Sian Durward-Akhurst graduated from Glasgow in June last year, and was not due to begin an equine clinical training scholarship until January. To fill the time between the two, she volunteered to work for the SPCA in Fiji, but then wondered if she was going to be out of her depth . . .

Fellow graduate Jenny Martin and I travelled to Nadi international airport in Fiji on November 1. We were not sure what to expect, as we had had limited contact with the resident vet in Fiji because of an intermittent internet connection. By the time we arrived in the capital, Suva, we were more than a little nervous. What facilities would we have? What support would we get? And were we both going to be completely out of our depth?

The Fiji SPCA was set up in 1953 and is the island’s only animal welfare organisation. It provides care for Fiji’s animals through a small veterinary clinic, a welfare office and a shelter that rehomes unwanted dogs and cats.

Veterinary coverage of Fiji is poor; there are only two vets for the whole of Fiji’s islands and they are both based in Suva, so when Jenny and I arrived we doubled the vet population. The SPCA offers vastly subsidised services, as many owners live below the poverty line, and there is a welfare fund for treatment of animals whose owners cannot afford to treat them for serious conditions. The permanent vet at the SPCA (Deborah Hewton) graduated in Australia in 2007, and is a volunteer herself on a two-year placement.

We found that the clinic had most of the basic equipment; the only piece of equipment that I missed – on more than one occasion – was an ultrasound machine!

Baptism of fire
Our first week was spent mostly doing surgery. We knew that the permanent vet was going away for our second week – if she felt we were capable – and we would be in charge (a slightly scary prospect). My first surgery was to fix an aural haematoma, closely followed by numerous spays and castrations.

A big challenge was that many queens and bitches were in heat or pregnant. My main concern was the surgery, but we coped, with an excellent nursing team to help with the anaesthesia, so that we could focus on doing the surgery.

Our main challenge actually ended up being the consultations. Not only did we have to learn a lot about exotic diseases, but there was often a language barrier and, on top of that, many of the animals were not used to being handled. A poorly parrot turned out to be a slightly traumatic consultation, but my small animal notes came to the rescue!

Poisonings
There were a lot of cases of poisoned dogs, as many people leave poison down for the massive stray dog population. Many of these
were very harrowing; watching a dog die from paraquat poisoning is not pleasant, and I became a lot more persuasive at encouraging owners to have these animals euthanased when they presented, rather than just before they died. Unfortunately, we saved only a few poisoning cases due to the late presentation of many cases and lack of antidotes. The SPCA has to euthanase orphaned puppies and kittens under six weeks of age, as a lack of time coupled with the limited number of personnel would not allow for them to be properly cared for. Some days this got to me, as euthanasing a litter of puppies was pretty grim; however, it was mostly definitely for the greater good. The cute faces got the better of us when a pair of ginger kittens arrived. I couldn’t bear to put them down, so we fostered them until they were old enough to be rehomed. Leaving them behind was tough, although the kittens themselves – Jonny Wilkinson and Tigger – didn’t seem too bothered!

Another of our duties was to check the in-patients twice a day, and to make sure the animals waiting to be rehomed were happy and healthy. Spending 10 minutes in a pen with the kittens was incredible, as they were all fairly attention-deprived, and it always ended up with kittens seemingly everywhere! The SPCA has a phenomenal backup team, and all the animals to be rehomed are well looked after. Funds are pretty limited and the staff bring in whatever scraps they have to ensure the animals are fed.

**What the trip did for me**

I am so pleased I went to Fiji; I gained so much confidence and experience, which will be with me for the rest of my career.

In Fiji we worked five-day weeks and visited various exotic locations at weekends. Jenny extended her stay for an extra two weeks, and got the opportunity to do outreach clinics on a variety of beautiful islands.

**Opportunity to gain experience**

The SPCA in Fiji is doing a good job but it always needs help. Jenny and I were there for just over a month, which I regret slightly, as I would have loved to have stayed longer. They are looking for enthusiastic vets who could work for at least a month, but longer would be fantastic. Experience is useful but not essential, and accommodation is provided. We had the use of a beautiful three-bedroom house with a lovely garden and coconut trees wherever you looked!

For further details on volunteering for work overseas visit www.bva.co.uk/overseas/bva_overseas.aspx

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**Ten-minute chat**

**Joanna Hosie-Kingham**

qualified from Edinburgh vet school in 2004. She worked in companion animal practice in London until last year, when she became regulatory affairs manager for Elanco.

**What made you decide to join industry?**

I really enjoyed working in general practice as a vet, but industry for me held more opportunities to develop in other areas. I wanted to retain my clinical knowledge but have the opportunity to work with scientists in specialised areas other than veterinary medicine.

**How did you get to where you are today?**

I spent seven years in general practice; after qualifying, I joined a mixed practice in south Wales before moving to London where I worked entirely with small animals.

**How do you spend a typical day?**

No day is typical. My day can be spent in the office working with team members on projects or taking part in meetings. Travel can also be a key part of my job.

**What do you like about your job?**

As a vet I am still able to use the practical and business knowledge I gained from practice. I enjoy revisiting the basic science from early university years. I like the fact that no day is typical and that things change daily and sometimes every hourly!

**What do you not like?**

Occasionally I miss being able to cuddle the in-patients!

**Why is your job important?**

In the early stages of developing new veterinary medicines, I am able to provide helpful insights and pass on the experiences I gained from working in practice. The development and ongoing assessment of products will lead to better clinical care.

**What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?**

Talk to as many people as possible who work in industry. There are many varied roles, not all of which you hear much about when at veterinary school.

**What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?**

Thinking ahead in the veterinary profession is important, and picturing yourself in a number of scenarios will help you decide where you really want to be.

**What was your proudest moment?**

Being a vet is really important to me as a professional, and graduating from the ‘Dick Vet’ remains one of my happiest days.

**What was your most embarrassing moment?**

I wish I could remember!
Ten-minute chat

Joanna Hosie-Kingham

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