A career in pharmaceuticals

Industry offers a range of opportunities for vets who wish to pursue an alternative to practice, including opportunities in research and development

VETS have been working in industry since the 1950s. Today’s veterinarians are educated to protect the health of animals and people. They not only work hard to address the health needs of animals; they also play a critical role in environmental protection, food safety, animal welfare and public health. There are various roles in industry for those with veterinary training, including sales, technical services, product development and marketing.

Other veterinarians take advantage of their underlying knowledge of comparative physiology, pathology and medicine to work in the research functions of human pharmaceutical companies.

And some, like Jane, who works for AstraZeneca, are involved in new product development – planning, running and supervising trials to investigate the efficiency and safety of new products. Jane is currently working in reproductive toxicology, but has been working as a veterinarian in industry for over 18 years. She feels that the first, and biggest, difference between working as a veterinarian in industry and working as a veterinarian in practice is the importance of teamwork and group contribution.

‘The needs of others may well outweigh the needs of yourself. You cannot have dictators, you cannot have prima donnas – from the technician who’s feeding the animals, to the scientist who is directing a multinational piece of work, we all have to work together.’

‘The output from my work – and I shouldn’t use “my” because it’s always a team effort – might be an experiment, or it might be a major scientific project that’s going to lead to a scientific paper that somebody on the team is invited to speak about at an international conference.’

Like many veterinarians working in industry, Jane is excited by new research.

‘When a report ends up on my desk, whether it was commissioned from another company or was delivered by my team, I feel real excitement to see what the results of the experiment were, and what we need to do next.’

‘Within my current job, I am given the opportunity to interact with people who could be described as leaders within several scientific fields. You get to go to international conferences. You get to meet scientists from other countries and from universities. There are opportunities to interact with government-based scientists who are setting international policy. Some of those interactions are the most challenging but also the most rewarding – because, at the end of the day, if your scientific opinion and the arguments you bring to bear result in a change in international policy that you feel is of benefit to animal welfare or humanity, that is a fabulous feeling.’

Industry provides a challenging environment. There is constant change and development. Jane says, ‘Of the key competencies the industry looks for in veterinary-trained professionals, inevitably, sound underlying veterinary and scientific knowledge is the most important. Linked to that, I think
industry jobs suit people who have inquiring minds, and who are prepared to continually revisit the decisions they make, based on the new evidence that becomes available. You’re always learning about a new issue. So focus on delivering high-quality science that is at the cutting edge of its field: that way you will develop expertise and opinions that matter.”

Jane is proud of her current reproductive toxicology work. ‘Animal testing is vital to the pharmaceutical industry as we develop the information that goes into the pregnancy label of every single AstraZeneca medicine. You cannot develop a medicine without generating information on what to tell a pregnant woman. A pregnant woman with a serious bacterial infection needs antibiotics. She and her GP should have the ability to read a label and determine whether an antibiotic is liable to hurt her baby. And it’s not OK simply to have a label that says a medicine is dangerous in pregnancy, because if you say a medicine is more dangerous than it is and the woman takes the medicine and then discovers she is pregnant, she may choose to have an abortion. All because a label suggested a product was more dangerous than it was. I am very proud of doing the best we can to inform doctors and patients about the safety of our medicines.’

‘If I had to give one piece of advice to someone who was training to be a vet on why they should consider a job in industry, I would encourage them to be open-minded about how the knowledge and judgement that their veterinary training provides can benefit industry and society to a much greater extent than it can in veterinary practice.’

This article was provided by AstraZeneca. More information is available at www.astrazeneca.com

Ten-minute chat

Jenny Walton qualified from Edinburgh in 1998. After the birth of her first daughter in 2002, she worked nights for Vets Now, and saw a need for blood products in the emergency and critical care field. As a result, she ran a pilot trial on canine blood banking in the north-east of England, and has been veterinary supervisor for Pet Blood Bank UK since the charity’s launch in 2007.

What made you become involved in canine blood banking?

At university, internal medicine was taught by Andy Mackin, who had worked previously in the USA and Australia, where blood components had been readily available. He regularly commented how frustrating it was that we did not have such products in the UK. Late one night, when I was dealing with an exsanguinating dog, his comments really hit home. At the time, I was on the Vets Now clinical board, and we decided that it was time to try to find a solution to the issue. A local trial made components available, and made the difference every few weeks between cases surviving or not. The company decided that more could be done than small-scale provision of blood components to its own clinics, and, as the legislation had recently changed, that investigating a UK blood bank would be the way forward. A forward-thinking veterinary nurse, Wendy Barnett – another member of the clinical board – was given the task of going to the USA to research the logistics and of putting a proposal together. To cut a long story short, she set up and became director of the Pet Blood Bank UK. I became the veterinary supervisor due to my interests and accumulated knowledge during the trial.

Why did you take this career path?

There was an obvious need for a service, and I relished the enthusiasm and support available within the company to be involved in something that would make a difference to the UK veterinary profession.

How do you spend a typical day?

My typical day/night is tricky to define! I work two night shifts every fortnight at Middlesbrough Vets Now, keeping up to date in emergency critical care. Working from home, I take calls from practitioners asking for advice. I assess results from donors and liaise with the lab manager to release units, and I analyse the collection session data to see what we can do to improve sessions. I also gather and edit clinical support literature, as education and articles on transfusion medicine are really important. I supervise two blood collection sessions a month in the north-east and travel regularly, most often to the Midlands base for meetings, VMD legislative duties and training new staff and phlebotomists. We are often invited to lecture practitioner groups, and benefit from attending UK and international conferences.

I liaise regularly with our US-based veterinary blood bank adviser, who has 20 years’ experience in the field, as well as our National Blood Service adviser, who has vast experience in human blood banking.

What do you like about your job?

I really appreciate the people I work with in the blood bank and the critical care roles. In the collection part of my job, I enjoy seeing the donors and their owners come back; some of them have donated 15 times now.

What do you not like?

Personally, the sometimes crazy hours I put in, and the time away from my family. Work-wise, running a volunteer programme is intensive. If I had a magic wand, I would ensure that every UK practitioner typed every recipient needing a red cell transfusion, and used DEA 1.1 type-matched blood. This would mean we could maximise all the donors offered to us.

Why is your job important?

It makes a difference to the canine population. Rational, ethically thought out and prudent use of blood components is often life-saving.

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

Be prepared to work hard, be enthusiastic, and recognise, nurture and appreciate the talents of the people around you.

What’s the best piece of advice you can give others?

Although, when enthused, it is hard for others to get a word in edgeways, I try to stop and listen . . . I internalise the information, digest it, respect and learn from people, and when making decisions go with what I think is right . . . so my advice to anyone else would always be ‘learn to listen’.

What was your proudest moment?

The first time we achieved a staffing level that investigating a UK blood bank would be the way forward. A forward-thinking veterinary nurse, Wendy Barnett – another member of the clinical board – was given the task of going to the USA to research the logistics and of putting a proposal together. To cut a long story short, she set up and became director of the Pet Blood Bank UK. I became the veterinary supervisor due to my interests and accumulated knowledge during the trial.

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Ten-minute chat

Jenny Walton

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