

# GAZETTE



The Law Society

## 'Pragmatic' Society backs referral fees

By Philip Hoult

Solicitors should not be banned unilaterally from paying referral fees while such payments can still be requested from other providers of legal services, the Law Society Council has said.

Adopting a policy statement on the controversial issue at its November meeting last week, the council said that if referral fees are to remain, 'there should be strict rules... aimed at reinforcing a solicitor's independence and duty to their client, which should be robustly enforced by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (SRA)'.

The Law Society should also make representations to the government, the statement said, 'as referral fees have the potential to limit access to justice and reduce the quality of legal services'. Further research was needed into whether referral fees have a place in the legal services market, it added.

The statement comes a month before



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the SRA is due to receive a final report on its enforcement and information campaign, and decide what further action to take. The SRA said in September that compliance was improving, but there were also serious concerns over some firms' dependency on introducers.

The council's statement followed Law Society research that found unease

among both payers and non-payers of referral fees about their use and impact on competition. But many had changed their business structures and felt they would be negatively impacted if a ban was reintroduced.

The report revealed 'mixed views' about reintroducing a ban. Solicitors in the personal injury market are split 50:50, largely along the lines of payers and non-payers. In residential conveyancing, 'there is a strong view that the ban should be reintroduced – even among some of the firms currently paying introducers'.

Law Society chief executive Desmond Hudson said: 'We believe that we have adopted a pragmatic approach which recognises the need for a level playing field for all providers of legal services, while still upholding the core values of the profession. The impact of referral fees on the market for legal services is not a matter for solicitors to address in isolation.'

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## Home Office poised to retreat over tipping-off

By Anita Rice

The government looks set to step back from proposals to introduce a new 'absolute' tipping-off offence within the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 (POCA), following intensive lobbying by the Law

Society, the *Gazette* has learned.

Chancery Lane wants to retain the legal professional privilege (LPP) exception allowing solicitors, in certain circumstances, to disclose to a client that a money laundering report had been made about them or a third party. The Home Office has

sought to remove the LPP exception to bring domestic legislation in line with the third EU money laundering directive – due to be implemented next month.

The Society believes absolutely prohibiting anyone in the regulated sector

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# Heavy hitter

**FROM MERGERS AND ACQUISITIONS TO GETTING HER LIP BUSTED BY A SIX FOOT-TALL SPARRING PARTNER, LAURA SAPERSTEIN TELLS TIM STEWART WHY SHE GAVE UP THE LAW TO BECOME A PROFESSIONAL BOXER**

**H**igh-flying lawyer Laura Saperstein, 36, gave up her £75,000-a-year job with top City law firm Freshfields in London to train full time as a boxer. Having won all ten of her amateur bouts and two years ago triumphing in the British lightweight amateur championship, she made her professional debut this week at the 1,600-seat capacity Tooting Leisure Centre in south London, with ringside seats going for £50.

She dreams of winning a world title within two years and plans to

use her legal skills to challenge the ban on women's boxing in her native New South Wales to bring it into line with the rest of Australia, so that she can one day return home to fight there. She also hopes to inspire other women to take up the sport and has created a website, [boxergirl.net](http://boxergirl.net), to build up a database of women boxers, and is launching her own 'Boxergirl' sportswear range.

Ms Saperstein says: 'I fell in love with boxing from the very first fight I watched. A boyfriend took me

along and kept trying to talk to me during the bout but I wasn't listening. Until I saw it in the flesh, I thought boxing was just two people whacking each other, but when I saw the skill and fitness of the fighters, and how toned their bodies were, I was absolutely entranced. It looked like dancing with violence to me. I thought it was beautiful to watch. I could not wait to try it and the minute I did I was addicted to throwing punches.'

Ms Saperstein grew up near Byron Bay in Australia, but a lack of



**Million Dollar Laura: vented work frustrations through boxing**

Photographs: Tim Stewart



money and sponsorship killed her youthful dreams of becoming a professional surfer, so instead she eventually began studying law, finishing university with a first-class honours degree.

'That gave me the chance to work pretty much where I wanted. I worked in criminal law for a while but did not enjoy it much. In 2001, I realised I could triple my earnings if I did corporate law in London and thought I might as well get paid as much as I could. I worked as a mergers and acquisitions solicitor at Freshfields for three years. It was a good salary but long hours – 14-hour days – and a lot of pressure.

'It was a real prestige job, flying business class around Europe to lead negotiations and the firm paying for everything, but I didn't like being stuck in an office working for other people. I was a long way from family and friends back home and did not have a support network.'

She was already kick-boxing but watching that first fight opened up a whole new world to her. 'It was very nerve-wracking walking into a gym for the first time though. I thought it would be like going surfing all over again – that they would think I was a silly woman and too old to box. But everyone was really welcoming. Becoming a boxer is like belonging to a family. I found that to boxing people it does not matter who you are, how you look or how good you are. What they respect is people who try hard and have courage.'

Ms Saperstein says she quickly discovered a 'real buzz' from whacking punchbags 'or, preferably, other people. I think I vented a lot of my work frustration. I was quite angry. As there were no other women, I had to spar with blokes. There was a 6ft-tall guy who bust my lip early on. I fought back the tears and said "Let's finish the round". It shook me up for a while but I kept going because I loved it so much and I hated being bettered by anyone, man or woman'.

Ms Saperstein's trainer, Chris Hall, says: 'Ten years ago, I would not have thought women's boxing would take off, but it certainly has and the standard has increased a lot. I prefer training women to the men. They are friendly, articulate, more diligent in their training and smell nicer. Laura is very good. She is



**Change of direction: the former City lawyer is relieved she no longer has to put on a suit**

**'I have never looked back since leaving the law. You earn a nice salary but you have to give your life up for your career'**

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naturally strong and aggressive, and we have really polished her technical boxing ability.'

Soon after taking up boxing, Ms Saperstein was cycling to and from work, training in the gym at lunchtimes and leaving work at 6.30pm, which is not the way most young solicitors at top City law firms generally behave. 'My mind wasn't on the job,' she confesses. 'I was into boxing a lot more than mergers and acquisitions. I wanted to challenge my body, not just my brain. I left Freshfields six months after watching my first fight. It was a very hard decision because your identity is almost defined by your job. I was a successful lawyer in a top firm.'

'A lot of men get into boxing because they come from the wrong side of the tracks and need structure and discipline in their lives. I had no money worries but I still needed guidance. I needed to find something that was the real me and a purpose in life. I have never looked back since leaving the law. You earn a nice salary but you have to give your life up for your career. When I go out for a run and see everyone in their suits going off to work, I feel so relieved that I don't have to do it anymore. I run an hour each morning and train two hours in the gym in the afternoon.'

Ms Saperstein says her first fight was terrifying. She had just two coaches and her then-boyfriend for support when she walked into the ring in front of several hundred people. 'You feel very exposed and alone in the world. I was expecting it to be like sparring, and was standing in the middle of the ring when my opponent rushed over and laid into me. I just covered up and stood there getting beaten up. I froze

and my coaches were horrified.

'Once I had processed what was happening, I thought "OK, if you want a brawl, I'll give you one". I started throwing punches back and won the fight within a minute when the referee stopped it. The adrenaline rush from the fight was amazing. You feel like you have just been to war. In another fight, my opponent got a standing count from a body shot, started crying and refused to carry on.'

Half of her fights have been in Sweden and thus far she has won them all without being knocked down or badly hurt. She trains at the London Boxing Academy in Tottenham and says the only downside is 'having to starve myself to reach my fighting weight of 60kg. You end up dehydrated and irritable from hunger. I distract myself by reading voraciously, and going shopping for handbags and bras'.

She explains: 'I think you can be a warrior and feminine. I am girly and like looking pretty. I love having my hair done, doing my make-up and dressing up. I am very houseproud and love cooking. Celebrities like Dannii Minogue and Geri Halliwell have helped make boxing trendy by using it as part of their health and fitness regimes, and I get told I look like Hilary Swank in 'Million Dollar Baby' all the time. They add a touch of glamour and, hopefully, so do I. Women have always been kick-boxing but now boxing is more popular than ever. Most of the women I know think it is great that I box. They are intrigued. A lot wish they had the guts to do something unconventional too.'

Her ambition is to win ten or so fights in the next two years and then have a shot at a world title, finding a serious sponsor and a top boxing promoter along the way. 'But I just want to do as well as I can and hopefully inspire other women to box or just to chase whatever is their particular dream. One day, I would hope to be in love, meet the right partner and settle down, but I am single at the moment. I think a lot of men find me threatening because I am a strong personality and get a lot of attention from big, buff boxers. For me, the most important thing is that my life is interesting and stimulating. That's what makes me happy.'

*Tim Stewart is a freelance journalist*