From private practice to university

Gareth Arthurs moved from practice to academia, becoming a lecturer in small animal surgery at the Royal Veterinary College. Here he describes how and why he made the move and what he has gained from it

FIRST, I need to give some background. I graduated from Cambridge in 1996, and after the obligatory final-year holiday, I started work in general practice. I enjoyed it, but right from the beginning I was keen to continue learning and developing myself professionally.

I soon registered for the certificate in veterinary radiology; I studied while working in general practice, and as I learned more my interests developed. My work became predominantly small animal, and I did less and less large animal work.

After I passed the certificate in 1999, I moved to a small animal practice that had a heavy surgical caseload, including orthopaedic referrals. This stimulated my interest in surgery, so I studied for the certificate in small animal surgery – suited me well as it was primarily a clinical position. At Cambridge, I had really enjoyed being immersed in the academic environment with the opportunity for and stimulation of constant learning. The opportunity to re-experience this environment was immediately appealing.

I calculated that moving to university would be a good career move in terms of developing myself professionally because a university position carries some kudos. It is a good way of developing one’s professional profile, and opens unique opportunities, such as research and access to cutting-edge technology.

Is the job perfect and brilliant? Are there absolutely no problems? Of course not: no job is perfect. The biggest frustration is that
there is so much to do and not enough time. The clinical and teaching workload is so busy that there is very little free time. My original intention was to complete much more research than I’ve been able to. One-third of my time is ‘off clinics’, which is not ‘free’ time, as it is consumed by extra duties, such as tutoring students, writing and marking exam questions, writing or presenting lectures, organising CPD courses, or attending meetings. The longer you’re in the job, the more extra jobs and responsibilities you accumulate, and, before you know it, you suddenly have more responsibilities than you feel able to cope with! This doesn’t sit particularly comfortably with me as I like to complete a task as soon as possible, but now I have long ‘to-do’ lists and precious little time in which to do them.

It seems to me that the general view is that a university job is a relatively cushy number, but in my experience this is not true. I’m currently working harder than I have before, including taking work home.

Considering a switch?
My advice to anybody who’s considering a switch – if you’re so inclined and can afford to – is do it now. The opportunities that a university position can offer are unrivalled and plentiful. You don’t have to do it forever, and if you don’t like it, there’s likely to be a good job in private practice you can return to!

Sally Goulden spends two mornings a week working with swans at the Swan Sanctuary in Shepperton, Surrey. She spends another three days a week in companion animal practice. When she is not working or looking after her husband and two teenage sons, she is at the gym, running in Windsor Great Park or being a churchwarden.

How did you get involved with caring for swans?
I used to work for the vet the Swan Sanctuary used, with cases being brought to his small animal hospital. Around the time I was taking a career break to have my first baby, the sanctuary moved to larger premises with an operating theatre on site. They invited me over for what I thought was a baby bootie knitting pattern swap, and offered me the work. It would have been rude to refuse!

Tell us a bit about your background and training.
I qualified from the RVC in 1984 and went straight into companion animal practice. When I started the swan work in 1988 I had no experience at all with birds, let alone swans. I had to go back to first principles, and the vet I had worked for told me how to anaesthetise birds, let alone swans. I had to go back in 1988 I had no experience at all with birds, let alone swans. Although I had had some experience with other waterfowl, I had never done anything with swans before.

What sort of conditions do they present with?
Many of the injuries are extensive and life-threatening. About one-third of swan injuries are fishing-related, and one-third are incurred during crash-landings. The remainder have river traffic, predator-and dog-inflicted injuries; intoxication from agents such as botulinum toxin, lead, blue-green algae or sewage and infections such as Aspergillus, internal parasitism and duck virus enteritis. Treatment varies from simple rest and recuperation, to wound management, intravenous fluid support, nebulisation, surgery to remove hooks, fishing line and damaged limbs and bone repair. In the warmer weather the wounds are often infested with hundreds of maggots.

What do you like about your job?
There’s never a dull moment! Every case is different, and yet provides a little more knowledge and experience to help work out what to do with the next patient.

What do you not like?
Maggots! Injuries inflicted by humans in mindless cruelty. Getting cratered on.

How many swans do you see?
Ten-minute chat

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Veterinary Record 2010 167: ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.g7049

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