In at the deep end

A week after graduating, assisted by a BVA travel grant, Joanna Melluish set off to spend a month working for the Gambian Horse and Donkey Trust.

As proud new MsRCVS, my friend Catherine Wilson and I set off to spend a month in west Africa to help improve the health and welfare of working equids. Knowing we would be the only vets volunteering with the Gambian Horse and Donkey Trust at the time, the phrase ‘throwing yourself in at the deep end’ seemed scarily relevant! And, just to make things more challenging, we would be working in 40°C heat, in a country with four major languages, none of which we spoke.

The charity was founded by sisters Stella Brewer and Heather Armstrong, to help improve the welfare of horses and donkeys in the Gambia. It aims to improve welfare through education, particularly with regard to nutrition, tack and handling of animals, as well as providing dentistry, farriery and medical support through a brilliant team of trained Gambian staff, and volunteers from abroad. By improving the health and productive capability of the animals, the charity has had a significant impact on the prosperity of the people in the local community.

Tropical diseases cause many problems in the Gambia, with trypanosomosis being particularly common. In addition, any pustules encountered should ring alarm bells for epizootic lymphangitis.

Our study

After learning about the Gambian Horse and Donkey Trust and the great work it does, we wanted to do something to help. The trust suggested we should do a study to assess the prevalence and clinical effects of Babesia species infection in horses and donkeys (with and without clinical signs), as little was known about its prevalence in the area. We collected 100 or so blood smears over the month, and measured packed cell volumes of as many of the animals as possible. This was more time-consuming than it sounds, because the manual centrifuge had a handle that had to be spun very fast for six minutes to get each result!

The rest of the time we spent doing veterinary tasks for the charity. Three times a week, we went to markets in nearby towns to examine and treat the horses and donkeys brought along by concerned owners. Despite help from the experienced Gambian staff, this was certainly a challenge. We dealt with cases ranging from those requiring routine worming and treatment for trypanosomosis to animals needing a new custom-made headcollar (Gambian horses are smaller than those in the UK), as well as cases of strangles, overgrown feet, wounds caused by beating or ill-fitting tack, and abscesses.

One night, which I will never forget, we had all three of the emergencies we encountered during our stay: a donkey with a fractured radius, a fetotomy (performed by torchlight) and a donkey suffering extensive burns, probably as a result of falling into a fire. The last case required some serious innovation in order to dress the wounds on the donkey’s...
The people we met during our time in the Gambia were extremely welcoming and very grateful for the work done by the charity. Although they were very experienced in practical matters, most had little medical education, so we aimed to add to this with talks on topics such as how to carry out a clinical examination on a horse, and what the drugs in our ‘big box’ actually did.

Travel grants
To help with the costs of the trip, a university colleague suggested I should apply for a grant. I applied to the BVA for an Overseas Travel Grant and for the Harry Steele-Bodger Memorial Scholarship.

I was lucky to have both applications accepted. (I am grateful to David Chivers, David Williams and Sheelagh Lloyd at Cambridge vet school for their support and help with the application process.) I feel especially privileged to have been awarded the scholarship, which was created by friends of Harry Steele-Bodger after his death, in recognition of his enormous contribution to the advancement of veterinary medicine and the leadership he provided to the profession. Its purpose is to allow veterinary students and recent graduates the opportunity to conduct a piece of research or study. It is funding that has supported a number of varied and important projects.

Our trip to the Gambia and the project looking into babesiosis — the first of its kind in the country — would not have been possible without the support we received.

The people we met during our time in the Gambia were extremely welcoming and very grateful for the work done by the charity. I feel very privileged to have been let into this community — if only for a short period of time — and to have been able to do a little to help them in their mission to improve the lives of the people and animals of this area.

Learning to cope
The time spent in the Gambia taught us some tough lessons on how to cope with cases — sometimes extremely serious ones — when we did not have the facilities and assistance that is taken for granted at vet school. It was also a priceless experience for building confidence in my abilities and knowledge as, during my final year, I was conscious of how much I felt I didn’t know. However, when the situation arose where it was up to me to do something to help an animal presented to me, I realised it was within my capabilities to treat most of the cases.

These skills have already helped my working career. Two months ago, I began an internship at a wildlife hospital, being the only vet permanently on site, thinking on my feet and learning to have confidence in my decisions are certainly important parts of the job. I am passionate about wildlife welfare and conservation, and hope to continue my career in this field, in the UK and other parts of the world.

The babesiosis project made me very aware of how important it is to research diseases affecting domestic species as well as wildlife. After all, it is only when we know a disease is present that something can be done about it.

I plan to do further research at some point during my career, but for the time being I will concentrate on developing my skills to become the best vet I can be.

Travel grants

BVA Overseas Travel Grants
The BVA Overseas Travel Grants scheme awards a number of grants of up to £500 each year, to undergraduates attending a UK veterinary school, to help them to undertake a project in a developing country that contributes to sustainable development, including the promotion of good animal welfare.

Successful applicants are asked to write a 500-word summary together with supporting photographs of their experience.

■ The closing date for applications for the next round of these grants is February 21, 2011.

Harry Steele-Bodger Memorial Scholarship
The BVA Harry Steele-Bodger Memorial Scholarship assists a visit by a recent graduate or penultimate or final-year veterinary student to a veterinary or agricultural school or research institute, or some other course of study approved by the governing committee.

■ The closing date for applications for the 2011 scholarship is April 11, 2011.

BVA TAWS Overseas Travel Grants
The aim of the World Association for Transport Animal Welfare and Studies (TAWS) is to promote improved management, health and welfare of transport and draught animals.

In collaboration with the BVA, TAWS awards grants of up to £500 annually to undergraduates undertaking projects involving working animals used for draught and pack purposes, including transport and cultivation, in developing countries.

■ The closing date for applications for the next round of these grants is February 21, 2011.

Donkey Sanctuary Overseas Travel Grants
The Donkey Sanctuary aims to prevent the suffering of donkeys worldwide. Overseas, teams of its staff help hundreds of donkeys every day, by providing free veterinary treatment and giving practical advice to owners who are dependent on their animals.

The Donkey Sanctuary’s travel scholarship scheme awards an annual grant to cover travel and subsistence expenses for a veterinary undergraduate visiting a project site in Mexico, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya or India.

■ The closing date for the next round of applications is February 21, 2011.

Application forms for travel grants available through the BVA can be downloaded in pdf format from the overseas and student sections of the BVA’s website. The information sought on the application forms includes details of the proposed study, how the experience gained will be used and background information regarding the originality of the work.

Further details of these grants and information about other organisations that offer travel grants can be found at www.bva.co.uk/student_centre/Student_travel_grants.aspx
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Joanne Melluish

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