. This would mean that the professional register would contain names that are no longer actively involved in meat inspection or possibly not a member of the Association.

In regards to achieving professional recognition I have written to the RCVS to enquire if the recent review of the legislation (veterinary surgeons act) would now allow the formation of a council for meat inspection and I am currently awaiting a reply.

We reminded Mr. McGrath that the veterinary nurses had been trying to achieve this status for some ten years or more and were still not quite there.

He agreed this point but then suggested that perhaps the AMI could look to other relevant organisations to achieve professional recognition. I.e. CIEH, RSPH, REHIS

I agreed to take this to council for further discussion and asked him if he would be prepared to write a letter of support to further our case. Mr. McGrath informed us that such a letter would be forthcoming on request.

He did suggest that that the AMI utilised science and gathered evidence to support and demonstrate the value of what it is doing.

The Association is moving ahead on this issue.

Work of the AMI

We informed Mr. McGrath that Seminar last year had been a great success and would be running again this year at Nottingham University over the weekend of the 10th & 11th September.

We had sought last year to include subjects that were directly relevant to the work of the MHI, as well as one or two that were interesting but not (as yet) directly relevant.

He was directed towards the last edition of The Meat Hygienist and it was agreed that it contained a goodly amount of scientific papers and articles directly relevant to meat inspection. It is advertised as being available to publish scientific papers but the reality of the situation these days is that the papers are published in the first instance by other means.

We have also been in discussion with Lincoln University who have provided a list of courses that are available to MHI's and that are largely distance learning. This list has been distributed to divisional secretaries for cascading

to members and is also carried in this issue of the Hygienist. There may also be opportunity for MHI's to take up a similar option in the future and work towards NVQ level 5, diploma or even a degree. It would be hoped that the previous work completed by members on the CPD modules would gain credits towards these qualifications and thus the efforts already made by members would not be wasted.

It was stressed that this was in the very early stages of discussion, that cutbacks in education budgets had made the whole thing less sure and that this goal remains a long way off though we are hopeful that a positive outcome is achievable.

We enquired if such a scheme would garner support from the FSA and the answer was in the affirmative, with a recent change in legislation providing for time off to study if the studies are relevant to the business. There were also a couple of other scenarios cited where support might be available. The one point that was stressed was that any individual seeking such support should be able to demonstrate a high level of commitment.

There is to be an open day to be held at the Rhiseholme campus on Saturday 17th July at 10:30 am. If you are interested to see what is on offer I would suggest that you make a note in your diary and keep that day free and look out for the invitation that should arrive via the post.

Fellowships

At the recent AGM, two members of the Association, Pierce Furlong and Eric Wood were made Fellows of the

AMI in recognition of their many years of service.

I would like to say thanks to them both for all their efforts and to congratulate them both on this award.

Conclusion

I hope that you will agree that the Association is working hard on your behalf, representing your concerns and making efforts to further your interests. We rely upon input from members to make things work and hope that you continue to provide feedback to us.

I will re-iterate at this point that all comment is in the strictest confidence.

I hope to meet more of you at Seminar in September.

Until then,

keep up the good work.

Regards,

Ian Robinson