Starting practice on a firm footing

Candice Summers joined Medivet’s residency programme when she qualified and is now a partner in the company’s Watford 24-hour centre

I REMEMBER my graduation day as being one of the happiest and proudest moments of my life. The gruelling routine of spending most of my waking hours revising for finals was over, and the enormous sense of achievement in qualifying as a veterinary surgeon was finally sinking in. The time spent as an undergraduate student is a special and unique period. Not only do we benefit from a multidisciplinary support network of learning and advice from our clinical tutors, but living and working alongside our fellow students means that many of our academic and personal stresses are shared and eased.

However, the excitement and anticipation of my ‘first working day’ started to develop into anxiety and panic. Could I remember how to perform a low dose dexamethasone suppression test? What would I do if I encountered a ‘bleeder’ during a bitch spay? The fears that set in ahead of your first job are not easily allayed. According to the Veterinary Defence Society, 10 per cent of all claims in 2000 were made against new graduates, and recent figures suggest litigation claims are increasing. This means such graduates, and recent figures suggest litigation claims are increasing. This means such worries are not unfounded and do little to ease the pressure on new graduates.

I was lucky to have applied and been accepted onto Medivet’s Residency Training Programme. Flicking through the jobs pages of Veterinary Record, the benefits of having a period of time spent learning and practising under close and guided supervision seemed to make sense. The programme offers a new graduate three to six months of working alongside a partner in a sufficiently busy, but not overwhelmingly busy, practice to develop their skills gradually and progressively. As a new graduate I was filled with a wealth of theoretical knowledge, but not necessarily the same level of surgical, communicative and organisational skills required to be an effective clinician. In my first few days of working I found I was not going to have to face the daunting situations I had anticipated alone.

During my time on the programme, I worked alongside a partner to develop my consultation skills, starting with simple vaccinations, and then moving to more complicated clinical presentations. This helped greatly to condense a 20- to 30-minute consultation into a 10- to 15-minute consultation a student may have been used to at university into a time frame more commonly encountered in general practice. I benefited from an experienced pair of eyes when performing routine surgery or radiography and interpreting laboratory results. The programme also provides new graduates with a supportive nursing team who, in my case, were extremely patient and encouraging.

It is common for new graduates to experience a crisis of confidence and be self-critical of their performance. However, failure and disappointment is something that cannot be avoided, whether from a failure of treatment, misdiagnosis or communication breakdown with a client. It is important to keep these in perspective and use constructive criticism positively. Working alongside a more experienced clinician, I was able to reflect on aspects I could have done or said better, and turn any disappointments into areas of improvement and positive focus.

The programme also allowed dedicated time for me to complete my Professional Development Phase (PDP) and this helped to highlight areas where I needed further experience. Regular and ongoing appraisals highlighted my strengths, which boosted my confidence and also identified areas where I needed to improve.

At the company’s large 24-hour clinics I observed more complicated surgeries, got involved with hospitalised patients and started gaining experience in other diagnostics such as ultrasonography. I was introduced to other new graduates and attended Medivet’s clinical clubs and internal CPD evenings. I quickly developed a support network and avoided the feeling of isolation that can often affect new graduates.

A new graduate’s experience during the first few months in practice will undoubtedly impact on their future career. I firmly believe the support and guidance I received on the scheme helped me develop the confidence and skills to progress my career and cope with the daily pressures of being a veterinary surgeon. As a partner, I now face exciting, new challenges providing a busy and varied
The team that is encouraging and supportive in me and feel lucky to work within a clinical edge and skills the first module has given Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Practice, caseload. I am working towards the RCVS more confidence and self-esteem and of emotional support – giving partners dogs give an immeasurable amount more. Apart from the physical help, the unloading washing machines and many dropped items, helping partners opening and closing doors, picking help with everyday tasks such as applicant’s requirements. They can are trained to suit each individual specially trained dogs whose wellbeing is a key consideration. The health and welfare of the dogs trains dogs to give people with disabilities greater independence. Ormerod, a vet. The charity’s mission is to assist people with disabilities to enjoy a greater independence and a better quality of life and, where possible, to help them into education and employment, through the provision of Charitable work? One of the founders was Liz training of dogs I thought it would be a good fit. How did you become involved with Canine Partners? An announcement was made during a local CPD evening that a Sussex-based charity was looking to appoint a veterinary surgeon to its board of trustees. Anyone who might be interested was asked to contact Canine Partners for more information. I had trustee experience from running a millennium village hall project and, after nearly 18 years working for PDSA, I had recently moved back into private practice. This appeared to present an opportunity to maintain a link with the charity sector. It seemed to offer an interesting challenge, which would combine veterinary knowledge and communication skills. As my areas of interest include behaviour and the training of dogs I thought it would be a good fit. Tell us a bit about the charity. Canine Partners was founded in 1990, and one of the founders was Liz Ormerod, a vet. The charity’s mission is to assist people with disabilities to enjoy a greater independence and a better quality of life and, where possible, to help them into education and employment, through the provision of specially trained dogs whose wellbeing is a key consideration. More than 1.2 million people in the UK use a wheelchair, and a significant number of these would benefit from having a canine partner. The dogs are trained to suit each individual applicant’s requirements. They can help with everyday tasks such as opening and closing doors, picking up dropped items, helping partners undress, pressing buttons or switches, unloading washing machines and many more. Apart from the physical help, the dogs give an immeasurable amount of emotional support – giving partners more confidence and self-esteem and enabling increased opportunities for social interaction. Why is your involvement important? The health and welfare of the dogs is a key issue for the charity, and my presence allows an objective view to be given when policy or decisions need to be made. A huge amount of emotion is invested in the dogs by those who work with them and I hope that I can give a balanced view based on my many years of veterinary experience. What do you like about your charitable work? I enjoy working with dedicated volunteers and staff who have a great passion for Canine Partners. The puppy parents have a vital role to play in an organisation such as ours and their selflessness is to be applauded. My practice is near a puppy training satellite, so I often get hands-on puppy experience. Partnership ceremonies, where the placed dogs and partners are acknowledged as a permanent unit, are the culmination of the charity’s work. It is a great pleasure to attend these, especially where the dog may have had a less than straightforward route to this point, requiring extensive veterinary input. What do you not like? The most difficult or least enjoyable aspect of my work within Canine Partners is having to take clinical decisions that may result in the break-up of a partnership. This is usually due to health issues with the placed dog. All our dogs are monitored on a regular basis by staff who visit the home of the partner, and also by looking at the clinical records forwarded to us by local veterinary surgeons. What was your proudest moment? Within the charity, it was when Otis, the first puppy I ever selected from a client’s litter, graduated as a fully fledged partner. . . and your most embarrassing? This would probably be when I appeared in a local village pantomime as Little John – I have never worn green tights since.