Opening new doors

Doing a research project as an undergraduate gives you experiences and skills that will benefit you as a vet or as a scientist, says third-year veterinary student Myfanwy Hill

LOOKING at the list of the BVA’s specialist divisions, you realise what a wide range of jobs a veterinary degree gives you access to. If you wanted to, you could treat it like any other BSc degree and become a teacher or a banker, but I guess most vet students want to go into practice. That is part of my plan, although I’ve always known that I want to do more.

Maybe I’ve just got a short attention span and get bored easily, but I like to think it’s because I’m a bit adventurous. I’m interested in spending at least some of my career in science and research. As far as I can see, we are all the products of veterinary research. Research is about finding out answers to questions that interest us, which is not a world away from working up a case to reach a diagnosis.

With this in mind, I applied to the Veterinary Sciences Summer School at Cambridge. The summer school offers vet students the opportunity to do a research project in one of the school’s departments, and gives career guidance through workshops, seminars and trips to other institutes, which opens students’ eyes to the different career paths available to veterinary graduates.

I spent 10 weeks in Cambridge with other undergraduates from all over the world – from as far away as Australia to just up the road in Glasgow, and pretty much everywhere in between. My project was in the neurology department, but there were people working with viruses, bacteria, and even frogspawn. I spent most of my time looking for the genetic cause of a polyneuropathy in a family of pedigree dogs. But I also got to see the work that other people in the lab were doing on multiple sclerosis in human beings and on spinal regeneration in dogs with spinal cord injuries.

I doubt my project will earn me a Nobel prize (in fact, I think it would probably be a good idea if I never went near another PCR again), but it’s amazing to think that the work I was doing might contribute a tiny amount to knowledge – not just about animal disease, but human disease as well. It’s a cliché, but research doesn’t have to happen in a lab – clinical audits are research as well. Being in research doesn’t make you any less a vet: you can do PhDs and residencies with the aim of becoming a better clinician.

As students, we have inquiring minds; that’s why we’re at vet school. I know a career in research isn’t for everyone, but we shouldn’t forget that we’ve got a good 40 years of our lives to fill after we graduate. I want to cram as many experiences into that time as possible so I’m not going to shut any career doors on the way.

The Association for Veterinary Teaching and Research Work offers free student membership for those interested in working in science and research, and the Association of Veterinarians in Industry can advise on other not quite so ‘vetty’ career paths. The Wellcome Trust funds summer research placements across the vet schools, most of which can be counted towards extramural studies.

Doing a research project doesn’t tie you into a lifetime in a lab coat, but it will open doors for you and give you experience and skills that will benefit you as a vet or as a scientist or both. The two are not mutually exclusive!
Ten-minute chat

Chris Daborn is a member of a rare breed – a private veterinarian working in rural Africa. Having lost the job security of a career in overseas veterinary work when the Overseas Development Administration (ODA) became the Department for International Development and cut back on funding the secondment of British veterinary practitioners, he needed a new career path to keep working in Africa.

What made you become a veterinarian?
I think the emotion of finding, at the age of eight, a freshly run over cat in its death throes, for which I could do absolutely nothing, and, some 12 years later, attempting to treat terminal cases of African horse sickness that was killing large numbers of horses, mules and donkeys during the 1966 pandemic in Morocco, were salient moments in deciding my career direction.

Morocco also showed me the direct association between the health and productivity of animals and the livelihoods of their owners, and set my career on its course.

How did you get to where you are today?
I came away from school with a good crop of O-levels, competency in sports and the desire to do something of value. Having set my sights on becoming a vet, I focused on achieving that goal. Getting into the Royal Veterinary College took five character-developing years, adding fatherhood and a range of income-earning skills along the way. In those years, I faced many setbacks and low points interspersed with some highs. I have found that remaining strong to a core belief in yourself and holding to the goal set are key to moving forward.

After a year in general practice, I applied to the ODA for a scholarship to undertake a Masters in Tropical Animal Health and Production at the Centre for Tropical Veterinary Medicine (CTVM) at Edinburgh University. The ODA did not award me the grant but instead put me on a plane to Malawi, where I spent the next 10 years learning my trade, courtesy of the veterinarians from around the world with whom it was my privilege to share class.

CTVM encouraged me to adopt a research interest, which progressed from the potential to domesticate African wildlife for draught purposes, to understanding and addressing the stress caused in candidate species, and then the problem of tuberculosis (TB) in the red deer being used to study stress reactions.

For the next 10 years I focused exclusively on the zoonotic importance of bovine TB in Africa, work that continues to this day. The study brought me to the Usangu Plains in Tanzania, where around 30 per cent of the cattle tested positive to the comparative intradermal test. If you want to study disease, Africa is the place to be! Seventy-two of the 85 diseases of large and small animals listed by the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) can be found here. There is, however, a real challenge faced by the majority of the 53 countries making up the continent in delivering an effective veterinary service to diagnose and control these diseases.

Working with pastoralists in the Usangu plains brought this reality home to me, and when the opportunity arose I took the chance work for the NGO Vetaid, setting up in Maasailand a primary animal healthcare service using community-based animal health workers.

My recent training by the OIE to become a Performance of Veterinary Services Assessor has given me a strong platform from which to advocate this approach.

How do you spend a typical day?
Typically, doing something that is different from the day before! As an international veterinary consultant I can find myself on a plane to just about anywhere doing just about anything. I remain committed to working involving the delivery of veterinary services, and spend a lot of time on my laptop writing reports, preparing papers, communicating with colleagues and continuing my education by following up the wealth of veterinary information available on the web.

What do you like about your job?
The opportunity to use my acquired knowledge and experience to make a contribution towards improving animal health and productivity, and in doing this to help secure the livelihoods of the livestock owners.

What do you not like?
Being relatively income insecure, as opportunities to practise and earn a living as a conventional private veterinarian are limited in the rural areas of Africa. I tried the complementary approach of opening a non-veterinary business, as practised by many of my multitasking colleagues, but mine, a pub/restaurant/farm shop called ‘Bytes’, was burnt to the ground, taking my lifetime’s savings with it.

Why is your job important?
Because I really believe that the veterinary profession has a huge contribution to make in securing the livelihoods of the livestock-keeping peoples of the world and protecting the health of consumers of livestock products. I remain optimistic that one day the wheels of development priority will turn to the point where it again provides the livestock sector, inclusive of the service providers, with the level of support needed to realise its full productive potential.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
If you want to be poor but happy, consider it. Otherwise, take the chance of being rich and happy in something more securely remunerative!

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
My mother used to say, ‘every cloud has a silver lining’, and she was right.

What was your proudest moment?
When a horse that had not been caught up for weeks came to my hand after I had spent a day standing still with a bucket of nuts to entice it.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
When my careers adviser suggested that if I learned to spell ‘veterinary’ correctly I might have a better chance of being selected for veterinary school!

This period I achieved my next goal – an ODA scholarship enabling me to attend the CTVM in Edinburgh.

Six years later, a telex offering me the job of supervising the Tropical Veterinary Medicine MSc at the CTVM came like a bolt from the blue, and I spent the next seven years learning my trade, courtesy of the veterinarians from around the world with whom it was my privilege to share class.

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