

Uncovering the Impact of Corporate Takeovers on Veterinary Practices: A Closer Look at Rising Fees and Animal Welfare

In recent years, a concerning trend has emerged within the veterinary industry - the corporate takeover of veterinary practices. The gradual shift towards prioritizing wealth over health has catalysed a significant rise in vet fees not only in the UK but also around the world. Who are these corporate entities that are rapidly acquiring independent vet practices, and what implications does this hold for animal welfare? This is what an enquiry into the corporate take over of the veterinary professional in Wales would aim to discover and highlight why we need one in place.

The landscape of veterinary care is evolving, with small independent practices being gradually replaced by corporate giants seeking to monopolize the industry. The cosy, trustworthy, familiar, usually family-run vet clinics that once stood as pillars in communities are now being swallowed up by faceless entities driven by profit margins. While from a business perspective this consolidation may seem lucrative, the repercussions for animal health and welfare are dire. This is not a tech giant charging hundreds for a new brand of phone in which customers can opt out of buying and just purchase a cheaper alternative. This has become a monopoly on lives. We have known cats survive a road traffic accident and be taken to a vet by drivers, which is exactly what we ask for and expect as part of being part of a morally sound society, just to be tragically euthanised with simple cuts and bruises because owners could not afford to stump up huge amounts of money in an instant.

The consolidators, often backed by substantial financial resources, are strategically acquiring independent vet practices to expand their reach and maximize profits. These corporations operate with an efficiency-driven mindset, aiming to streamline operations and prioritize revenue generation. However, this drive for financial gain often comes at the cost of compromising the quality of care provided to our beloved animal companions.

In the veterinary industry, corporates refer to large companies or consolidators that acquire independent veterinary practices for strategic purposes. The six large corporate groups in the UK are CVS, IVC, Linnaeus, Medivet, Pets at Home and VetPartners, and we would urge the Welsh Government to open an investigation of their own into the effect this is having on sentient beings lives across the nation.

As we spend more on our cats, dogs and other precious beloved family members, the veterinary industry has become attractive targets for big corporations, and pet

owners are seeing higher bills and declining care as a result. Veterinarians and their employees tend to have comparatively low salaries compared to human doctors and nurses. In addition, pet ownership has boomed in recent years, with pet owners willing to spend whatever it takes to keep their beloved companions healthy. To put into context how much we spend on our pets each year in the UK, the Office for National Statistics revealed there has been a 270% increase from 2005 to 2021. The corporates see these rising figures, and they want in. With profit solely on the minds of these big organisations, animal welfare, as well as the welfare of the people who went into the industry wanting to help animals, has dwindled significantly over the last few years. The veterinary sector has the highest suicide rate of any other profession which we urge you to note.

Issues have now been going on so long that we have an entire generation who no longer know the traditional, animal centric, veterinary practice that the older generations remember so fondly. In many areas across the UK now, corporate owned veterinary practices dominate, yet people tend not to notice because the practices keep their original name and even veterinary staff. People are no longer aware their vets are no longer free to advise on a course of treatment, closer external service (such as pet crematorium or laboratory), or the most cost-effective avenue for the patient. They have no idea their vets are working to maximise profit at the expense of their sick, injured or, tragically, dying animal. The entire face of the veterinary industry has changed right before our eyes and we are running out of time to put the breaks on and turn it back to animal welfare.

It is not just the veterinary practices themselves they now pull the strings of, the corporates have now bought into out of hours services', often creating an expensive monopoly in most areas, pet crematoriums, laboratories, pet insurance...even the pet food itself! Let's start with the out of hours service, something we see our supporters often needing due to the untimely nature of road accidents and the time periods these accidents statistically fall into. Even without treatment, an out of hours consultation can cost from £200 upwards before your animal has been taken out of the carrier! Vets Now is the largest out of hours service who operate as part of the IVC (Independent Vet Care) Group, which is operated and controlled by a board led by CEO Mark Ross. While we pay excruciating amounts of money for out of hours services, usually in a bid to save the lives of animals in emergency situations, IVC reported gross profits of £953 million in the 2022 financial year, while its revenues jumped from £1.31 billion in 2020 to £2.84 billion last year. Sadly, some of the Vets Now services are so busy currently, animals are being referred miles away to other Vets Now theatres, regardless of there potentially being independent vets closer that are also operating 24 hours. As we heard at a recent Welsh Government presentation was the case for one sick little dog. A 7-month-old bulldog who was having seizures, prompting his family to phone their vets at 2am. They were advised by recorded message that only Vets Now were open, but they would not take the dog and referred him to another of their out of hours practices 2 hours away. Tragically, this young dog died in the car enroute.

The corporate's buying power is now so great that the independent veterinary services have been left on their knees, often being pressured to sell up to the corporates as they just cannot compete. With such great buying power, the external companies are also being held to ransom. The more you can purchase, the more cheaply things become in large quantities. The things the corporates are purchasing

in bulk, ultimately creating discounts for themselves, in things such as pharmaceutical products, waste disposal, cremation services, equipment, even services we wouldn't necessarily think of such as direct debit suppliers. Having such big buying power, and many external companies also working on the basis of wealth before health, the corporates are now the preferred buyers on their lists. All the costs they save are not passed down to the customer, us the pet owner, and they also cause independents to have no other option but to increase their costs too. In essence, they have created a monopoly which we, the pet owner, have no option but to use/pay and animals are suffering as a result, even more so now in the middle of this cost-of-living crisis.

The pet food industry has also not escaped the corporates grasp, with that rapidly increasing market being a key target of growth for them. Heavily backed by the corporates are big names most people will be familiar with, like Nestle and Mars. Pet health is now the candy company Mars' biggest financial part of their portfolio, and they have begun their own training academies also. Their take over has resulted in a reduction in choice for consumers.

The representative organisations of the industry are the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). The British Veterinary Nurse Association receive most of their membership fees from the corporates, and the BVA itself enjoy financial perks and sponsorship from the Mars group and the corporates themselves, leaving many to fear their influence.

As corporate entities acquire more and more vet practices, a troubling pattern emerges - a monopoly that restricts choice and hinders personalized care. Pet owners are increasingly finding themselves limited to a handful of corporate-run clinics, where the focus shifts from individualized treatment to standardized protocols aimed at increasing throughput. This shift towards standardized practices can have detrimental effects on animal health. Conditions that require careful and tailored attention may be overlooked in favour of cost-effective, one-size-fits-all solutions. Furthermore, the pressure to meet profit targets can incentivize practices to upsell unnecessary services or procedures, potentially putting the well-being of animals at risk.

The most distressing aspect of this corporate takeover is the decline in animal welfare standards. With profit margins taking centre stage, the compassionate ethos that drove many independent veterinarians is being overshadowed by financial considerations. The once warm and personalized care that pets received from their local vet is being replaced by impersonal, profit-oriented interactions. We do not intend that to sound like vet bashing either. Many vets are leaving the industry because it is "not what we thought it would be". As the corporate footprint expands, the focus shifts away from the well-being of animals towards bottom-line figures. This shift not only undermines the fundamental values of veterinary care but also jeopardizes the health and happiness of our furry companions.

The corporate takeover of vet practices represents a significant paradigm shift in the veterinary industry, where financial interests often supersede health considerations. While the rise in vet fees can be attributed in part to increasing operational costs, the

underlying issue lies in the prioritization of profit over compassionate care. The health of our furry friends should always take precedence over profit margins and this is exactly why this petition needs to see a positive outcome so the issue can be investigated further and in greater depth.

Mandy, Tiya and Carlie

CatsMatter