

VETS

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erinarian disciplinary process, allowing the public to attend hearings once a complaint was determined to be legitimate.

The proposed gagging of citizens who file complaints might violate free-speech rights, said Bill Rogers, executive director of the S.C. Press Association.

"You shouldn't have to get permission to speak about a public issue," Rogers said. He noted the S.C. Supreme Court ruled last year that the State Ethics Commission acted improperly in trying to enforce a confidentiality rule against a newspaper.

John Crangle of Common Cause of South Carolina said the secrecy provision is "self-serving and designed to protect individuals who should be exposed for wrongdoing."

But veterinarians defend the gagging. They say the proposed disciplinary provisions actually are more open than the current law.

Two nearly identical bills have been introduced, one in the House and one in the Senate. The Senate might take up its bill this week.

The new bills, vets say, would — for the first time — allow a citizen who files a formal complaint against a veterinarian to attend the vet's disciplinary hearing. However, those hearings would remain closed to the public. Currently, citizens who file complaints are banned from disciplinary hearings, which take place only if a complaint is determined to be legitimate.

Veterinarians, including Dr. Roger Troutman of Rock Hill, say prohibiting a pet owner from talking publicly about a complaint is intended to prevent the airing of frivolous grievances.

"Small-town veterinarians seemed to have the most concern about that," said Troutman, who last year was president of the S.C. Association of Veterinarians. "Negative publicity" before a hearing can unfairly damage a vet, he said.

But Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Berkeley, who wants to open veterinary hearings once a complaint is deemed legitimate, said the bills' secrecy could put pets in danger.

Grooms recalled the bungled operation that came close to killing Pumpkin, a cat owned by Marcia Rosenberg of Mount Pleasant. Af-

ter her cat was saved by another vet, Rosenberg went on a multiyear crusade resulting in the veterinarian disciplinary board suspending Dr. Stan Gurlitsky. Gurlitsky, who later agreed to retire, had a documented record of maiming cats and dogs in Ohio as well as in South Carolina.

If it hadn't been for Rosenberg making public dozens of complaints about Gurlitsky and putting pressure on a slow-moving veterinary disciplinary board, Gurlitsky still might be practicing, Grooms said. Under the new bills, someone like Rosenberg would be gagged, he said.

"The vet board's charge is to protect the public," Grooms said. "But if the public doesn't have a right to know what's going on behind closed doors, how is the public protected?"

Rosenberg, who is working against the secrecy provisions, said, "If something bad happens to your pet, you should have the right to tell your friends and neighbors."

One lawmaker who helped shape the new vet bill is state Sen. Danny Verdin, R-Laurens.

Last June, a bill that included opening the veterinary discipline process to the public was set to become law. But Verdin, who opposed public discipline, staged a filibuster. Senate rules allowed Verdin — acting as a single senator — to kill the bill.

At the time, Verdin, whose father is a veterinarian, said secrecy serves the public. "The best way to protect the public is to protect the profession."

Verdin did not return repeated calls last week.

Verdin helped draft this year's bills, said veterinarians and state Rep. Tom Dantzler, R-Berkeley, the sponsor of the House bill.

Dantzler, a retired vet, said he supported the openness in last year's bill. Now, however, he supports this year's bill.

"In my 11 years in the Legislature, I've never seen a bill that pleased everyone," he said. After last year's bill was killed, veterinarians had to draft a bill that would pass, he said.

Secrecy is only a small part of the bill, he said. Other provisions would:

- Require a new veterinarian to train for two months under a more experienced vet

- Allow forms of alternative medicine to be used on pets, such as

- acupuncture and physical therapy
- Increase fines on wayward vets to \$1,000 from \$500

- Add a consumer representative to the vet disciplinary board, now made up of only veterinarians.

Veterinarian Dr. Valerie Alexander of Rock Hill, chairman of the S.C. Board of Veterinary Examiners, supports the new bills. They "provide increased protection for the consumer," she said.

She said she especially likes the section that lets a complaining pet owner attend the secret disciplinary hearings. "It allows the complainant to hear all the facts and to feel confident that their complaint has been appropriately addressed."

But Rogers of the Press Association, which includes The State newspaper among its members, said veterinarians might find their reputations in jeopardy if they insist on muzzling citizens who file complaints and then holding secret, closed hearings.

"When people are gagged and proceedings are held in secret, the public has room to doubt that things are done fairly," Rogers said.

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S.C. vets want complaints to be private



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Doctors backing bills to gag citizens in animal cases

S.C. veterinarians want to muzzle more than dogs these days. Two bills they support would stop citizens from speaking out about incompetent vets.

Bills making their way through the House and Senate would gag citizens who file complaints against veterinarians who they think are incompetent.

The secrecy provisions in the bills are the opposite of those in a bill that almost passed last year. Last year's bill would have opened up the now-secretive vet-

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