Veterinary care 24/7

Last year, Highcroft Veterinary Group decided that it was time to employ dedicated overnight vets to provide out-of-hours cover to its clients. Robert Dawson, a partner in the group, explains more.

IN common with many other small animal practices, Highcroft Veterinary Group has grown considerably over the past decade to meet the level of care expected by its clients. As a busy veterinary hospital we have a large number of hospitalised patients requiring overnight care. Unless we moved these patients to an out-of-hours service provider every night, we would still need a veterinary surgeon available at night to look after them. We also have excellent critical care facilities and run veterinary ambulances, allowing for essential out-of-hours visits.

We therefore decided to employ dedicated overnight vets at the practice last year, following the completion of a large extension to our hospital. This coincided with taking on the on-call work from neighbouring practices and the launch of Highcroft Veterinary Referrals, which meant that we were starting to take surgical referrals. The amount of overnight work required to give adequate care to the in-patients, and to cope with the increased number of emergency calls coming in from other practices, meant that we could no longer ask our day vets to cover overnight work.

There was obviously a large financial commitment in this transition. The classic scenario is that two vets are employed to do a one-week-on, one-week-off rota, and the salary for each overnight vet is comparable to that of an experienced full-time day vet. Once the cost of covering holidays is taken into account, the total cost to the practice is over £100,000 per year. When combined with the salaries for an overnight VN, nursing auxiliary and cleaner, who all work the shift with the duty vet, the overall staffing cost is considerably higher than this.

**Overnight vets**

The overnight vets do a 13-hour shift, from 20.00 to 09.00, allowing a short handover period to and from the day vets. During their shift, night vets are expected to take over the care for all the in-patients, including contacting the owners of each patient in the morning to update them on their pet’s situation. In addition, they deal with any emergency cases that arise during the night and are expected to deal with any life-threatening problems, as well as organising any treatment that may be required by the day staff the following day. While there is often time for some sleep, and overnight accommodation is provided, the overnight vets are expected to work right through the night if necessary to provide the hospital patients with the care they need.

There are many attractions to the position of an overnight vet, but the right vet for the job must be experienced and competent to cope with any, and all, emergency situations. This does not mean that they have to be an omnicompetent ‘supervet’ who can operate on any case, but it does mean that they need to be able to give suitable levels of care to stabilise patients adequately so that they can receive further treatment as needed by other specialist vets. They must also be able to identify and deal with cases that need immediate surgery.

The attractions start with the obvious: the vets get every other week off. There are others too; there are no boosters, nail clipping or anal glands to empty. There is an opportunity to see more genuine emergencies than you would as a day vet. You get to work at a time when the normally bustling hospital...
is quiet and uncrowded. You work with the same small group of colleagues every day, allowing a chance to build close working relationships. You never have to fight to use equipment or theatres, and you are able to follow longer-term in-patients throughout their treatment. Obviously, night work would not suit everyone and some would not adapt well to changing sleep patterns, but for the right person it can be a really rewarding job, and one that allows them to pursue other interests in a way that would not be possible with a more conventional working pattern.

Given the benefits, we were surprised at the level of interest we received in the position when we advertised it. Normally, we expect a pretty hefty pile of CVs when we advertise a new veterinary position, but we had only a few applicants. Luckily, these included some excellent candidates and our overnight service is proving successful.

Ten-minute chat

Nicky Paull is the senior partner of a 13-vet mixed practice in Cornwall, the practice she joined after qualifying. She married one of the dairy farming clients, had two children and bought the then three-and-a-half-vet practice from her boss. She went on to be president of the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) and President of the BVA. She has been a non-executive director of Centaur Services, is a director on the board of the Veterinary Benevolent Fund, and was recently appointed as an RCVS postgraduate dean.

How easy was it returning to full-time practice last year having been BVA President in 2008?

Very hard. I have spent my life moving forwards and on as new openings or challenges occurred. Suddenly I found myself trying to go backwards. Everything appeared as before, but the practice had certainly changed, and I am sure I had changed over the three years I spent as an officer of the BVA. Some of the worries and concerns may simply have been in my head, but I think I have had to almost reinvent myself over the past few months. Now, life seems to be gradually getting back to normal.

How did you get to where you are today?

By luck, really! I got a job in an area I love and met a client who I have made my life with. My boss decided that the practice life was not what he wanted at that time, so I was lucky enough to be able to buy the practice I was working in. Because I had no clue how to run a practice it meant I had to learn on the hoof, but also to try to learn from other vets. This encouraged me to join SPVS and attend as many courses and lectures as I could. Through this I made many friends in the profession. From there I seemed to fall into veterinary politics through our local veterinary division here in Cornwall.

If a new door opens I appear to have a habit of walking through just to see what is on the other side.

Describe your job.

Historically, my job was mainly farm work. Over the years I have been gradually increasing my small animal clinical input, and since returning to the practice my ageing bones have pushed me into giving up farm work altogether. The physicality of farm work has simply got too much, although others might say that most of my aches are due to my inability to stand up for long on a pair of skis! On top of the clinical stuff is the day-to-day work involved with being a partner in a busy practice. The role of keeping a large team of vets and support staff happy can never be underestimated, but on the days when all is well there is nothing better then seeing the practice running like a well-oiled machine – but don’t ask how many days a year that really happens!

What do you like about your job? The people – staff and clients – and the animals.

What do you not like?

The pressure sometimes but, as with so many others in the profession, I put a lot of that upon myself. I seem to want to keep everyone happy – staff and customers – and if I don’t, it gets to me. George Cooper said that, although we see 39 happy clients in a day, it is the 40th one who wasn’t satisfied by our service that we think about when we get home. And, as my accountant told me the other day when I was in a stress over something: ‘Employing people is not a popularity contest.’

Why is your job important?

My job still gives me a buzz and gets me out of bed in the mornings (and also sometimes in the middle of the night). I think we sometimes forget that, for the majority of folk outside our profession, being a vet is something special.

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

For all its ups and downs, I would do the same again. If a chance arrives, take it. I never want to be in a position where I think, ‘I wonder if I had done . . .’. Don’t look back and fret for things that might have been . . . and your most embarrassing?

On my last day as a board member at Centaur, I was at a trustees’ meeting and it was a fellow trustee’s birthday. I had bought a cake – plus candles – and proceeded to light them in the corridor outside the meeting room. Unfortunately, I hadn’t noticed I was right under a smoke alarm. Suddenly, not only were the entire office and warehouse staff evacuating, but the direct alarm to the fire station meant the firemen were on their way. I thought the CEO was going to strangle me!

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

You will never get 100 per cent of what you would like. Find the 80 per cent, but don’t spend the rest of your life grumbling about the 20 per cent you haven’t got.

What was your proudest moment?

This may sound a little cheesy, but it’s just watching my children. I still wonder how Ed and I managed it, although I was worried that maybe I had not been a very good role model when a member of staff said she wanted to go part-time after her maternity leave as she ‘wanted to bring her children up properly’. Also, the four years I spent organising the Lancaster final-year student seminar. And, although being BVA President was hard, I have to confess to the odd moments of feeling a bit chuffed and having to pinch myself – such as when the Secretary of State said at a function . . . and, as Nicky Paull has rightly said . . . .
Ten-minute chat

Nicky Paull

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