Riders on tour

A raffle prize led to a unique CPD event and a chance to raise money for charity.

Jessica Kidd and Derek Knottenbelt report

The ‘Horsepower CPD’ tour was the brainchild of Derek Knottenbelt, professor of equine medicine at the University of Liverpool who, last year, won a Harley Davidson motorbike in a raffle. Rather than simply selling the bike and taking the money, he decided to take lessons and get his motorcycle licence. He then devised a unique fund-raiser for a charity dear to his heart. From there, the equine vet/biker grapevine helped recruit riders for the Horsepower CPD tour, which visited all seven veterinary schools in England and Scotland in the last week of July, delivering a five-hour CPD programme at each.

The sentiment behind the project centred on the need to provide financial stability to the SPANA-sponsored Disabled Riding Centre in Bamako, Mali, which provides a loving, respectful and stimulating respite from the rigours of orphanage life for abandoned disabled children. The BEVA Trust, which supports a wide range of important equine health and welfare projects in the UK and overseas, was also set to benefit.

The final biker team comprised Derek Knottenbelt, David Bolt, Josh Slater, Caroline Hahn, Jessica Kidd, Mike Hewetson, Peter McElroy, Alex Dugdale, Peter Brown and Mike Shepherd. There were also three support team drivers, an IT support person and numerous local organisers involved. All types of bike were represented: Harleys, BMW trailies, sports bikes, sports tourers, classics, and retro bikes. Each biker covered at least 1250 miles and some had covered over 1500 by the time they got home again. More than 35 hours of state-of-the-art CPD covering a wide range of topics, largely dictated by the expertise of the bikers themselves, were delivered. It was certainly a major feat of endurance on physical, mental and emotional levels and was the first time anything like this had been done in the UK.

Attendance at the events was free of charge, although commensurate donations were expected. Attendances varied from 40 to 70 reflecting the enthusiasm for this unique and unusual charitable CPD event.

When the bikers arrived en masse at Leahurst in pouring rain, the lecture theatre was near capacity. The first CPD programme delivered eight papers covering a wide range of topics.

The team then set off for Bristol arriving in Langford that evening. The trip down the M6 in pouring rain gave every rider a shower from the waves of water when passing lorries. No-one seemed downhearted, but all hoped for better weather.

The eight-lecture programme delivered the next day covered entirely different topics from those covered at Leahurst. Mike Shepherd included a presentation on the Dakar Rally, which he then gave at all the subsequent venues. Sadly by the time everyone arrived at the RVC stopover, Peter McElroy had succumbed to food poisoning and retired – only to pop up again for the Scottish leg.

The third day was tough, with the team presenting a different set of lectures again at the RVC before setting off for Cambridge for an evening session of CPD, where yet another programme was presented, bringing the day’s total to 10 hours of talks.

After a night spent listening to lorries thundering by on the A14, and a 06:30 start, the next stop was the Nottingham faculty buildings at Sutton Bonnington. A great attendance characterised the Nottingham leg. Peter Brown thought he could join us only for Bristol and Nottingham, but he had caught the bug and continued on to Scotland. Then came the long motorway dash up the A1(M) to some amazing hospitality laid on...
at the Newcastle Racecourse. On the way to Edinburgh, we passed Nigel Mansell pedalling madly uphill on a fundraising tour; we were happy to be on real bikes! The Edinburgh session was really great, with a near-capacity lecture hall. As the programme drew to a close, a deafening roar could be heard outside – the Dunedin Harley Group had arrived to ‘escort’ us to the overnight stop near Falkirk. The riders came in to see Derek’s presentation about the Banakó centre. The experience of being surrounded by a herd of massive Harleys and great people was a highlight of the trip.

On the final day, the scenic route to Glasgow meant travelling down windy lanes at high speed in the rain, an experience that challenged the less experienced riders and thrilled the others. Jessica Kidd, going too fast, didn’t see a small bridge and went sailing through the air to land 10 feet further on, much to the amusement of Mike Shepherd waiting at the crossroads ahead. All good things have to come to an end and the bikers parted company for their rides home after what was a truly amazing experience. The comments from delegates were universally positive: a unique event in a charitable cause gives a completely different sentiment to the concept of compulsory CFD.

Full colour notes of all 28 presentations given on the tour are available from Alex Dugdale at Leahurst (e-mail alex.dugdale@liv.ac.uk) in return for a donation (£40 to £50 suggested). Anyone who missed the tour but who would like to make a contribution to the cause is invited to visit www.justgiving.co.uk/horsepowercpd.

The team would like to thank all the businesses and individuals who contributed to the success of the event.

Ten-minute chat

Jack Reece planned to spend six months on a volunteer experience with Help in Suffering in Jaipur. Ten years later he is still there, making a difference through the Animal Birth Control programme that helps control rabies through vaccination and neutering of street dogs. He was presented with the BVA’s first Trevor Blackburn award in 2006.

How did you come to work for Help in Suffering?
I ended up spending so much time in India completely by accident. I was fed up with TB testing and dreary accommodation in large animal practice, so I volunteered for the first overseas job I saw in Veterinary Record that appealed to me. I wanted to travel, but also do something useful. I came for six months, which became a year, then two, and I have never yet quite managed to get back to the UK.

How did you get to where you are today?
I hit the peak of the Herriot bubble and not being awfully clever had trouble getting into vet school, despite seeing a great deal of practice and getting a lot of support from that practice and my school. I did a biology degree at York, then worked in agriculture, and was finally accepted by Liverpool. I had always imagined I would end up as a partner in a mixed practice in a small rural town; ending up working in rabies control in India has come as a bit of a surprise.

How do you spend a typical day?
Mornings are spent involved in the administration and practical aspects of our rabies/street dog control programme, which often includes spaying 10 to 12 street dogs. Afternoons are more varied. I may work on the scientific aspects of the rabies programme, or be collecting a brain sample from a suspect rabid animal.

Some afternoons I will be involved in case discussions with colleagues, and treating anything from horses with tetanus, rescued owls with fractures, sick camels or electrocuted monkeys. Sometimes afternoons will find me felling a tree in our compound or dealing with blocked drains. Increasingly I’m tied, reluctantly, to a computer trying to raise funds for the charity or doing other similar secretarial administrative duties, which I hate.

What do you like about your job?
The variety, my colleagues, the bizarre unpredictability of life here. The training we do is rewarding. The look of satisfaction on a colleague’s or vet student’s face when they have spayed their first dog is wonderful.

What do you not like?
India is a long way from my family, who I miss greatly; and it’s hard not to feel estranged from friends as they become partners, have families etc, and progress professionally while I’m here. Not receiving a proper salary for working in this field is an increasing bore. There are so few practical worthwhile jobs overseas these days that pay a proper salary.

Why is your job important?
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What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?
Don’t do it to get rich, but go ahead if you want to do something different from dealing with pets and their owners.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
Churchill’s advice – ‘never give in, never, never, never . . .’.

What was your proudest moment?
Without doubt qualifying with my parents watching.

And your most embarrassing?
Going for tea with one of our technicians, and my most embarrassing?

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Ten-minute chat

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