Qualified abroad and working in the UK

Nearly half of newly registered vets in the UK are overseas graduates. For some, getting permission to work here can be a daunting process. Shay Shelly Eisenberg talks about her struggle to follow her vocation – and her heart.

FROM the age of six, I wanted to be a vet. Growing up in a small village in Israel, I dreamed of caring for animals and developed an interest in wildlife and endangered species. I beat off stiff competition to gain a place on the Hebrew University of Jerusalem’s well-resourced seven-year veterinary course. However, after just one year of study, my boyfriend at the time got a job in Bulgaria – and I decided to follow him. I wanted to complete my studies in Bulgaria, but they had no programme in English, which was my only language besides Hebrew and Arabic. I studied Bulgarian for six months and then threw myself into the course. It was terribly hard at first only knowing half of the language – I was writing things down phonetically and translating them when I got home.

In contrast to Jerusalem, the vet school at the Forestry University in Sofia was short on equipment and poorly funded. However, it had a strong ethic of dedication and application. I learned to appreciate what could be done with limited resources and the right attitude. At the end of the five-and-a-half-year course, I reached my goal of coming top in my year.

While studying in Bulgaria, I met my future husband, James, and we married after I graduated in 2010. James got a job as an intern with oncology specialists VRCC at Laindon, Essex, and I moved with him to England.

I thought it would be straightforward to become an MRCVS because I had an EU qualification. But I was told that I couldn’t be awarded membership because I was not an EU citizen. For a long time it looked as though my dream of practising in the UK would never be achieved.

While this was going on, I was able to get a ‘see practice’ position with Medivet in Essex with the help of someone my husband knew. I was very happy to be involved in that environment, but at the same time it was frustrating because I couldn’t physically get involved with treating the animals. It came to the point where I thought I would have to study for the necessary RCVS exams, even if I had to start all over again. When I set my heart on something I will do anything to achieve it.

Thankfully, Jenny Harris from the RCVS went out of her way to check my eligibility to become an MRCVS with the legal department. Just when I thought all hope was lost, she contacted me with wonderful news. She said I was able to migrate here with James because he was an EU national. It gave me the status of a Community Rights Entitled person, which meant I was able to practise.

I then had to produce a large amount of documentation to support my application to the RCVS, plus a parallel application to the UK Border Agency for a work permit. I returned to Bulgaria and called on friends and colleagues to help me out with the paperwork. From the date of my first application,
it took six months until I was finally registered.

Once registered, I approached one of the senior partners at Medivet and asked for an interview, and was immediately given a job. I started as a ‘floater’ in the Southend area. After three months, I was offered my current permanent position at the South Ockendon branch.

Medivet was extremely supportive when I was struggling to get my registration. One of the best things about starting work with the company is that you get a ‘buddy’. This is an experienced member of staff to guide you and offer advice. It was a great shock starting work at last, moving from nothing to everything. I also had to get in touch with British culture. People here are very emotionally bonded to their pets and will do anything for them. Because the company employs a wide diversity of nationalities it has been easy to fit in. It is like one big family. They are good investors in people, and you can see the staff members developing – both the vets and the nurses. They have some wonderfully trained and experienced people. I find the clients are very open-minded about having a foreign vet, but I suppose that says something about their confidence in the registration system.

Ten-minute chat

Joe Sprinz is a veterinarian in mixed practice. He joined BVA Council as the Royal Counties territorial representative and is now the elected representative for the South East on Council. He lives on a farm in Buckinghamshire with his wife, two rescue cats and a black labrador.

How did you become involved in veterinary politics?
While I was on a skiing trip to France and in absentia, Chris Trower nominated me to be the Royal Counties BVA rep at the 2005 AGM.

How did you get to where you are today?
I was brought up in Sheffield and Edinburgh. I was educated during the holidays from George Heriot’s School and my museum: ice-cream ratio was about 100:1. On leaving school, the Dick Vet beckoned and I graduated in 1978. Working in practice in North Yorkshire was followed by Northumberland, and finally north Oxfordshire. All three practices were mixed, and I remain (hopefully) omnicompetent. I did meat inspection Official Veterinarian training after graduating, which was very much in demand when I moved south.

What does your job involve?
As well as everything that you would expect, I still castrate and disbud calves, manually pregnancy test hundreds of Limousin heifers, thyroidectomise cats, and feminise male cats with urethral obstruction.

What do you like about your job?
Most days involve driving around visiting farmers and clients who are my personal friends. At my branch surgery I have clients and patients with whom I am on first name terms.

What do you not like?
There are not enough hours in the day. I also despise IT that is neither informative nor technological.

Why is your job important?
Having been in the area for 30 years one becomes part of the (farming) community, the benefits of which include wedding and other social invitations. The downside is being expected to put down a favourite collie whether one is working or not.

What advice would you give to someone considering running for BVA Council or joining a committee?
If I can do the job, so can you . . . especially with the BVA team behind you; and you can make a difference. For me, I hope that difference will be an improved awareness of the welfare of fish at slaughter.

How does your work for BVA Council fit in with your day job?
I am fortunate to have an understanding practice manager and partner. They feel that my involvement in veterinary politics benefits our practice as well as the profession as a whole.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
‘Never take a chance; your chickens will always come home to roost . . . eventually’: Lewis Grant, my first employer.

What was your proudest moment?
Being told at the Cu Chi Tunnels in Vietnam (pictured above) by my ex-Viet Cong guide that I ‘shot that AK47 very well’ and, at this year’s BVA Congress, being presented with the John Bleby Cup (also pictured)*.

. . . and your most embarrassing?
Asking both Jay Kay (Jamiroquai) and Nick Mason (Pink Floyd) at separate times what they did for a living.

Tell us something not many people know about you.
I recently started running, after a gap of many decades, and try to run 10 km once or twice weekly; as yet I still cannot keep up with my wife.

* The John Bleby Cup is presented each year to the member of BVA Council who the Association’s Officers feel has made the most outstanding contribution during the year.
Ten-minute chat

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