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Senator blocking bill to regulate veterinarians

Measure would open disciplinary process to public

A state senator filibustered Tuesday, trying to derail a bill that supporters say would protect pets and pet owners from incompetent veterinarians.

Sen. Danny Verdin, R-Laurens, said the bill would result in harassment of vets and subject them to unfair regulations.

"I find it (the bill) intolerable," said Verdin, who told senators he has a lifelong familiarity with veterinarians because his father is a vet.



John Monk

News Columnist

jmonk@
thestate.com
(803) 771-8344

Verdin specifically objected to a provision that would open up the now-secretive disciplinary process, which critics say allows bad vets to keep harming pets. "For us to build a bill that is built upon lack of trust ... I take offense to that."

Others say increased public scrutiny is needed. Vet disciplinary proceedings now are secret; citizens who make valid complaints can testify at — but not otherwise attend — the trial-like hearings at which a vet's guilt or innocence is determined.

"The more the public can see of the process, the better they can understand it," said veterinarian Dr. Claude Schumpert, a Richland County vet who chairs the S.C. Board of Veterinary Examiners and oversees disciplinary proceedings. He favors the bill.

If the bill passes, the disciplinary system for veterinarians would be as open as that of S.C. lawyers.

In the S.C. legal world, if an investigation determines that a citizen's complaint against a lawyer is serious and has merit, the attorney is given 30 days to respond. Then the complaint and response are made public and a public hearing is held, said S.C. Bar executive director Robert Wells.

Under the current law, however, veterinarians enjoy a cloak of secrecy. All their disciplinary hearings are secret, even those involving vets with a history of killing and mutilating many pets.

"This secrecy allows bad vets to continue negligent practices because it prevents the public from finding out which veterinarians have valid complaint histories," said Marcia Rosenberg, a Mount Pleasant homemaker.

Three years ago, Rosenberg's pet kitten, "Pumpkin," was injured in a botched operation by Charleston-area vet Dr. Stan-

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ley Gorlitsky. When Rosenberg investigated, she learned Gorlitsky had a history of bungling operations. Some of the complaints against Gorlitsky had been kept secret by the S.C. Board of Veterinary Examiners.

"We are talking about only one percent or less of all licensed veterinarians," said Rosenberg. "This bill only targets that very small minority of vets who have something to fear."

In 2002, the Board of Veterinary Examiners barred Rosenberg from the hearing at which it took disciplinary action against Gorlitsky for botching operations. (The board suspended Gorlitsky's license for a year.)

Since then, Rosenberg has worked with veterinarian groups on the bill now before the Senate.

The bill Verdin is trying to kill is backed by the S.C. Association of Veterinarians, the S.C. Board of Veterinary Examiners and Rep. Tom Dantzler, R-Berkeley, the only veterinarian in the General Assembly.

"I totally support this," said Dantzler, adding that secrecy "looks bad for my profession."

Dantzler stressed only valid complaints against vets would be made public. Any complaint made would have to go through a three-step process before being made public, he said:

- An initial investigation by a trained investigator
- A review by a special panel of veterinarians, a vet nurse and a consumer representative
- A finding by the eight-member board, seven of whom are veterinarians, that the complaint has merit

Schumpert said the public has a right to know what is happening with a serious complaint.

More openness also will teach the public how complex veterinary work can be, he said. "I really think it would do a lot to help people understand that there is more than one side to a com-



FILE PHOTOGRAPH/THE STATE

Sen. Danny Verdin, R-Laurens

plaint."

In his Senate speech, Verdin criticized the proposed special panel that would help determine whether a complaint is valid. He said the special panel represented a "whole new body" of regulation.

The public is best served by keeping complaints secret, Verdin said. "The best way to protect the public is to protect the profession."

Verdin said public airing of complaints could cause pet owners to leave one vet's practice and flock to another. He also said airing complaints may cause vets to take expensive, unnecessary steps.

"The more that you tilt the regulatory playing field against the conscientious practitioner, the more he's going to be forced ... to cover his costs and fees that he charges your constituents. We are talking about an escalation of

the cost of doing business."

Verdin said he wasn't against most other reforms in the bill.

These reforms include requiring newly graduated veterinarians to spend 60 days with an experienced vet before starting their own practice. There is no "intern" requirement now.

The bill already has passed the House and Senate once. A technicality has put it before the Senate a second time. If the Senate approves it within the next two days, it will go to Gov. Mark Sanford.

But Verdin's filibuster could kill the bill.

Rosenberg said, "The only ones to fear it are the bad vets."

Dantzler said openness and higher standards shouldn't be fought.

"This will make our profession stronger and better. It brings our practice into the modern age."

ABOUT THIS STORY

■ The push to make veterinarians more accountable to the public grew out of a case involving Charleston-area veterinarian Stanley Gorlitsky, who botched an operation on a cat named Pumpkin and other pets, according to the state officials. The proposal before the Senate would make it easier for the public to learn of valid complaints against veterinarians.

To read about Pumpkin and how the S.C. Board of Veterinary Examiners handled the cat's case, go to thestate.com.