The dilemma in the May issue dealt with the appropriateness of financial incentives, based solely on turnover, due to the possible conflict of interest that could arise between a practice’s finances and the welfare needs of patients (In Practice, May 2014, volume 36, pages 262-263). David Main argued that although incentivising staff can seem like a legitimate management tool to encourage good performance, poorly designed incentives could lead to the promotion of unnecessary products and services, which could lead to a negative impact on patient welfare, as well as challenge the caring reputation of the profession. He suggested that the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme should prohibit performance-related pay based on turnover, and that the profession should use an evidence-based approach to investigate and advocate better incentive systems.

I WOULD argue that the question we should be asking is not ‘Should the veterinary profession be allowed financial incentives?’, but actually, ‘Do financial incentives work at all?’

Can anyone provide evidence that financial incentives actually boost productivity or performance in the long term? In fact, I would argue that financial incentives are an outdated invention of the 1950s, originally designed to shepherd a flock of lazy individuals towards mind-numbing goals.

Working as an associate in a large corporate vet practice, I regularly see rewards used to try and increase productivity: ‘reach this target and get this prize’. Such incentives tend to lead to the alienation of management, decreased motivation and, even if the goal is reached in the short term, it damages the work environment going forward.

In a highly adaptive industry, requiring innovation and intrinsic motivation to maintain high performance, financial rewards can have negative effects on productivity. I strongly recommend reading Dan Pink’s book, ‘Drive’ (2011), in which he reviews the subject and offers an interesting new style of management technique. We should not be thinking ‘How can we push our team to earn more?’, but instead consider ‘How can we create an environment in which staff can work to their full potential and where they will want to stay for many years?’

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Reference

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Comments on the dilemma in the May issue: ‘Financial incentives’