A career in government service

Linda Smith looks at some of the options available

ABOUT 800 vets are employed in the public sector by government departments and agencies in the UK. This amounts to about 5 per cent of practising vets. The umbrella organisation, Government Veterinary Surgeons (GVS), is led by the head of profession, the Chief Veterinary Officer, and it links the government vets spread throughout England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Some of the GVS member organisations are listed in the table opposite.

As a general rule, jobs fall into two categories: operational and policy-based.

Operational work
The biggest veterinary employer in the country, Animal Health, is the executive agency responsible for implementing notifiable disease control, farm animal welfare, import and export control, and a variety of surveillance programmes.

With over 270 vets, you join a GB-wide community, and a similar number of technical staff are employed to support you. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) performs a similar, but slightly wider, function, incorporating meat hygiene and policy development roles too. The Veterinary Laboratories Agency (VLA) also falls into the operational category, giving the option of working in a variety of pathology, research and epidemiology jobs.

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) Operations Group (formerly the Meat Hygiene Service) employs official veterinarians (OVs) in slaughterhouses and other types of premises producing food for human consumption. OVs enforce public health, animal health and animal welfare policies, and are involved in import and export controls, as well as surveillance programmes.

The Home Office employs a small team of vets to oversee the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. This involves inspecting premises that hold licences under the Act, to ensure licence conditions are being met, and therefore supports and polices the research community.

Policy advice
Not everyone is suited to the outdoor life, but don’t be fooled: even those jobs that appear to be completely office-based can still involve trips and visits. Working for organisations such as Defra, the FSA, the Welsh Assembly Government or the Scottish Government tends to involve providing veterinary policy advice. This type of work can be very demanding, but rewarding, and you get to work with a wide variety of other professionals, including lawyers, economists, statisticians, sociologists and politicians. Policy jobs also offer, in some cases, travel abroad.

Pros and cons
The variety of work in government service is immense, and changes all the time. GVS encourages interchange between member organisations, so you can get an idea of other work areas too. Working hours are generally fixed, and out-of-hours work is often more limited than in practice. As a general rule, working terms and conditions are well defined and secure. In most cases, you could have the opportunity to apply for promotion at an appropriate time in your life, and take on more managerial tasks. On a wider scale, working in the public sector is, for many
people, a meaningful and fulfilling role in society. Doing things ‘for the greater good’ can be satisfying and have effects that can be seen throughout a wide area. For example, becoming involved in animal welfare policy work can have positive effects on millions of animals.

There is also a downside: the amount of contact with animals is obviously less than in practice, and sometimes the bureaucracy is tiresome. People you meet may not understand what you do, or why. But it’s not a one-way street; vets regularly go back into practice with relative ease, and a new perspective, having seen a different world.

Where to find out more
Each organisation that is a member of GVS has its own website, and the GVS website (www.defra.gov.uk/gvs) provides links to all its members. Most have information on careers and options, or you can contact them directly and ask. You should note, however, that some GVS members employ only a small number of vets, so opportunities can be limited.

How to join
Government jobs are usually advertised in Veterinary Record, and you can also find information about vacancies on the GVS website.

If you have a really strong desire to work for one of the government departments, you could get in touch and ask about future vacancies or send your CV. Some GVS organisations will arrange for a visit to one of their sites, to help you to learn more.

Entry requirements vary, and not all GVS employers will take on new graduates. In some cases, further qualifications are required or form part of the training process on recruitment.

Be warned: Civil Service recruitment procedures can be thorough, and it is not unusual for five or six months to pass before you actually walk through the door.

Ten-minute chat

Tom Ogilvie-Graham, MBE, is commanding officer of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps (RAVC) – a unit of highly motivated soldiers that cares for the ceremonial horses and the growing team of dogs deployed in operational units

What made you become an Army vet?
I took an Army bursary when I was in my second year at Edinburgh, partly as I wanted to join the Services, and partly as I needed cash to cover my point-to-point expenses!

How did you get to where you are today?
I was always keen on horses, hunting quite a lot as well as racing, hunter trials and so on, and this helped me secure postings to both the King’s Troop Royal Horse Artillery (whose horses pull the guns that fire Royal salutes), and the Household Cavalry. I took a doctorate in equine behaviour when I was at the Household Cavalry, and also studied during a Fulbright scholarship at Cornell. On other academic development, I qualified as a barrister from the Inns of Court and took a Masters at Reading.

What do you like about your job?
The satisfaction of working with really highly motivated soldiers, which almost all RAVC soldiers are (we select only one in 10 who apply to join us). This never goes away. The time I have spent on active service has given me a great deal to look back on. My first posting in Northern Ireland was formative – and serving with the Royal Engineers in the first Gulf War, then with the Airborne Brigade in Rwanda, with the RAVC in Bosnia and with the US Army in Baghdad have all presented different challenges. The animals themselves are great, constantly surprising, and, at its best, the Army can have a fantastic team spirit.

What do you not like?
Being in the Army is primarily a young person’s game, and, as you get more senior, you inevitably find yourself less part of a team and more bound down with procedure and paperwork rather than dealing with people.

Why is your job important?
No one in the Army is – or should be – indispensable. That said, I’m proud to be in charge of several hundred really good soldiers and a pretty good bunch of veterinary officers, while knowing that the RAVC has doubled in size in recent years as the service we provide in areas such as mine detection, finding hidden weapons, assisting the infantry and other operational tasks has become better recognised by the wider Army.

My job is to manage this, but also to provide direction and, I suppose, the main thing is that quite a few other people are counting on me to get things right at my level so they can get on with doing their job – with their animals, out on the ground.

What is the best piece of advice you were ever given?
If you can’t take a joke, you shouldn’t have joined!

What was your proudest moment?
On a professional level, probably setting up and running a ‘hearts and minds’ veterinary project in northern Kenya that provided a significant and lasting benefit.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
There have been quite a few, but when the vet’s dog is sick in front of a whole lot of senior officers in the General’s office (as happened last week), that’s not ideal. I’m still trying to find the person who fed her so many chocolate Bourbons!
Ten-minute chat

Tom Ogilvie-Graham

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