The first year in practice is arguably the most challenging, stressful and emotional, says Emily Gascoigne, who qualified in 2012. She has begun her career on a one-year intern programme with the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) and Synergy Farm Health.

WITH the potential for ‘calamities’ in the form of client (mis-)communications, ethical dilemmas and clinical errors, the first year after qualifying can be an emotional rollercoaster. Couple that with working with valuable patients, performance-motivated clients and challenging on-call, the decision to become a farm animal clinician as a new graduate can be a brave one.

Although as an undergraduate I had waivered between the prospect of being a farm animal or mixed practitioner, my final-year rotations at the University of Cambridge and ultimate EMS placements cemented my choice to pursue a career in farm animal medicine. A mentor had told me that when you find ‘your’ subject, you discover a thirst for knowledge and skill. My final year highlighted that, although I enjoyed small animal and equine medicine, my enthusiasm was focused on farm work.

Many new graduates are dissuaded from farm animal practice due to a perceived lack of support, unfriendly on-call rota, the potential for ‘calamities’ and demanding clients. I had similar concerns, but the potential rewards of a farm animal position outweighed those challenges. My requirements for my first position were short but essential – I would look for a supportive team, with a high caseload and an emphasis on continued learning.

I felt that an internship would meet these requirements and, having polished my CV, I began applying. Following interview, I accepted a Junior Clinical Training Scholarship with the RVC in association with Synergy Farm Health, Dorset. The practice is a 100 per cent farm animal practice in the south west. My working day involves shadowing routines and attending my own calls to individual animals, herd or flock health planning, and routine procedures such as castrations, disbudding, etc. I also have the opportunity to tailor my internship to my own interests, discuss cases with recognised specialists and work through targeted projects. I attend RVC CPD two days a month and am mentored within Synergy as well as by Nick Bell of the RVC’s regional veterinary centre. The CPD has an emphasis on bovine medicine, but also includes pigs and sheep, postmortem techniques, infectious diseases, etc.

As the ‘Dorset intern’ I live with students ‘farm tracking’ at the RVC’s field station in Dorset. My main role is to discuss clinical cases with them and attend a weekly clinical club at Synergy. Although a teaching position was not on my checklist as a prospective intern, it is an enjoyable and challenging part of my role, especially when the students are enthusiastic and inquisitive.

During my first week in the practice, I was encouraged to write a list of tasks that I was comfortable performing on my own, to which I would be given preference. On other calls, I have support or I shadow another colleague. In reality, the support I need is someone to run my thoughts past and for them to either tell me to crack on or to have a rethink.

The opportunity to shadow other vets with routine work has enabled me to build my confidence and meet clients. Individual cases have helped to cement my knowledge and skill set, and I can focus my reading and development accordingly. Access to the XL-Vet infrastructure also means that I can tap into experiences from beyond my own practice through group forums and publications.

Given the region, TB testing plays an inevitable role in the working day. As an intern, my involvement is capped, and I was provided with extra support for my first few large herd tests.

On-call can be a worry for new graduates, and the thought of being let loose is a concern. My inclusion on the rota has been gradual, shadowing other vets initially and then having phone support where necessary. The phone lines within the practice are managed centrally, enabling calls to be fielded accordingly. Although I anticipate on-call to be stressful (mostly fuelled by concerns about...
a lack of signal or sleeping through a phone call), knowing that I will have the support of my colleagues means that I will be able to concentrate on the cases in hand.

Extracurricular activities are an essential part of any new vet’s timetable, and as a farm vet my first priority was to join the Dorset Young Farmers. The highlights so far have included attending a Wurzels concert, having a go at raft building, my first Young Farmers’ ball and a clay pigeon shoot; I’m getting a diverse local education!

The RVC-Synergy internship has offered me a supportive working environment (with multiple specialists), a varied caseload (tailored to my interests), a flexible teaching component, access to resources and experience from within the RVC, continued knowledge development and the opportunity to become part of the local farming community in a beautiful part of the UK.

Ten-minute chat

Sheldon Middleton is happy in his first job five years after qualifying from Cambridge, but his route into the profession was not straightforward.

Why did you want to be a vet?

My inspiration to be a vet came from my uncle’s dairy farm in Cheshire. Aged 12, I saw my first caesarean section on a dairy cow and was impressed by the way the vet handled the situation. I liked the idea of working outside and with farmers, and started doing work experience that would either encourage me or put me off. Many farms, abattoirs, veterinary surgeries and laboratories later I still wanted to be a vet, so my school exam choices were built around this aim.

Did your schooling go to plan?

I took physics, chemistry, biology, geography and general studies at A level. In retrospect, this was probably a mistake, as general studies was not considered in any offers from vet schools and neither was a fourth subject. When I first applied for veterinary medicine you could apply to all six universities in one year, which I did. I was interviewed by two and rejected by all six. Also, I did not get the necessary A level grades. I had arranged for my mum to phone my results through to me while I was waiting outside the admissions office of one of the universities, so that I could try to get in through clearing. I went to the office anyway, and was told that I didn’t have the grades to get into veterinary medicine, and that I would find it very hard to get in with retakes. It was suggested that I should consider an alternative career. This was definitely a low point.

What spurred you on?

Never one to give up easily (a characteristic that has also been described as ‘impossibly stubborn’), I decided to retake my A levels. I also decided to reapply for veterinary medicine and I got four rejections out of four (you could by now only apply to four veterinary universities). I was also rejected for medicine on the grounds that I obviously wanted to be a vet!

My school was fantastic. I was allowed to wander in and out of lessons, exams were scheduled and invigilated for me alone. The staff were extremely supportive and I achieved the grades I needed. Throughout the year I had visited four of the vet schools for advice, which was invariably ‘find an alternative degree’.

Did you consider another career?

By now, with four A grades at A level and lots of work experience, I believed I was bound to be accepted. I took a year out to earn some money and reapply for a third time. Yet again, I got four rejections. This time I got the message; I was not destined to be a vet and I would just have to lump it. I didn’t want to be a doctor or a dentist and, to be honest, I wasn’t really sure what else I wanted to be. I decided to do a generalised degree and postpone my next life decision for three years. I took up the offer to read zoology at Edinburgh, which was fantastic and I made good friends. I was thoroughly enjoying my studies, bar one thing: I was in halls of residence with vet students. I couldn’t see how they had got in and I hadn’t. I had the same grades, the same drive and, in most cases, more work experience. I decided to knock on the door of Edinburgh vet school to see how I could go about getting in. Essentially, I had to reapply through UCAS with next year’s applicants, otherwise I would be considered after everyone else.

Tell us about your fourth application.

It was a Friday morning in October when I found this out – and the deadline for UCAS veterinary applications was on the Sunday. The UCAS and Cambridge admission forms were half completed by my school and posted to arrive on Saturday morning. I had to complete them and get them back in the noon post on the same day, and my fingers were crossed that they would be accepted a day late. It is ironic that the rejected forms were the ones on which I had spent hours, poring over the phrasing, while the successful forms took less time to complete than the dash to the post office.

Again, I applied for four veterinary courses. This time I got only three rejections. I was relaxed at my interview, because I was happy in Edinburgh: the worst outcome now would be that I would have to carry on there, rather than go through the previous soul-searching.

How did you feel when you were finally accepted?

I finally got my acceptance letter from Cambridge during the Christmas holidays. I wasn’t expecting it until I got back to Edinburgh, but the admissions office had obviously realised I wouldn’t be at my halls of residence address. I remember that day as a wonderful one, spent visiting my parents at work, my former headmaster and teachers and friends to let them know.

Eighteen applications and 17 rejections later, I finally had my place to read veterinary medicine. I think the fact that I was by then two or three years older than most of the year, and that I had had a rather circuitous application process, gave me a better perspective on the course. I didn’t spend every waking moment studying. I got involved with university life and, among other things, became president of the Cambridge University Veterinary Society. I was asked to give the speech at our graduation on behalf of my year and I was awarded the Animalcare prize for ‘consistently outstanding contributions to student and college life’. It was a long way from being told I would never be a vet.

Looking back, I can see why I was discouraged by the universities and agree that sometimes the most helpful advice you get is the advice you don’t want to hear. It is almost impossible to differentiate the huge number of exceptional candidates that are presented each year and I don’t envy the universities that job. I’m glad my stubbornness paid off though.

Sheldon is the editor of the BSAVA’s new ‘BSAVA Pocketbook for Vets’.
Ten-minute chat

Sheldon Middleton

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