Moving on

John Remnant qualified three years ago and went into mixed practice in Cornwall. It was a practice he knew well, having done school work experience there and subsequently much of his EMS. After 18 months, he wanted to concentrate on large animal practice, and decided to move on.

I was very lucky with my first job: I joined Luxstowe Vets, a 10-vet mixed practice in Liskeard. I had first visited the practice as a teenager to do work experience, and as a veterinary student did my EMS there. As graduation approached, the practice offered me a job. Initially, I was unsure about going home to work, but the opportunity was too good to miss.

In hindsight, I should not have worried about being close to home. I moved into a practice house, and having my family and friends nearby in my first job was great. The other major advantage was that I knew the practice and the staff knew me – both our expectations were accurate.

The practice was very supportive, and I gradually improved my skills across medicine and surgery for all the species we dealt with. As well as good clinical development and support, the practice provided a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. There was an active social side too, through the recent graduates and younger support staff. I would consider this to be important in any future job, as being a vet can be stressful, but working with people you like makes a big difference.

Moving on was not an easy decision: I was very happy, but had become increasingly interested in working with farm animals. While the practice had a high farm animal caseload and partners who were keen to support me in doing more, there was, inevitably, a large amount of small animal work too. I wanted to concentrate on the area I was most interested in. I also felt that I wanted to experience other practices and ways of working.

My motivation to move was more about self-development than just for the sake of leaving my existing job, and for this reason I was selective about the jobs that I applied for. I was looking for a position that would enable me to develop my interest in farm animal work, particularly herd health medicine, and I was keen to try something a bit different.

I kept an eye on the Careers section of Veterinary Record, as well as speaking to people at CPD events and conferences. Keeping an open mind and talking to as many people as you can about what opportunities are available is essential – you never know where this might lead. A number of positions were advertised that looked appealing, and I applied for several – some at universities and others in private practice. I was successful in a few and unsuccessful in others.

In the end, I had to choose between a position in a private practice and one with Langford Veterinary Services. It was a difficult decision, but I concentrated on which position best fulfilled what I had initially decided that I wanted. This can be difficult after the excitement of interviews and seeing what opportunities present themselves. I felt that the job at Langford would offer me the support and opportunity to develop my skills in herd health medicine, as it had a strong track record in this area, as well as providing ‘something a bit different’ by being a teaching institution. The position also suited me better geographically.

It was an exciting time at Langford: the clinical services had recently been taken over by Langford Veterinary Services, a wholly owned subsidiary of the University of Bristol. Taking this role meant that I would also have the opportunity to become involved in practice progression and development in this new environment.

I am lucky to be in the position of having had two good jobs since graduating. I have learned many things by changing jobs, particularly having not been through the normal job-hunting/job application process with my first job.
My advice to others thinking of moving practice would be to:

- Concentrate on identifying why it is you want to change jobs; particularly if you are happy where you are.
- Think about what it is you think you will gain by moving, and make sure this is in the front of your mind when making decisions on which jobs to apply for. For example, if you wanted to improve your work/life balance rather than to increase your salary.
- Don’t feel you have to accept a job if it doesn’t provide what you are looking for.
- Talk to people and keep an open mind. If you are unsure whether an advertised job is what you are looking for, call the phone number in the advertisement and ask about it.

I suspect a lot of potential farm animal vets are put off by what they perceive may be a lack of caseload and support in mixed practice, although that was not my experience.

Finally, don’t give up on what you want to do.

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**Ten-minute chat**

Ben Mayes is a horse vet in Sussex. He will become president of the British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) later this year, which also happens to the association’s 50th anniversary.

**What made you become involved in veterinary politics and become a BEVA council member?**

Like most things, it sort of just happened. I didn’t really think of joining BEVA council as ‘politics’, but the opportunity came my way, and I thought it was time to give something back to the profession. It was daunting to start with, then you start to realise that you can contribute, that you certainly have something to say, and that the opinion of the lowly general practitioner is not just important, it’s essential. It’s amazing how few at the top of our profession know what goes on at ‘the coalface’. As one gets more involved, it’s fascinating to discover how much politics there is in such a small profession. My motto is ‘Say what you think’.

**How did you get to where you are today?**

My father was a dentist and I was lucky enough to go to a private school. In the early 1980s veterinary medicine had the reputation of being the hardest course to get into, and I still wonder if this made it a ‘Holy Grail’ for wannabe over achievers: you could easily get into medical school with three Cs! I had ponies and horses as a child and teenager, was involved with Pony Club and local shows, so equine was always my bent. Cambridge was an extraordinary experience. The lack of horse exposure made you go and get it – be that at Leahurst, on an externship at North Carolina State University, or Newmarket. We were all heavily influenced by Josh Slater and Celia Marr, and it’s extraordinary how many of our year are equine vets (and on BEVA council for that matter).

After a wild sojourn to the north-east, with the legendary Graham Russ, I joined Colin Bond as assistant in the Horsham/Dorking area in 1994. We were a two-vet equine practice with a clinic at Colin’s house. Working one-in-two nights and weekends in your late 20s seemed a normal thing to do, but I wonder if anyone could be persuaded to do it now. We became three vets in 1999, and I bought the practice in 2001 when I was joined by vet school contemporary Judy Scrine. We are now a five-vet RCVS Tier 2 practice with purpose-built clinic facilities.

**Describe some of the activities that your job involves.**

My day job of 17 years involves driving, talking on my mobile (a lot), getting on with horses (which I love), meeting lots of people (which I also enjoy), using my brain to work out what’s wrong with the horses, eating my sandwiches on the move, risking my life doing nerve blocks, a lot of X-radiation, a smelly arm in the summer, horsey women, travellers, as well as human resources, public relations, crisis management, client talks and debt collecting.

My BEVA job, of five years (and due to end in 2013), involves e-mails, meetings, driving, talking to lots of interesting people, buffet lunches, writing documents, train travel, committees, politics, conferences, CPD, hotels and wearing a suit (or tweed jacket). And HR, PR, crisis management and accounts.

**What do you like about your job?**

All of the above.

**What do you not like?**

The relentlessness of all of the above, especially the mobile (e-mail for BEVA work). Also the fact that horse clients seem to require so much emotional investment: they seem to want a piece of you.

**Why is your job important?**

Tricky one. Sometimes I worry that caring for competition horses and pet ponies is pretty poor compared with being an A&E consultant, or a doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières. However, equine welfare, the art of protecting the animals from their keepers, and BEVA projects such as Safer Horse Rescues and the Working Equids Initiative help me to see the point.

Politics can be boring, but is important too – our profession is so small and can feel insignificant. I strongly believe that highly educated, science-based professionals are the best guardians of animal welfare, and we must be wary of the gradual erosion of the veterinary profession to a service industry, or even complete deregulation.

**What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?**

Before applying to vet school, have a gap year. Be sure it is the right career for you and be aware of all the opportunities this amazing career can give you.

If you are sure you want do equine work, which is now so competitive, do an externship, perhaps even as a postgraduate. Then, having gained some experience in practice, do an internship at a large practice or hospital. Don’t be afraid of working in small animal practice to start with if you are stuck. Come to the careers evening at BEVA congress!

**What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?**

Turn your phone off, go on holiday; it will still be there when you get back.

**What was your proudest moment?**

Being head boy at school, getting into Cambridge, marrying a beautiful woman, watching my three children grow and develop. Equine veterinary medicine – that’s just my job.

. . . and your most embarrassing? Embarrassment? Moi? I don’t think so.
Ten-minute chat

Ben Mayes

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