Developing a career in conservation medicine

The University of Edinburgh’s online distance learning programme in conservation medicine leads to the award of a masters degree, a diploma or a certificate. Programme director Anna Meredith describes who the course is aimed at and what is on offer.

Conservation medicine is an emerging discipline that studies the complex relationships and interactions between animal health, human health and ecosystem health. The University of Edinburgh’s Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies distance learning programme in conservation medicine is aimed at veterinary graduates worldwide (BVMS or equivalent) who wish to pursue a career in this rapidly developing field, in academia, research, governmental and non-governmental organisations and consultancies.

There is rising global concern about anthropogenic impacts on ecological health, leading to loss of biodiversity and modification of ecological processes, increasing global toxification, pathogen pollution and global climate change. The emergence or re-emergence of infectious disease as a result of these anthropogenic changes has major impacts on human and animal health and on conservation of animal species. Thus conservation medicine shares a similar philosophy to the ‘One Health’ concept, but is also closely allied with the values of conservation biology and the management of endangered populations. It is interdisciplinary, requiring input from veterinary and human medicine, ecology, biology, epidemiology, public health and social and political science.

We launched the conservation medicine programme in 2012 to provide vets with the skills and knowledge required to be effective practitioners of conservation medicine, and to enable them to assist in the development of solutions to complex ecological health issues, and in the conservation of endangered wildlife. We aim to provide a dynamic learning experience by providing in-depth training in a modular flexible format. This makes it ideal for vets who wish to achieve an award while maintaining busy professional and personal commitments.

Programme aims

The programme aims to enable students to:

- Acquire knowledge about conservation medicine and the interactions between animal, human and ecosystem health;
- Acquire specific veterinary skills applicable to conservation medicine;
- Understand how a conservation medicine approach can be applied in a range of practical situations;
- Be able to interpret and communicate scientific results and information in research and other forms of social debate, across other related scientific disciplines and to other stakeholders.

Within the courses, ecosystem health, species conservation, applied epidemiology and interventions for conservation medicine are studied, alongside wildlife disease management, conservation genetics, wild animal welfare and zoonotic diseases. Participants can choose to study part time over one, two or three years to certificate, diploma or masters degree level, or up to six years by intermittent study. Using the interactive online learning environment allows students to communicate with expert tutors and fellow students from the comfort of their own home or workplace.

Years 1 and 2 consist of the taught element and year 3 comprises the written reflective element. Each year is made up of three 11-week terms structured into two blocks of five weeks of study, with a week in between for independent study and reflection. The written reflective element
provides an opportunity to further develop scientific skills and use scientific theory; it allows a choice of a written dissertation, a casebook relating to relevant professional experience, a personal portfolio of reflective and practical activity; or a short research project.

Learning outcomes
In delivering this programme, we aim to:

- Enhance knowledge and understanding of conservation medicine from a global perspective, in order to enable effective veterinary participation in this complex interdisciplinary field;
- Enhance knowledge and skills relating to the diseases of wild animals and veterinary aspects of the conservation of endangered species;
- Assess, assimilate and apply scientific evidence, which may be limited or incomplete, to real-life situations and develop appropriate, timely and adaptable responses and solutions to conservation medicine challenges;
- Provide a first-class learning experience, leading to the development of proactive, independent, reflective and lifelong learners.

Programme delivery
The programme is delivered in an online environment that provides a dynamic and collaborative learning experience. Assessment of progress is achieved by presentations, essays, critical reviews of literature, student self-reflection activities, short answer questions, scientific posters, group wiki events and peer review activities. In addition to the core learning, the programme allows students to enhance their interpersonal, self-management, IT, team working and project management skills. More information is available at www.ed.ac.uk/vet/conservation-medicine

Ten-minute chat
Harvey Locke, a former BVA President, chairs the BVA’s CPD Group whose remit is to develop the BVA’s CPD programme nationally. He was a founding partner of a small animal hospital practice in Cheshire, from which he recently retired.

What made you take on chairing the CPD Group?

After three busy years on the BVA officer team and being recently retired from practice, perhaps the powers that be in the BVA felt that I should not find myself at a loose end! I was invited to take on the role of chairman of this new group for its first year. It was not a difficult decision to make; in fact, I was honoured and excited by the invitation. I have had plenty of practice at chairing meetings over the past few years and also gained a significant level of experience in the planning of CPD courses from my time on the BSAVA’s congress committee, so I felt comfortable taking on this new role.

What is the group’s role?

Over the past couple of years, the BVA has run a pilot CPD programme at its headquarters in Mansfield Street. These courses proved popular and the BVA Board decided that CPD should be developed as a members’ service, with courses being run on a national basis. The group was initially set up to plan two full-day farm and equine streams at London Vet Show (LVS) this November, and also to plan the programme for the BVA Careers Fair, following its successful launch at LVS last year. Once we had completed these tasks we set about planning the BVA’s CPD programme for 2014.

Who’s on the team?

Nominations were invited from vets and the good response meant that it was a difficult task to pick the six members needed. It was important that the team had experience of CPD provision and that our balance of skills represented the main species that the courses would cover.

What do the members do?
The members of the group come from a variety of backgrounds. Four are in practice with their special interests covering equine, farm animal, camelids, exotic animals and antimicrobial and anthelmintic resistance. Our small animal member is a lecturer in oncology at Glasgow vet school and another member works for a welfare organisation and is in charge of its CPD programme.

How long do you serve on the group?
The initial appointment is for one year, but I really hope that the team stays together for a second year as we are working well and everyone on the group is enthusiastic and making an excellent contribution.

How are you getting on with planning for 2014?
The first thing we needed to do was to find out what our members wanted by way of CPD provision, so we commissioned a members’ survey and had an excellent response, with over 1600 replies. This has given us the information that we needed on course subjects, the location and the cost; they are all important considerations. We are now putting together the detail of the 35 clinical and non-clinical courses planned for next year; the programme will be finalised at the end of the summer.

What do enjoy about this role?
I am enjoying working with a new group of vets who are so enthusiastic about our mission – all of the meetings we have held have been productive.

I also relish the challenge of the BVA getting involved in the competitive CPD market and being recognised for putting on high-quality and relevant courses for practitioners at an affordable price.

Do you miss practice?
At times I do but, in reality, I am so busy with the BVA I have not had time to reflect on leaving practice, which is probably a good thing. Having started my practice in 1976 and seen it grow to the 24-vet, seven-centre group that it is today has been hugely rewarding, but I have left a great team there, so I have every confidence that the practice will continue to go from strength to strength.

What was your most embarrassing moment?
The one that sticks in my mind occurred the day of EMS at a local mixed practice and, as I entered the pig house with the vet and farmer, I stepped on the edge of a manhole cover for the slurry pit, which gave way. The next thing I was standing up to my waist in you know what! The vet took me back to his house for a shower and the loan of a change of clothes. Not a good start to an EMS placement!
Ten-minute chat

Harvey Locke

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