From Portakabin to hospital

Gillian Page qualified as a veterinary nurse from Berkshire College of Agriculture in 1988 and worked in a number of roles before she and her husband Tony bought a piece of land and started their own practice.

THERE it was, the advert I’d been waiting to see for what seemed like a lifetime: ‘Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies (RDJSVS) seeks trainee veterinary nurse’. I knew it was mine, or, rather, desperately hoped so. At that time there were no training centres in Scotland and competition for places was strong. I knew there would be many applicants, so I’d have to think of a way to get noticed. The plan was that, when asked the inevitable interview question, ‘Why do you want this job?’, I would find a way to stand out. I decided most applicants would say ‘I love animals’, or ‘I just want to work with animals’, so I wouldn’t say that; however, I hadn’t actually thought what I would say. When the question was asked, the unbelievable words ‘I’m in it for the money’ came out of my mouth. Fortunately, the interview panel thought it was amusing and, a month later, with great excitement, I put on my green and white striped dress. What an education was to follow.

I completed two years and my first year of VN training at the Dick before deciding general practice would benefit me more in the long term. I was keen to see a puppy vaccinated rather than another hemilaminectomy. I found a good practice in Blythwood Vet Group in Pinner, Middlesex, and after qualifying from Berkshire College the following year, was delighted to take up the Head VN role with them.

I loved my time in Pinner, working alongside great colleagues with whom I’ve remained in touch.

So keen was I to gain a nursing position that, on leaving school, I hadn’t taken the opportunity of going to university, something I’d always regretted. When considering my next move I decided to return to Edinburgh to do a science degree at Queen Margaret University. I worked as a locum VN during the student holidays, covering the UK, which made for a tiring but educational few years. I would often daydream about what my own practice might look like, but in those days it wasn’t possible for someone other than a veterinary surgeon to own a practice.

Following graduation, I moved to Worksop in Derbyshire to be with Tony, whom I had met while working as a locum. He had already started to formulate the idea of having his own practice and we realised that we shared a vision of the type of practice we wanted. That decided, Tony came home one night with a map of the UK and a pin and asked me ‘Where do we put the pin?’ Although happy in Derbyshire, my friends and family have always been paramount in my life so we moved to Scotland in 1996. We were unemployed, had no money and no home – we had to do something and quickly.

Fortunately, Tony got a job with the PDSA and I joined a healthcare company with a veterinary division. This role involved me with national veterinary wholesalers and veterinary school key accounts in Scotland and the north of England. This was a whole new world, tougher than I had been used to, and I gained a great deal of knowledge of veterinary business. I worked alongside colleagues who might be considered ruthlessly focused and ambitious, but they were also extremely good teachers. My interest and enthusiasm for veterinary practice management was strengthened by working in this
environment. The travelling and hours spent away from home were tough, so I found another focus that would allow me to be at home more often. Having felt for quite some time that I would like to teach, I inquired about, and was offered, a post at Oatridge Agricultural College. As well as teaching, I was learning to write and develop material for the higher national certificate and higher national diploma courses in animal care, and I’m sure this was the reason I was offered the post of centre manager with the College of Animal Welfare (CAW) in 2000. When I joined CAW, Scotland’s first ever degree in veterinary nursing – offered by CAW, Edinburgh Napier University and the R(D)SVS – was about to be validated. Having a passion for veterinary nursing, it was a dream job for me being involved as deputy programme leader.

Starting on our own

Throughout this time, our dreams of our own practice had not gone away and the building was in the first stages of design. All we needed was £550k to build it! Ever confident, and with business plan in hand, we approached the high street banks. The answer, without exception, was no. The reason given was that I am most proud of in my working life. The project, five years in total, involved finding land, raising finance, designing the layout, interior design and co-project managing the build. There is no doubt it pushed us to our limits mentally and physically, but thankfully we came through, relatively unscathed, but perhaps a little wiser and more sober.

To have been able to produce something personal, lead on and put in place a working culture, structure, clinical protocols and working processes in line with our personal values and beliefs has been incredible. From those early days to achieving hospital status, which was awarded by the RCVS in 2007, we have been fortunate to work alongside a small, dedicated team of people who have helped to make the practice what it is. In terms of division within the practice, Tony is the veterinary clinical partner and I handle the business aspect. As individuals we are very different characters and approach things in different ways, but almost always with the same goal in mind, so it works well for us.

Reflecting on my path, I think it is important to have confidence in yourself: don’t shy away from calculated risk, stick to a personal value and belief system no matter who or what tries to shake it, and push out of your comfort zone in order to facilitate personal growth and have fun in what you do. I truly believe these points have been the foundation for my own career.

Diary of a parliamentary intern

Hannah Jordan, parliamentary intern to Lord Trees, describes a busy time before the House rises at Christmas.

As I write, the division bell is sounding and peers are dashing to vote. December has been a hectic month and this is likely to continue until the House rises. I, perhaps naively, thought that business might wind down towards Christmas. Instead, some issues raised at the BVA Congress last month have gained momentum, along with a crescendo of other Lords’ business as several bills reach important junctures.

The veterinary circus that comprises the London Vet Show was a wonderful opportunity to meet the stakeholders in veterinary business and, this year, the BVA Congress was held as part of the event. We took part in a couple of discussions, first on the pros and cons of an increasing number of UK vet schools and, secondly, on the role of evidence-based veterinary medicine (EBVM) for the profession. While there might be little we can do about the former, we can certainly help shape the profession and prepare for change. The latter is terrifically important in an increasingly litigious society. RCVS Knowledge is hosting an EBVM conference in October 2014 to thrash out the issues.

Veterinary-related business in the House has been varied this month. We submitted two questions to Lord de Mauley regarding pre-exposure rabies vaccination for vets. While the responses were informative, they left the responsibility for pre-exposure vaccination firmly in the hands of the business owner (see p 613 of this issue).

Opposition amendments to include dog control notices in the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Bill were, unsurprisingly, withdrawn. We may table an amendment at the Report stage to extend protection from ‘people and assistance dogs’ to include ‘protected (domestic) animals’.

Last week, the Lords debated the continued use of badger culls by Defra. This was closely followed by a less measured debate in the Commons. Following the conclusion of the culls there has been much talk about what the Government will do next. The minister, Lord de Mauley, refrained from giving much away while we await an independent report. On the subject of reports, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs recently advised reclassification of ketamine as a Class B drug. This may impact its use in practice and we will keep an eye on developments.

In case you were wondering, it has not been all work and no play. I was grateful to be able to attend the RCVS President’s reception, the Westminster Abbey parliamentary carol service and the BVA Christmas reception this month. The carols were magical and the readings, by various politicians, were better received than some of their comments on Radio 4!

January will be a chance to debate the non-stun slaughter of animals, and badgers will get further air time at the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. Do get in touch if you have something to contribute; in the meantime I wish you a merry Christmas and a happy New Year.