Donna Cordon Stacey had a career in print and publishing before embarking on her dream of being a vet. She now works in small animal practice and lives in Oxfordshire with her husband and two boys.

LIKE many children growing up in the 1970s, with ‘All Creatures Great and Small’ on television, I announced at an early age that I was going to be a vet. I thought school was going well until my tutor told me at 14 that the school didn’t think I was ‘cut out to be a high-flyer’ and that I should look for a more realistic career. With no plan B, I lost motivation and spent my second O level year mucking around waiting to leave school and get a job.

I took a position in an architect’s office and taught at a riding school at weekends while I looked for direction. I followed my dad into the publishing industry, becoming an assistant print buyer in an advertising and design agency, where I learnt a lot about marketing, promotions, production and print.

I enjoyed copywriting and proof-reading, so I moved into magazine publishing, as an editorial assistant for an equestrian monthly, where one of the contributors was Derek Cuddeford from the Dick vet school. I mentioned to him one day how much I looked forward to receiving his nutrition articles. That turned out to be a life-changing conversation. He asked whether equine nutrition was a particular interest of mine. Before long I’d told him about my abandoned plans to become a vet. I moved to a better editing job with the fantasy games empire Games Workshop. It was one of those happy places to work, where people were paid to do what they loved – designing, playing and writing about games.

I might have stayed longer, but I met an illustrator and moved on impulse to Devon with him. I didn’t have a job to go to, so I wrote to the local equine yards, advertising my services as a groom. I started work on a farm that bred National Hunt horses, kept livery and had a 300-strong flock of mule ewes. I’d done a lot of lambing in return for my stable on the farm where I’d kept my horse, so I was keen to help with the sheep.

I had fun riding out, caring for the mares and youngstock and, when lambing time came, taking on much of that work too. For a while, I continued to nurture the idea, but I needed to find an opportunity to study; I only had one A level – in business studies – and I needed to finance my plan. I moved to a better editing job with the fantasy games empire Games Workshop. It was one of those happy places to work, where people were paid to do what they loved – designing, playing and writing about games.

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I had fun riding out, caring for the mares and youngstock and, when lambing time came, taking on much of that work too. After a while, an opportunity as a production assistant with a reprographics company came up, so I exchanged physical stresses of my farm job for a mentally stressful job in production. After a year of being on the receiving end of a disorganised management team, I’d had enough and was missing the outdoors, so I looked for my next move.

The farm where we rented our cottage let grass keep to a livestock dealer. I got chatting to him one day and he took me on as a full-time shepherd. There was some seasonality to the work, so I sent out my CV to publishers and got a regular stream of freelance copy-editing and proof-reading, which filled the gaps.

My partner now had regular work as an artist on a well-known comic strip, so we decided there wouldn’t be a better time for me to do my A levels. Even so, sometimes when he was waiting for a pay cheque, I’d take a day or two off and do office temping for petrol money to get to college.

During the holidays I worked for my friend the dealer. The lady from the ministry, as it was then, had come to check out one of his cows with an apparently duplicated ear tag, and had been slightly perturbed by his efforts at herd records, so I got these in order.

Being a mature student by some nine or 10 years was great. I really valued the chance to get these qualifications and worked much harder than I would’ve done if I’d tried to do them with the little motivation I had left fol-
though I was now where I belonged. I don’t
know whether I’d have recognised that had
I not spent so long with my sights set on it
from so many other perspectives.
Coming relatively late into the veteri-
nary profession has perhaps had its disadvan-
tages – I might otherwise have waited longer
to start a family – but I don’t consider those
years wasted. Although I didn’t realise it then,
I was learning a lot about people. My moti-
vation to pursue this career was, and still is,
because I like animals, but I now know that
I also care about the people who come with
them, and try to empathise, even with the
difficult ones because, in their own way, most
of them like animals too.

Working parents
Veterinary practice presents particular chal-
lenge to working parents: normal consult-
ing hours exceed those of most paid childcare
providers; and when much of your day is
booked out as 10-minute slots, and a client
expects to collect their newly spayed bitch
from you at the end of the afternoon, you
can’t easily nip out to take your pyrexic tod-
dler home from nursery until relatives can
come and help out.

I’ve worked part-time since our chil-
dren arrived, although that will change this
autumn when Will, the eldest, starts school.
My normal working hours include regular
weekends. Then, my husband looks after the
boys so I don’t have to take time off work if
they are ill, and we save on childcare costs.
We’re lucky to have an understanding, flex-
ible nursery and have, on numerous occa-
sions, also relied on family support. This,
the small, personal and approachable
feeling. Generally the receptionists play
a stronger role in the practice team
now. We’re fully trained in insurance
protocols, for instance, and are also
given product training so we can
advise owners or pass them on to the
veterinary team if necessary. The sheer
scale and complexity of everything we’re
involved in has increased significantly,
but it makes the role constantly
challenging and enjoyable.

What do you enjoy most?
For me, dealing with the public is the
best bit of my job. I live locally and I
know many of our clients, and see them
out with their dogs. It’s good to get to
know them and their pets – in good
times and in bad.

What’s the most challenging part
of the job?
We tend to see owners at times of
great stress and when emotions can
be running high. Some get frustrated if
they are kept waiting for an appointment
because an emergency has been
brought in, while others can feel in a
state of despair if their much loved
pet has to be euthanased. I recently
attended a special bereavement
counselling course, which I found very
helpful and it enabled me to help an
elderly client who had lost her dog.
When she arrived back at the practice
a few months later with her new dog, I
felt I’d made a difference and it was very
rewarding.

Are you involved with training
other receptionists?
Yes, I organise all the training for the
reception team – whether it’s IT, product
training or training on other aspects of
our work.

What was your most unusual or
surprising experience?
In truth, being awarded a long service
award at our group’s diamond jubilee
party, was the biggest surprise. I had no
idea it was coming and it was a lovely
gesture. It’s because the firm takes this
personal approach that I’m still here.

How has your job influenced your
family?
My interest in the veterinary world has
rubbed off on my family. My daughter
Jennifer is now a qualified VN, having
done her work experience with us.

Ten-minute chat
Goddard Veterinary Group reached
its own diamond jubilee during
June 2012 and the staff celebrated
with a cruise on the Thames the
day before the Thames Diamond
Jubilee Pageant. During their cruise,
23 of the group’s staff received
long service awards, including head
receptionist Julie Driscoll who has
worked at the Wanstead Veterinary
Hospital for over 33 years.

What attracted you to the role
of receptionist in a veterinary
practice?
I liked the fact that it was a small,
family-run business that was very local.
Although the group is much bigger now,
the individual practices have a family feel.

What does your job involve on
a day-to-day basis?
I run a busy reception team of 10 staff
at Wanstead, and liaise frequently with
our 40+ branches and hospitals. We
have eight incoming phone lines and are
dealing with the public constantly, both
face-to-face and on the phone. We are
open 24/7 every day, so managing staff
effectively can be challenging, because
we’re constantly busy and shift patterns
mean that I rarely see some of them.

How has the job changed over
the years?
Expansion is the big difference that I
have experienced. When I started, we
had four branches and a card filing
system. Now we are much larger, and
we have so much technology at our
fingertips, but we work hard to maintain
a small, personal and approachable
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Ten-minute chat

Julie Driscoll

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