Embarking on an internship

An internship can be the springboard from which to launch your career

WHEN I started my internship at the Royal Veterinary College in 2007, I think it’s probably true to say that I wasn’t quite sure what I was getting myself into, but, without a doubt, the year was one of the best (and hardest) of my life. I had just finished a thoroughly enjoyable two years in mixed practice in the north of England, and was starting to feel that being a general practitioner was not what I wanted to do forever.

Internships are becoming much more widely available as more and more large referral practices need to expand their veterinary team. This is great for those who are keen to embrace the opportunity to work in referral practice, but many people do not realise the variation between individual internships that might affect their enjoyment of the position, or their future career decisions and prospects.

Interns in universities and private practice usually have similar job descriptions. While all positions give you the opportunity to be involved in more complicated referral cases, the role of the intern usually extends to covering night duty in the hospital on a rota system. The hours are long and hard, and notoriously not very well paid. Nevertheless, they provide a tremendous opportunity to learn.

Most people do an internship with the intention of applying for a residency and then to specialise in a particular area of veterinary medicine or surgery. However, an internship can provide valuable training for any veterinary surgeon, including those who then wish to enter or return to first-opinion practice. In a way, an internship is like a very intensive extra year of vet school – where you actually get to make a lot of the decisions, but there is help available to guide you and, on occasion, overrule you!

University or private practice?

One of the benefits of a university internship may be the reputation of the institution and its staff, which may attract the attention of future employers, particularly when accompanied by a good reference. Many excellent private referral centres can boast similar benefits. A little research can determine the success of interns from various institutions in gaining residencies or other positions later in life – this might be an important factor when thinking of where to apply. Most of the time, however, candidates are just thankful to be offered a position, as applications are extremely competitive. If you intend to pursue a residency after your internship, then applying to an institution that offers residencies in your chosen field is a good idea (provided you make a good impression).

A further benefit of a university position is the potential to become involved in non-clinical research projects within the faculty and even beyond. The majority of clinicians in university positions are highly skilled researchers who are actively involved in national and international projects, and as an intern you will have the opportunity to participate in these, albeit most likely in a small way. Certainly, if you hope to pursue a career in academia, then a university internship (and residency) may be of more benefit.

In many universities, interns are expected to participate in some first-opinion work. This may be something you want to research when applying for different internships, as the amount varies widely between institutions, as does the type of work (emergency versus routine). In almost all situations you will also be expected to get involved with teaching students, which can be a very rewarding experience.

Student teaching is an important part of university-based residencies, so having some teaching experience can be valuable. You will also usually be invited to attend clubs, seminars and lectures provided by residents and
Ten-minute chat

Alexander Stoll is a third-year vet student at the Royal Veterinary College. He also plays jazz professionally, can order meals in a number of languages, keeps poultry and has a private pilot’s licence.

You intercalated in veterinary pathology. Why?
I am interested in the science behind medicine. I chose to apply for the veterinary pathology course as it promised to explore molecular pathology. However, the principal reason for my desire to intercalate was to experience the research environment and ‘do’ science. I was lucky enough to join Dr Bujdosó’s prion group at Cambridge vet school. Although I had done a summer studentship the previous year, this allowed me to undertake an extended research project in a field I am interested in – transmissible spongiform encephalopathies.

Do you know what field of veterinary work you will go into?
I am attracted to the clinical side of veterinary medicine and would like to undertake a PhD and postgraduate training in neurology or pathology. Likewise, I am passionate about science, and a career in research is definitely on the cards. Another interest is public health and the importance of the veterinary profession in this regard. I am also very fond of camelds and poultry. I think a career in academia might suit me best – maybe as a camelid neurologist/neuropathologist?

You could fly a plane before you could drive. Did you have a career as a pilot in mind?
I have been obsessed with aircraft from a young age, and set my heart on becoming a pilot. It soon became clear that I would not be able to afford the training to become a commercial pilot. Then, for my 16th birthday, I was given a flying lesson, and I was hooked. I worked incredibly hard for a year to save up enough to pay for the training towards a private pilot’s licence, but my dad used to have to drive me to my lessons. I flew solo for the first time in 2007.

Where did your interest in languages come from?
I am really interested in the evolution of language, and frequently annoy people with my obsession for etymology. It wasn’t until I lived with a gifted linguist in Cambridge that I was inspired to study foreign languages properly. I already knew Italian, Spanish and a bit of French, so I have been working on becoming fluent. Fluency in German and Mandarin is another goal, and I have started studying another eight languages that I would like to be conversant in. I study languages in the same way as learning instruments.

What do you get out of being a jazz pianist?
I get such a kick out of playing the piano; sometimes I can play for hours at a time, but it feels like half an hour. The best gigs are those where I get to perform with other musicians and a responsive audience. It is a fantastic feeling to see people enjoying the music. I remember my first piano lesson when I was five; I have been fanatical about the piano ever since. If I had to give up everything except the piano, I would still be a happy person.

Studying languages, flying light aircraft, music . . . how do you fit in studying veterinary medicine?
I always ensure my studies come first, but generally don’t find I am pushed for time. However, I also find I have very little free time. I would not change this though, as I hate having nothing to do. I use the piano to unwind in the evenings and write a lot of my own music, or read to clear my head. I also enjoy spending time with my friends, and it is brilliant when I get to share these activities with them too!

You were an extra in the Harry Potter films. Would we recognise you?
I can be seen in a few of them if the film is paused! In the fourth film I am on screen for a while when Dumbledore takes Harry’s name from the goblet of fire. In the eighth film, I was an injured student after one of the battles, and a dead person in another scene. We were set very early in the morning to have our make-up done – although sometimes it was so early that I didn’t require make-up to look like a dead person. I was lucky to meet many of the cast; I had a long chat with the late Richard Harris, and lunch with Robert Pattinson before he was famous.

What was your proudest moment?
My first concert, aged six, stands out, and it was so early that I didn’t require make-up – although sometimes it was so early that I didn’t require make-up to look like a dead person. I was lucky to meet many of the cast; I had a long chat with the late Richard Harris, and lunch with Robert Pattinson before he was famous.

. . . and your most embarrassing moment?
Probably the appearance of pictures of me wearing a mankini on Facebook after a fancy dress party.
Ten-minute chat

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