Few veterinary students entertain the idea that their career might involve public health. Jill Nute has devised a week-long course that aims to provide interested students with a unique opportunity to get to grips with an underrated area of veterinary science.

ASK any vet or vet student why they wanted to be a vet, and veterinary public health (VPH) is unlikely to be in their list of answers, yet they will almost all make decisions during their careers that will impact on public health. Two things happened while I was RCVS president in 2008/9 that led me to promote VPH. First, the Worshipful Company of Farriers came up with a scheme to offer a week’s EMS with a master farrier to a student from each vet school, and secondly, I was approached by two students who were interested in VPH as a career but had been ridiculed for saying so. At the same time, discussions were taking place between the RCVS and the universities on the VPH element of the veterinary course, with a move to make the required practical visits part of the core course, rather than EMS. Now that the basics were going to be covered by the schools, there was a need for a more in-depth EMS opportunity for interested students.

Developing an idea
Like a lot of things that seemed like a good idea at the time, organising such a course revolved around the whys and wherefores, with a dash of who, what, when and how.

I had a lot of experience with EMS students both in meat plants and at our mixed practice. I had contacts within the food industry, the Food Standards Agency (FSA) and its contractors, as well as the Heads of the vet schools, and I was a member of the Veterinary Public Health Association (VPHA). What seemed like a million e-mails and phone calls later, I had got buy-in from everyone, most importantly the plant operators and the FSA, which, along with the local contractor, would provide staff time. The VPHA agreed to sponsor a course dinner where a council member would attend to discuss career choices, etc.

Who, where, when and how?
One student from each school seemed a good starting point, with the limiting factors being accommodation and manageable numbers, especially from a safety aspect. The choice of student was left to the vet schools, so an interesting selection process followed: some set essays, other students were drawn from a hat or responded to a call for volunteers. While one university has, to date, not sent anyone, others have pleaded for extra places.

The south west has a wide variety of food and allied premises. We have forward-thinking farm clients who are interested in putting their side of things across to vet students, and our own RCVS accredited mixed practice. Every other business I approached was willing to be involved and delighted that someone was taking an interest in their activities. More importantly, we could provide accommodation, even if it did involve dormitory-style room sharing and a bit of a shower queue at peak times!

The timing of the course had to fit in with university terms, plant operating times and staff availability, and avoid peak holiday traffic. The second week of July was chosen. A week seemed a sensible length for the course, and I undertook to run it as a trial for three years; we’ve done it twice, so this year will be the end of the trial period.

The costed value over the three years is in the region of £25,000. However, the actual outlay is considerably less. The students’ travel costs are not covered, but accommodation, meals and travel during the course are provided. My mass catering skills are put into practice during the week, and a DIY barbecue and the VPHA dinner provide welcome relief. The major element of cost is time, which the FSA and contractors Eville and Jones have generously provided, by allowing their staff to manage their workload in such a way that they can be accompanied by...
Ten-minute chat

David Harwood works in the Animal Health and Veterinary Laboratories Agency regional laboratory at Winchester. He also knows a lot about goats despite having never owned one.

What made you leave practice to join the State Veterinary Service?
My time in farm animal practice in Witheridge, Devon, gave me the fantastic foundation upon which I’ve built my career. Partnership opportunities never really materialised and after nine years I decided to apply to join the (then) Veterinary Investigation Service after establishing a good rapport with my local laboratory at Langford.

Describe your job.
My day-to-day work revolves around the investigation of farm animal disease incidents through postmortem examination, laboratory testing and discussion with practice colleagues. This routine work also contributes to the data gathering and analysis that forms a foundation to Great Britain’s veterinary surveillance strategy, which is currently under review. I also manage the AHVLA (formerly VLA) welfare programme.

What do you like about your job?
Even after nearly 30 years, I still enjoy my time in the postmortem room; you never know what you might find when you open a carcase. I also enjoy having students with us on EMS and other placements – they constantly make me think about how and why you do your job.

What do you not like?
The increasing burden of accountability, for example, through quality systems and health and safety, which are both important in their own right but equally frustrating at times.

What have we achieved? Feedback forms and comments from the students and tutors have been encouraging, awareness has certainly been raised and eyes have very definitely been opened to the possibilities that VPH has to offer, either as a full-time stand alone career, or by being better informed to deal with on-farm and practice-based problems. A side benefit of the course has been seeing the friendship and support developing between students from different schools and backgrounds while getting to grips with some quite challenging situations, which can only be good for the future of the profession.

What next?
The future of the course is still to be decided but, hopefully, discussion with the FSA and the VPHA, with input from ‘past pupils’ and their schools, will look at what has been achieved, whether it was worthwhile and, if there is a place for this course, how could it best be taken forward.
Ten-minute chat

David Harwood

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