The summer before starting vet school provided Edward James with his first taste of living and working abroad, and whetted his appetite for further travel. He describes how far he got and what brought him home.

BEFORE starting my studies at Bristol, I spent three months working in a veterinary centre in the vibrant and bustling West African city of Accra. The days were spent assisting the local vets (who had trained in Russia and Cuba) in their efforts to treat sick and injured animals that had been brought to them, mainly by local pet owners or small holders. I found it frustrating when I experienced the commonly encountered attitude that treating and preventing disease in animals was of little perceived benefit, especially when funds, equipment and other resources were limited; nonetheless, the combination of a successful case and a happy client was always satisfying. The work was also made much more ‘interesting’ by having to make the assumption that sustaining a dog bite at anytime could result in contracting rabies.

I had a fantastic experience in Ghana, and will always remember the vivacious nature and infectious enthusiasm that the Ghanaians injected into almost every task they undertook. My time spent there whetted my appetite for further travel while at university, and made me realise how much it is possible to immerse oneself in a foreign culture by living and working in it for a short while.

Having intercalated in veterinary conservation medicine after my third year, and having spent some time seeing practice with the veterinary department at Whipsnade zoo, I had grand dreams of becoming a wildlife vet in a game reserve somewhere far flung and exotic (sadly not realised yet). To this end, I signed up to attend a chemical game capture course in South Africa during one of my summers away from university. Our time was spent anaesthetising rhinos and giraffes for the purposes of translocation between game reserves, performing routine health checks on a herd of buffalo, and funneling wildebeest into a boma using an elaborate combination of helicopters, sirens and sliding curtains.

We had the opportunity to meet a crocodile farmer without a full complement of fingers and thumbs, came face-to-face with a black mamba that hadn’t been devenomed, and performed a rumenotomy on a patient not commonly encountered in veterinary practice in the UK – a sable antelope. As much fun as all this was, I couldn’t envisage myself making a viable inroad into this industry; to be honest, I also wasn’t convinced that it was what I was looking for from a long-term career path either.

I was determined not to let this reality check scupper my desire to travel. Therefore, I decided to embark on an unsupported tandem bicycle ride from Land’s End to John O’Groats in the summer following graduation, partly in order to raise funds for the Worldwide Veterinary Service. This was followed by some time spent travelling around Brazil and Venezuela before deciding to look for my first veterinary job in Australia. I rather naively failed to anticipate how tricky it might be to secure a job in a foreign country as a new graduate who hadn’t practised in the nine months since graduation. While searching the veterinary press for job adverts, I managed to raise funds teaching people to kitesurf on the sun-kissed suburban beaches of St Kilda, in Melbourne. This soon turned into a weekend job once I managed to start veterinary work, but then stopped altogether when I realised how brutally cold a Melbourne winter can be.

Apart from treating and preventing a slightly different profile of infectious diseases, assessing patients for heat stroke, and treating patients for venomous snake bite intoxication, I was very surprised by the similarities between general practice in the UK and Australia. I tried to see as much of the country as possible during my four weeks’ annual leave; however, looking back on my time in Australia, I think it would have been a better idea to have gone out as a slightly more experienced practitioner on a 12-month working holiday visa, which would have allowed me to split my time between various locum jobs, and would have allowed me to

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work, live and travel in many more areas of the country.
So, having realised that a working life is a working life wherever you are in the world, and having had my naive dreams of Australian weather and lifestyle blown away, I decided to return home after only a year in my first job. Happily reunited with my family and friends, I spent just under another year working in general practice before embarking on my next adventure: a rotating internship in small animal medicine and surgery at the Royal Veterinary College. Who knows where this change of tack will take me?

Ten-minute chat

Michael Day is Professor of Veterinary Pathology at the University of Bristol. He is chairman of the World Small Animal Veterinary Association (WSAVA) Scientific Advisory Committee, the WSAVA One Health Committee and the WSAVA Vaccination Guidelines Group. He is also vice-president of the British Small Animal Veterinary Association (BSAVA).

How did you get to where you are today?
After graduation from Murdoch University (Western Australia) in 1982, I spent a short time in small animal practice before undertaking a combined PhD and residency in clinical immunology and microbiology. I undertook two postdoctoral fellowships in experimental immunology, the first in the Department of Pathology at the University of Bristol and the second in the MRC Cellular Immunology Unit at the Sir William Dunn School of Pathology at the University of Oxford. In 1990, I took up a lectureship in veterinary pathology at Bristol veterinary school, where I have been ever since.

What does your work involve?
I am primarily a diagnostic pathologist and spend much of my time reading biopsies and performing postmortem examinations. I also run a diagnostic clinical immunology laboratory and teach immunology and pathology. My research focuses on immune-mediated and infectious diseases of companion animals and is undertaken through numerous local, national and international collaborations. I am also Director of Pathology and co-founder of a university spin-out company that undertakes contract research for the pharmaceutical industry. Additionally, I am Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Comparative Pathology; I am only the sixth editor of the journal since it was founded in 1888.

What do you like about your job?
That no single day is the same, although in recent years I have become increasingly desk-bound!

Why is your job important?
The veterinary pathologist functions at the intersection of basic science and clinical application, providing understanding of disease processes and often a definitive clinical diagnosis. In the broader context, veterinary pathology underpins areas as diverse as new drug development and national disease surveillance.

What would you say to someone considering a similar career?
There is a global shortage of trained veterinary pathologists in academia, industry and government service. The accepted entry point to a career in veterinary pathology is via a residency training programme leading to board certification. Unfortunately, these programmes are competitive and there is insufficient funding allocated to satisfy the worldwide demand for pathologists.

What are your roles in BSAVA and WSAVA?
I have always had a strong belief in giving back to the profession through voluntary work. I have been a volunteer on BSAVA committees for the past 15 years and have chaired both the scientific and education committees before joining the Board in 2011. I have been a member of the Scientific Committee of the Petplan Charitable Trust since 2004, I was invited to join the WSAVA Scientific Advisory Committee in 2005 and have chaired that group since 2008. In 2006, we set up the WSAVA Vaccination Guidelines Group (VGG) and I have chaired that committee since 2009. In 2010, I initiated the WSAVA One Health Committee (OHC) to ensure that small companion animals were represented in the emerging global One Health strategy.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?
To move overseas for postdoctoral research. There is an unspoken expectation for Australian academics to do this; however, more often than not they never return home.

What work are you most proud of?
There is currently much discussion in academic circles about the impact of one’s work on wider society. Probably the greatest impact of my work has been in challenging and implementing global change in the way that dogs and cats are vaccinated, through the WSAVA VGG. We campaigned successfully for triennial core revaccination and this in turn has reshaped the available product range from industry. There are challenges remaining and the VGG starts a new project next month that focuses on the vaccination requirements of the Asian continent.

Similarly, the WSAVA OHC is having a global impact. We have engaged with the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and, within a broad portfolio of activity, have prioritised increasing awareness of global canine rabies elimination. It is incredible that in 2012 an estimated 55,000 people still die annually from canine rabies infection – a disease that is entirely preventable through mass vaccination of dogs. I was proud to have the opportunity of giving an address on this subject at the 80th general session of the OIE in Paris recently.

Tell us something not many people know about you.
Surprisingly, few people realise that I am an Australian and hail from the most isolated city on the planet (Perth). This year is 25 years since I left to take up a one-year Leverhulme Commonwealth Visiting Fellowship . . . with the intention of returning home at the end of that year!
Ten-minute chat

Michael Day

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