Developing CPD

Having been introduced to CPD in her first job in practice, Frances Barr now sits on the other side of the academic fence as the BSAVA’s academic director, where she uses the skills she gained teaching at Bristol veterinary school to develop the association’s postgraduate certificates.

I GRADUATED from Cambridge in 1979, and was lucky enough to be offered a job straight away in a large, progressive mixed practice in Kent. It was an ideal place to begin – other young assistants to share experiences and ideas, and experienced partners willing to train and support. It was very busy mind.

I well remember that first summer when canine parvovirus hit with a vengeance; clients queued out of the door and there were dogs on drips everywhere. As well as gaining invaluable clinical experience, my first practice also introduced me to the concept of continuing professional development. Assistants were all encouraged to study for one of the RCVS certificates, and I chose radiology. With the help of my supervisor Arlene Coulson, as well as support from the practice, I was delighted to gain the CertVR in 1982.

By this time I was intrigued by radiology and wanted to continue my studies towards the diploma. A few job applications came to nothing, but then I was offered the post of veterinary surgeon at Bristol Zoo (based in the surgery department at Bristol veterinary school). I spent mornings at the zoo, and afternoons working in the x-ray team at Bristol under the guidance of Christine Gibbs. It was a fantastic opportunity to gain experience and to study (I gained my diploma in 1985), while continuing to broaden my clinical experience with less familiar species.

In 1987, I left the zoo to undertake clinical research into the emerging technology of diagnostic ultrasound in the surgery department at Bristol, funded for three years by the RCVS Alison Alston Canine Award. It was a perfect role for me at that time, allowing me to continue clinical diagnostic imaging for first-opinion and referred patients of all species while learning how to work with the new technology and how to carry out clinical research. In 1989 I gained my PhD in the use of ultrasound for abdominal disease in the dog. What a general title that sounds now!

Over the following 20 years, as our family grew up, I remained at Bristol as a clinician and teacher in the field of diagnostic imaging. I always enjoyed teaching in the informal small group setting of clinics, and particularly loved watching the progression in confidence and competence of each and every student through the final year. It’s hard being a student, and teachers need to remember that there’s a lot to learn and absorb, and the holy grail of ‘experience’ seems a long way off at times. Of course much changed over that period of 20 years; increased student numbers, busier clinics, new technologies/procedures/therapies. However, the underlying skills required in order to deal with animals and their owners, and to teach those skills to the current crop of students, remained largely unchanged. Furthermore, there is nothing like teaching for stimulating the teacher to keep up-to-date and to understand why and how they take each step. An inevitable companion to teaching is assessment, and trying to minimise the accompanying stress for students while still being fair and consistent.

Postgraduate radiology teaching was also important at Bristol, and for many years we welcomed practitioners once a month to film reading days, supporting those who were interested in studying for the RCVS certificate in veterinary radiology.

During this period, I was also active within BSAVA as a volunteer. I began as a new recruit to its education committee, contributing to the planning of the association’s CPD courses, and moved from there to membership (and then chair) of the BSAVA congress scientific programme committee. I spent nine years as editor of the Journal of Small Animal Practice; a time that strengthened and broadened my clinical knowledge and my understanding of clinical research. From 2005 to 2009 I was fortunate also to be one of the BSAVA’s officer team, and to appreciate the contributions of permanent employees and volunteers alike.

And so to today, and my current role of BSAVA academic director. This role was created by the BSAVA in 2010 with the express purpose of developing and implementing its new postgraduate certificates. The exciting prospect of being involved from the beginning with a project I wholeheartedly believed in was sufficient to entice me from the security and familiarity of Bristol, although not without a few butterflies. The past three years have been a bit of a rollercoaster ride, but the certificates in small animal medicine and in small animal surgery are now launched, and in 2014 we will have more than 200 students in the first, second or third year of their studies.
Ten-minute chat

Denis Oliver qualified from Edinburgh vet school in 1942 and retired in June 2013 after spending 70 years in practice in Grantham. His last official duty was at the Shire Horse Show in March, when he presented the Oliver medal for the best shod horse.

Why did you study veterinary medicine?
I wanted to be a farmer like many of my relatives, but because of the agricultural depression, the advice was that there was no future in farming. I still wanted to work with animals, so I decided to be a vet. I had matriculated at age 15 and started vet school aged 17.

Were your studies affected by the Second World War?
Yes, I was a frustrated member of the Dick Vet’s cavalry officer training corps. Veterinary students were not called up because being a veterinary surgeon was a reserved occupation, so I was not allowed to fight. I saw my friends go to fight and some died.

Interestingly, a Polish veterinary school and a medical school were set up in Edinburgh during the war and English and Polish students studied part of the curriculum together. Once qualified there was a high level of unemployment. I was one of 47 applicants for my first job and many graduates worked for their keep in order to get clinical experience.

As a young vet you lived at the practice; what was that like?
I married in January 1946 and my parents helped me to buy a practice in Grantham. In those days it was commonplace to live at the practice. My wife was really the practice manager and nurse; she spoke about her role as a vet’s wife at the BVA Congress in Swansea in 1977.

When our children arrived – a daughter and a son – they too would help out in the surgery when they were old enough. In fact, my daughter reminds me that every Christmas morning (it seemed) I would be called to a calving, so the children had to wait for their presents! In those days I was never off duty. The telephone supervisor at the exchange had to be kept informed of where I was and calls were transferred to me. Sometimes, local doctors, dentists and vets would help each other out by giving advice over the phone.

The advent of sulphonamides and antibiotics changed the way we could treat animals. The work then was 90 per cent large animal, mostly pigs, which was a government push after the war, and I was very involved with the Pig Industrial Development Association.

There was also almost a complete demise of horse work after the war, to the extent that it was discussed whether equine studies should be removed from the veterinary syllabus. One example of this loss was felt at the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1953 when the country had to be scoured for suitable horses to pull the carriages. I treated a horse with severe thrush that then travelled to London by train to take part.

You were BVA President in 1964/65; what were the highs and lows of your year?
The first high point was holding my congress in Edinburgh. Secondly, it was giving evidence to the Brambell Committee on animal welfare – I was the first president to gather a group of expert vets to read a government report and issue an immediate press release. Another was being involved in the 1966 Veterinary Surgeons Act. Also, as BVA President, I was invited to attend Winston Churchill’s State Funeral. Finding myself on the steps of St Paul’s standing within feet of world leaders was surreal.

My low point was the lack of government funding for the eradication of brucellosis as so many vets and animals were dying of the disease.

You were also president of the Shire Horse Society – what sparked your interest in shire horses?
As a small child working on relatives’ farms, I worked with heavy horses in a way that wouldn’t be allowed now because of health and safety concerns, but I fell utterly for these majestic animals.

Was it that that led to your serving as Master of the Worshipful Company of Farriers in 1980?
A new farriery apprentice training scheme was introduced in 1960s started by the Worshipful Company of Farriers and, one day, when I was talking with Reg Wooldridge of the Animal Health Trust, he suggested I join the Company and I was chairman of the Examinations Board for 13 years, and Master of the Worshipful Company of Farriers in 1980/81.

Tell us about your OBE?
I don’t know who put me forward for it. Aside from being Secretary and President of the BVA, I was the chief vet of Royal Show for a very long time – 24 years in fact.

What’s the secret of your long life?
My first reaction to this question would be to say it was because I married a girl from Atholl Crescent Domestic Science School in Edinburgh! However, I think it is really never say no to any invitation to get involved.

What was the best advice you were ever given?
It was from my father who strongly suggested that I should do the BSc degree (very new in the 1940s) as well as the MRCVS, as suggested by Charnock Bradley at my interview at the Dick.
Ten-minute chat

Denis Oliver

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