

The State
COLUMBIA • SOUTH CAROLINA

METRO

MONDAY, MAY 30, 2005 • SECTION B

Bills to give public notice face tough road

Legislation aims to protect patients from questionable doctors, veterinarians

Two bills that would allow the public to know more about questionable doctors and veterinarians are finding the going bumpy during the Legislature's waning days.



Verdin

Provisions in both bills would make public the existence of serious charges against practitioners. The let-the-sunshine-in proposals grew out of instances of practitioners accused of killing or maiming pets and human patients.

One bill — to give the public notice of serious charges against doctors — has a chance of pass-

ing, supporters say

The second bill, which would allow the public to learn about serious charges against veterinarians, is in danger of being scuttled by state Sen. Danny Verdin, R-Laurens, other senators say.

Verdin, whose father is a veterinarian, said last week that he is trying to reach a compromise on



John Monk

News Columnist

jmonk@
thestate.com
(803) 771-8344

SEE MONK PAGE B5

MONK

FROM PAGE B1

the vet bill and didn't want to discuss it. However, other senators said Verdin is using a senatorial privilege that allows a single senator to indefinitely delay a bill.

Verdin denied that in an e-mail to The State.

"I could hardly be characterized as holding up the bill," he wrote. "I have been working harder for its passage than anyone. I am hopeful that language suitable to all interested parties will be agreed upon and adopted before we adjourn next week."

Verdin's claim of support for the bill brought a chuckle from state Sen. Larry Grooms, R-Berkeley.

"He (Verdin) is trying to get it passed, but without any sunshine provisions in it," Grooms said. "He would rather it not pass if it has openness and disclosure like

I want."

The version of the vet bill that Verdin backs also includes a provision that would gag a citizen who has filed a complaint about a vet from telling friends and neighbors.

The sunshine provisions in both bills are aimed at bringing South Carolina out of the "dark ages" when it comes to learning about potentially dangerous doctors and vets, said Sen. Brad Hutto, D-Orangeburg. "Openness protects everybody and allows people to make conscientious decisions based on full knowledge."

Hutto said frivolous complaints against practitioners would not be made public under the proposals. Only after an investigation found the complaint to be serious and the accused doctor replied, if he or she wishes, would the complaint and notice of a disciplinary proceeding be made public, he said. (The hearing would be a full airing of

the charges. Its finding also would be made public.)

Two regulatory boards oversee doctors and veterinarians — the S.C. Board of Medical Examiners and the S.C. Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners. But critics say the secrecy that often veils their actions protects questionable doctors and vets and, in some cases, harms the public.

For example, the S.C. Board of Medical Examiners last year kept secret a complaint that a patient had died after treatments by Dr. James Shortt. Richland County coroner Gary Watts ruled Katherine Bibeau had died as a result of injections of hydrogen peroxide administered under Shortt's direction.

In mid-April, the medical examiners board temporarily suspended Shortt's license to practice medicine.

During most of the time between the complaint and its action, the board kept secret the al-

legations against Shortt, even after The State newspaper and other news groups alerted the public to questions about Shortt.

Meanwhile, it took years for the Board of Veterinary Medical Examiners to take action against Stan Gorlitsky, a Mount Pleasant veterinarian accused of killing and maiming pets in South Carolina and Ohio. Last year, the board reached an agreement with Gorlitsky, allowing him to retire.

While the vet board kept the public in the dark, The State newspaper and Marcia Rosenberg of Mount Pleasant made public Gorlitsky's questionable history.

Rosenberg said Friday that she's unhappy that complaints against doctors and veterinarians could be treated differently.

"If complaints against doctors are going to be made public, is there any reason why veterinarians should not have the same legislation?" she asked.