From patient care assistant to area manager

Denise Turner joined Medivet in 1999 as a trainee veterinary nurse and is now an area manager for the group

MY journey began in January 1999 when, aged 16, I started as a trainee veterinary nurse. The company had only a handful of practices and, as the years have gone by, I have witnessed not only the growth of the company, but also increased levels of staff support.

Initially, I was a ‘floating patient care assistant’, which involved covering annual leave, days off or sickness within branches. Once I became a student I found a permanent position within a branch with a vet and qualified nurse. Although I had wanted to be a veterinary nurse, I had left school without the necessary qualifications to start NVQ training. I was enrolled onto a pre-veterinary course and, once I passed, I was able to enrol on the veterinary nursing NVQ.

My VN training involved working four days a week and attending college one day a week. I found working and studying challenging. At times I felt that while my friends were out enjoying themselves, I was revising or preparing assignments. However, I soon realised the positive aspects of being able to relate what I was learning at college with my every day work.

During my training, Medivet was growing and the more practices that became part of the group, the more experience I was able to gain. We had vets coming on board with special interests such as dermatology and cardiology. This not only added value to the company, but also to the experience I was able to gain as a trainee nurse. It gave me the opportunity to move around branches and work alongside vets who were seeing a varied caseload. Looking back on my training, a vital benefit of the group’s expansion was being able to talk to other people who were in a similar position.

Once I completed my training, I decided to leave Medivet to try something different. For the next three years I worked in a small veterinary clinic with nice people and gained experience with some interesting cases. But as time passed I found I was missing getting involved in critical care cases and surgical nursing. I valued my experience away from the group; it taught me that there are many ways of doing things. However, more importantly it made me think about my career and I wondered if there were more avenues that I could explore.

Returning to Medivet I was offered a head nurse position, which was a fantastic opportunity for me to develop my management skills as well as my nursing skills. This was almost nine years after I had originally joined the company, and I was able to appreciate the changes the group had made. The training of vets and nurses had improved, the practices were being refurbished and the group had grown larger.

After being back for two years and running two branches I felt that I needed another new challenge. I spoke to one of the senior partners to discuss how I could develop my career further; I wanted to do something that would really make a difference. He was very understanding and reassured me that being a qualified nurse did not mean I was remain in that role, and he offered me the opportunity to take on my current role as area manager of the Watford region.

At the time there was no set job description for the role, so I decided the best way to develop one was to go out into the branches I was looking after to see how I could help them. My support of them was crucial and much appreciated by the staff.

That was two-and-a-half years ago. Since then, my job has developed into a essential role within the organisation. We now have about 15 area managers and our job description involves supporting and mentoring staff, interviewing potential candidates, checking everything is in place for the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme, organising and chairing meetings and troubleshooting. Being able to think outside the box is an essential skill for this role.

Every day I face a new challenge and I thoroughly enjoy my role. I even was voted Employee of the Year in 2011.
Ten-minute chat

Theatre nurse Hannah Orme, along with her colleague, vet Maria Serrano Revuelta, were the first of three pairs of staff from YourVets Wythall to help the charity Vets Beyond Borders with a neutering programme for dogs in India

How did you get involved?
YourVets organised for three vets and three nurses to go to the Vets Beyond Borders (VBB) project in India as part of the SARAHS initiative (Sikkim Anti-Rabies and Animal Health programme). The practice selected and paid for the six of us – vets and nurses – as part of its reward scheme for recognising good work over the past year.

VBB is an Australian charity that aims to reduce the stray dog population and work towards eliminating rabies in the northern Indian province of Sikkim. This involves neutering and vaccinating street dogs and feral dogs. Without the charity’s work, thousands of stray dogs would be left to die of disease or rounded up and culled.

What are the teams doing in India?
Rabies vaccinations are routinely given to the street dogs that are caught and neutered, and the local people who own pets are encouraged to have them vaccinated too. Thanks to the work of the teams, Sikkim could be free from rabies in two years and, if so, it will become the first state in India to be rabies-free.

How did you get to where you are today?
I grew up in the Peak District and went to Hartpury College, Gloucestershire, graduating with a BSc Hons in Veterinary Nursing and the RCVS Veterinary Nursing diploma in 2006. From there I joined the Stechford Clinic of YourVets, where I gained the A1 assessor certificate and was promoted to theatre nurse. I transferred to Wythall in January 2008 and have since gained my clinical coaching and my SQP qualifications. I am currently training two students at YourVets Wythall. I recently gained a certificate in advanced feline friendly nursing and have just embarked on the diploma in advanced veterinary nursing.

Tell us about the trip?
The journey involved three planes and a four-and-a-half hour ride in a Jeep. We spent two weeks in Gangtok. Day-to-day tasks included checking on the in-patients and helping out with morning consultations. After consultations were finished, we helped with the day’s operations. Maria had to get to grips with carrying out flank bitch spays, but she picked it up quickly. Surgery mainly consisted of neutering the street dogs that had been caught by the veterinary helpers. They were brilliant at handling and restraining the dogs and prepping them. We took blood samples from the adult dogs, which were tested for rabies at a laboratory. After lunch we continued neutering and, finally, checked the in-patients and administered any necessary treatment before leaving for the day. We worked Monday to Friday and used the weekends to explore. This included trips to the Himalayan zoological park, three monasteries and some lovely local waterfalls.

Why was the trip important?
Before VBB set up in Sikkim, mass shooting of street dogs was used to reduce the population, but local people asked that more humane methods be used instead.

To date, 725,000 dog and cat sterilisations have taken place, and 90,000 rabies vaccinations have been given to dogs, cats, goats and cows. These efforts have led to a reduction in human and animal deaths due to rabies. Through public awareness and education, the SARAHS programme has encouraged local people to adopt local street dogs and, as a result, many of the local dogs are routinely vaccinated, which helps reduce rabies and other zoonotic diseases. Furthermore, Sikkim can be used as a model for setting up similar projects in other states in India. VBB works in partnership with the government of Sikkim and the Fondation Brigitte Bardot to enable this successful project. This state-wide animal birth control/anti-rabies programme is fully funded, but it requires the generous and dedicated work of volunteer veterinarians and veterinary nurses to allow it to continue.

Would you do it again?
I would love to go again; not only for my own personal life experience, but also because it’s a fantastic cause. It was a great way to use my vet nursing skills to benefit the local community and their animals.

Do you have any advice for anyone considering volunteering on a similar project?
Go with an open mind and a big heart. The local people clearly care deeply about the street dogs and their own pets, but euthanasia is something of a taboo; it can be difficult to see animals suffer for longer than they would in the UK. However, the people only want the best for these dogs and that in itself is lovely to see. It was a fantastic two weeks, but I would advise people to go for as long as their workplace will allow.

What’s the best piece of advice you were given before you went?
Take a head torch. This was definitely a great piece of advice. Power cuts were frequent. Some lasted a couple of hours, while others went on all day. Having our torches made operating with limited light much easier. I’m sure they would also be extremely useful at the camps further into the mountains.

We were told to go with an open mind. Thinlay Butia of SARAHS said: ‘Don’t rush’ and this was definitely true!

What was your most embarrassing moment?
I became a bit of a local celebrity because of my blond hair. Local people asked to have their photograph taken with me and I was even filmed in shops. Maria found this very amusing.
Ten-minute chat

Hannah Orme

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