

CANINE CORNER

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Local vet collective



Drs Oliver Reeve and Richard McKee, co-owners of the Onewa Road Veterinary Clinic.

In January, a collective of locally owned and operated vet practices known as Indie Vets was formed to promote the veterinary clinics which remain as New Zealand-owned and operated. Behind the scenes, a familiar face in the veterinary industry is coordinating the efforts. I sat down with Steve Merchant to see what Indie Vets is all about.

"I'd say we are a community of like-minded vets", says Steve.

"One veterinarian who has been in business for over 20 years told me

Long-standing *NZ Dog World* readers may remember the July 2017 'Canine Corner' in which I discussed the demographic change in the veterinary industry and the corporatisation of vet practices. At that time, Steve was the CEO of Pet Doctors which aimed to operate as a NZ-owned group. Ironically, the shareholders of Pet Doctors voted to accept a buy-out from National Veterinary Care shortly after that column was published. NVC has since been purchased by another corporation, VetPartners, which itself has been sold to a private equity firm.

that a supplier had described his clinic as a 'boutique clinic' which both concerned and surprised him. The operation of a veterinary clinic is increasingly challenging for individuals who are paying off student loans, raising a family, and faced with overheads for equipment, health and safety, and human resources. Older veterinarians want to retire but often have no local buyer for their practice."

The consolidation of veterinary practices in overseas ownership has largely gone unnoticed because once clinics are sold, they often retain their original names.

"Through this mutually supportive community, there is buying power. There's also the platform to share resources and connect. Through this support, older veterinarians wishing to retire and sell their practices will have resources to stay in business for a bit longer and to support those younger veterinarians as they are introduced to the practice ownership model."

As consumers navigated their way out of the nationwide lockdown in 2020, many kiwi consumers have focussed on buying local. Veterinarians are hoping that they can better promote their NZ-owned status through Indie Vets.

"There's something special about a locally-owned clinic and, once it is shut down or bought out, it is gone forever," adds Steve.

Dr Oliver Reeve, co-owner of the Onewa Road Veterinary Hospital on Auckland's North Shore, says that the practice joined Indie Vets to celebrate and promote their independent clinic.

"There's a difference between a family-owned practice and a corporate one. We use Indie Vets to raise public awareness; the logo is displayed at our reception, on our website, and in social media.

"I have never wanted to be part of the corporatisation of the vet world. At our clinic, we are totally vested in a high standard of medicine which we can practice

autonomously. We didn't want to push products on clients because the corporation has agreed on a product promotion, for example.

"We want people to know that we own this clinic and it's our livelihood. When a pet is brought here, they are looked after by us which provides continuity of care.

"Longer term, people have to ask themselves what choice they will have if all practices in the area are owned by a single entity. Independent clinics act as a balancer in the market."

Indie Vet membership is \$500 per year; participating clinics can be found in the searchable directory at www.indievets.co.nz. 🐾

