A thoroughly modern cattle vet

After qualifying, Andy Adler worked in mixed practice and then travelled abroad, discovering that he loved working on farms and with farmers. He treats sick animals and helps farmers to make their business a success.

WRITING this article on being a modern cattle vet is part of a journey; I find it entertaining that someone who scraped through university, spending most of his time trying to go sailing, should be asked to write about being a modern vet. I guess it is the journey here that got me the invitation, and it is a journey that I will discuss, before explaining what I do now. Finally, I hope to reflect on whether this is actually valid.

After qualifying in 1997 with a pass mark that represented having a good time and not academic excellence, I worked in mixed practice before spending four years travelling and working abroad. In this time I learnt that I did not enjoy small animal consulting and that I loved working on farms, with farmers, helping to deliver animal health and disease prevention. I returned from abroad in 2003 with a wife and young family and settled in Dorset for what I hoped would be a long career in farm animal medicine. The first job in Dorset was a risk as it was in a practice with a high staff turnover; however, it was in the location I wanted. Three years later I approached a more stable practice and moved to Southfield Veterinary Centre to work with my current colleagues who continue to inspire me with their skills and dedication.

In 2007 I undertook a part-time MBA at the local university while working full time (a busy period in my life with three young children). In 2009, the large animal department at Southfield merged with another large animal practice to form Synergy Farm Health (SFH). I became a director of SFH in 2011, and since then I have been elected to be a director of XL Vets Training Services and, recently, of XL Vets UK itself, allowing me to work collaboratively with a much larger group of similarly minded practices.

My MBA taught me a lot. One thing was the importance of engaging with politics and looking to the future to see what will happen to affect your business. I have always believed that it is important to give back to your profession and so I applied to join the BVA’s Veterinary Policy Group. This has enabled me to see the profession through different eyes and establish relationships and networks outside of my normal sphere of influence. Earlier this year I was asked to give a talk at the final-year student seminar in Lancaster; this article is based on that presentation.

What do I do?
I treat sick animals, create disease prevention plans and work with farmers to make their business a success. I work with data to turn it into information that is of value to farmers and any other aspect of the business where it is needed. The real answer (in my way of current MBA thinking) is that I work in a business-to-business environment, with teams of people to deliver a great animal environment in order to constantly improve animal welfare. I am a team worker working with a team of animals to improve productivity. I work with teams of farmers to maintain the health of the animal team and to create an efficient profitable business. Within the practice I work with our support team, which includes veterinary technicians, dairy hygiene specialists, suitably qualified persons, and office staff in the reception, lab, pharmacy, accounts and administration departments. I work with a team of vets – SFH now has 28 vets in various regional teams – including a TB testing team.

Finally, I also work with teams of directors looking at management issues and strategy direction. The core skill to be able to work within these different teams is the ability to communicate at different times and at different levels. Working within some teams can be difficult. At all times my clinical skills have to be kept up to date so that I can deliver the fundamental purpose of my role; however, increasingly I spend time updating and progressing my communication skills as this now defines my success.

On a day-to-day basis I spend most mornings on farm doing herd health visits (HHV) and working with herd managers and owners. I mostly do fertility work; however, now that we record percentage time doing different types of work it is amazing how much of a HHV is spent looking at sick cows and discussing disease prevention and
control. After the booked-in work I do incidental calls, although these are a decreasing part of my job as we have an excellent team of young vets who pick up these calls, allowing me to get on with herd health planning, responding to e-mails and communicating with the various teams. I do virtually no TB testing and, with the current TB testing tendering, I am relieved not to rely on this work.

An increasing proportion of my time is spent in meetings with colleagues and away from the practice. Most of these I find intellectually stimulating as they often deal with managing the future, which requires critical discussion and idea development.

I believe that I have a mix of skills that define a modern vet. I have a good grasp of basic farm animal disease treatment and prevention knowledge. I continually update my knowledge and skills within the clinical and communication background. I work out new ways of communicating and getting my advice across to my clients, and am happy to refresh my thinking if new evidence comes along to support a change in view. I deal with change well, embrace the future and accept the opportunities that change delivers. I have a large and differing network of contacts that I use to expand my knowledge and challenge my understanding of the world.

The great thing about being in the modern cattle industry is that it is so exciting, fast changing and has a capacity to hold many different vets with a wide variety of skills. That makes it a great environment to work in for the next 30 years of my professional career.

Ten-minute chat

Ian Battersby recently went to India with Mission Rabies.

**Why did you get involved with Mission Rabies?**

I have been friends with Luke Gamble, founder of the charity Worldwide Veterinary Service (WVS), since vet school. Our careers have taken us in different directions but we stayed in touch and I have always wanted to get more involved with a WVS project. Mission Rabies was the right project at the right time for me. I work at Davies Veterinary Specialists who decided to support to project as well. DVS purchased the first 50,000 vaccines for Mission Rabies and countless members of staff set about fundraising over the summer for this great cause, which was amazing.

**Have you done anything like this before?**

No, and I will admit to being slightly nervous as the trip got closer because there was an element of the unexpected, but it was such a great experience. If anyone reading this is thinking about getting involved, but is a bit unsure, my advice would be to go for it. You won’t regret going, but will always regret not doing it.

**What are the aims of the project?**

The project aims to reduce the incidence of rabies in dogs and, when caught, the dogs were well restrained. Any that required treatment were transported to a central hospital. We would break around 11.30 am and restart at 3 pm because of the heat. Each team aimed to catch and vaccinate 125 dogs a day. Areas were very different; some days we hit our target by lunch time.

**How long were you there?**

Ten days, but most volunteers were on the project for two weeks and some stayed for the whole month. In Ranchi we slept in a local hotel and our meals were provided by Auntie Rita, a supporter of a local dog charity (HOPE). Auntie Rita and her husband were incredible and opened their home to all the volunteers and dog catchers.

**Did you enjoy the trip?**

When you do a trip like this it is inevitable that you gain a different perspective of life. I felt privileged to see the non-tourist parts of a country and see all aspects of the culture and I want to get involved again. In the meantime I will support the charity in any way I can.

**Was there anything you didn’t enjoy?**

India is India really. It is certainly more chaotic than most countries I have visited and things inevitably take much longer than you are used to. Initially that was frustrating, but I was surprised how quickly I moved into that swing of things. With the great ‘team Ranchi’ spirit even potentially unenjoyable experiences turned into fun. The first night when I joined the team we travelled on a sleeper train in third class. If I am honest, the thought of the journey didn’t fill me with joy, but we soon found the funny side to the situation, which made it hysterial.

**Was there a special moment?**

There was an overwhelming response from the local people and the enthusiasm of the local children was infectious. There were days when some of the teams were able to catch dogs with rabies and get them safely off the streets. The team spirit we developed with the dog catchers was special, as was the hospitality of people living in slums, which at the same time was humbling. One child in the slums told a Mission Rabies volunteer: ‘You being here gives the children hope’, which says it all.

**Did you find out anything surprising about yourself?**

I coped better with the heat than I thought I would. It may be the time of my life, but I found myself reflecting about some of the things I saw much more than I would have done previously, in particular, some of the conditions children lived in in the slums, but that may be because I have young kids now.

**Did anyone give you a particularly good (or bad) piece of advice before you went?**

I was given lots of advice by friends and colleagues mainly focusing on my health, in particular ‘Delhi belly’, but I think the best advice was when I arrived and one of the volunteers said: ‘Just get out there and get stuck in, so you know you have done the best you can and you enjoy it.’

**Any embarrassing moments?**

As you can imagine they mostly revolve around toilet humour, although everyone from team Ranchi will have a story about toilets with no light!
Ten-minute chat

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Veterinary Record 2013 173: ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.f7045

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