Studying while working

Philip Robinson, who gained a MSc in Veterinary Epidemiology and Public Health while working in the government veterinary service, extols the benefits of distance learning

AFTER graduating in 1996 from Glasgow, I worked in mixed practice – mostly large animal – in Northern Ireland and Scotland for just over two years. I then applied for a job with the Veterinary Service of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in Northern Ireland, and started work as a veterinary officer (VO) in the summer of 1999.

My first eight years as a VO were based in a divisional field office, with the main focus being disease control on farms, especially bovine TB and, in the early days, BSE. I also carried out animal welfare inspections on farms and other animal establishments such as riding stables, pet shops and boarding kennels. I was trained as an Official Veterinarian (OV), and worked in cattle, pig and poultry slaughter plants as part of DARD’s fully integrated Veterinary Service.

One of the primary functions of a government veterinary service is to deal with outbreaks of epizootic disease. This was to become a very present reality in 2001 when foot-and-mouth disease occurred in all parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, and this was an extremely busy time for all of us in DARD.

During my time as a field VO, I studied for the RCVS Certificate and then the Diploma in State Veterinary Medicine, and although it was difficult to study while maintaining a full-time job, I found a great sense of satisfaction and achievement in gaining these qualifications. It takes a high degree of self-motivation to come home and study after a day’s work, but I found that I enjoyed the learning experience.

In 2007, I transferred from the divisional field office to DARD’s Veterinary Epidemiology Unit. This was a change of direction in my career, albeit still within the government veterinary service. As training for the new post, I decided to take up the MSc distance learning course in veterinary epidemiology and public health offered by the Royal Veterinary College (RVC). A colleague had already studied with the RVC and recommended it, and I felt that the course was well suited to my needs. The great benefit was that I could continue with my full-time job while studying for the degree. So, within three months of taking up the post I started studying once again.

My target was to complete the degree in three years, and to do so I had to complete seven modules. The core modules – veterinary epidemiology and animal health economics, veterinary public health and statistical methods in veterinary epidemiology – were compulsory. I was also required to choose four other courses – my choices were economics for livestock development and policy; management of infectious disease outbreaks in animal populations; research design, management and grant application writing; and advanced statistical methods in veterinary epidemiology. All the course materials, including extensive notes, course text-
books and CD-Roms, were sent to me, and were of a high standard. There was online support from the tutors as well as an online discussion forum where students from all over the world could interact. The academic year began in February, when I began working on assignments, and I submitted them throughout the summer. The year then finished in October with written examinations.

I was honoured (and surprised!) to graduate with distinction and to gain a University of London Distance Learning 150th anniversary prize for the highest overall marks. I had the privilege of meeting HRH the Princess Royal, Chancellor of the University of London, at a reception after graduation. I had the privilege of meeting HRH the Princess Royal, Chancellor of the University of London, at a reception after graduation. This capped a day to remember, and was a wonderful way to celebrate the conclusion of three years of study. I have been putting the knowledge and skills gained through the Masters into practice in my research, and, in fact, I couldn’t do my current job without having done it.

Distance learning is a brilliant way to study, but it takes discipline and hard work. I continually had to juggle the demands of work and family life, but I managed with a lot of support from my wife. One of our four children was born just before I started the course, and another was born just after I finished. There were times when I had to write an assignment with a baby on my knee, but spending time with the children helped to keep me sane, especially during revision periods.

Ten-minute chat

Jill Hubbard is a small animal practitioner with a particular interest in ophthalmology, who works in Caernarfon. She has recently been appointed as an RCVS postgraduate dean.

What made you become a postgraduate dean?

I have run a young graduate group in north Wales for some years, and feel strongly that older vets need to treat younger vets/new graduates with respect and give them help in reaching their full potential. We need to think through management so that youngsters know when they are on-call and not just have a rota issued three days before the relevant date. We need to be careful not to dump the TB testing and consultations on them and keep the more fun bits for ourselves. We must back them when they are struggling, either with a particular operation or if they need help with difficult clients. The postgraduate dean post, which involves advising and monitoring graduates during their Professional Development Phase, seemed a natural progression, as well as being something I could continue into retirement.

How did you get to where you are today?

I trained at the RVC in the days when there were 11 of us women in a year of 66. I came to Caernarfon as my first job; it was then 80 per cent large animal work. Lambing seasons were a major stress, and plenty was done ‘Herriot’-style. My husband then came to the area and we bought the practice when we were three years qualified. The practice has changed considerably and we gave up the farm work four years ago. We have moved the premises twice; the last time was 14 years ago, to our purpose-built clinic, which has five consulting rooms, two operating theatres and a large hydrotherapy pool.

What does your job involve?

I am a member of the BVA/KC/ISDS Eye Scheme panel, and have an ophthalmology certificate. I consider myself a ‘midway’ eye person. I don’t have a phaco machine or electroretinogram, while being happy to do parotid duct transpositions or lens luxation surgery. But I do manage to offer a local service in the top left hand corner of Wales and I feel that is a useful role to fill. I’m not a specialist, but a general practitioner with a special interest (apparently a ‘GPSI’ in medical terminology).

What do you like about your job?

I really enjoy knowing my clients well, seeing a variety of cases, the fact that you never know what is going to walk through the door. I like the fact that the majority of the time we can follow our own cases through and enjoy discussing management, behaviour, medicine and feeding, in addition to the clinical presentation. Most of all I enjoy the wonderful people I work with.

What do you not like?

What I seriously don’t like is having to explain again and again that I am not trying just to charge the maximum possible, but am trying to pay wages, overheads and earn a living.

What advice would you give someone considering a similar career?

There is nothing more varied, more interesting and with better job satisfaction, but don’t constantly compare yourself with other professions, be realistic about being on-call and not earning huge amounts of money.

What was your proudest moment?

A personal proud moment was when my 21-year-old daughter (who had been on a gap year in China) waited until the pedicab drivers tried to overcharge us 10 times for a trip, and then told them in Mandarin what the charge should be. As a vet, I am intensely proud when one of our youngsters passes an exam, does an operation particularly well, or when a client says what wonderful staff we have.

. . . and your most embarrassing?

The time I most wanted the earth to open and swallow me was the day I had taken some furniture in a horse trailer to our elder daughter in London. We were then on our way to collect a mattress in north London when the car died as we crossed Marylebone Road, with two lanes of traffic in each direction. The AA was wonderful! Professionally: a dog had fallen 60 feet down a cliff. My colleague was doing some wonderful rescue work, but wanted an assessment of the retinas. I became a bit flustered when I couldn’t find the eye at all, and was starting to wonder what injury had happened. My poor colleague was wondering how to point out to me that actually I was trying to part the lips of a facial wound above the eye. When I turned the lights on and looked again, there was indeed an eye – and I’m meant to be an ophthalmologist!