Bridging the gulf between academia and practice

Edinburgh vet school recently launched PALS – a Practice and Academia-Linked Study network – to strengthen links between academics and practitioners. Scott Pirie, David Argyle, Brendan Corcoran, Richard Mellanby and Ian Handel explain how vets and animals should benefit

THERE is an ever-increasing awareness within the profession of the requirement to establish, develop, support and maintain an evidence-based approach to veterinary medicine; that is, an approach that focuses on the optimisation of patient care. The RCVS has highlighted this need and RCVS Knowledge (previously the RCVS Charitable Trust) has recently refocused its efforts to become a global intermediary for evidence-based veterinary medicine (EBVM), committed to assisting practitioners to make well-informed treatment decisions and encouraging the development of partnerships and collaboration between practices and academic organisations in an effort to help achieve this aim.

In recognition of this requirement, the University of Edinburgh's Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies (R(D)SVS) recently launched the Practice and Academia-Linked Study (PALS) network, a resource designed to facilitate stronger links between its academic and practitioner members for the completion of high-quality clinical research with direct relevance to clinical practice.

The structure of the PALS network is largely modelled on the highly successful practice-based research network (PRN) template that is now widely established within the medical profession. PRNs represent a group of primary care medical practices and/ or practitioners affiliated with each other and with an academic organisation, with appropriate channels of communication between network members. They were originally established to investigate questions relating to community-based practice, following the recognition and demonstration by a group of dedicated pioneers that important new knowledge could be discovered by the practicing family doctor, even within an era of commitment to clinical specialisation and the linking of research to specialists. The establishment of PRNs has firmly demonstrated that primary care facilities not only represent important routes of application of the fruits of research conducted elsewhere, but are also invaluable sources of relevant clinical questions and vital clinical data resources.

Setting up the network

Currently, the R(D)SVS has established formal links with a group of veterinary practices in Scotland and the north of England, which are committed to the PALS network’s mission statement: ‘To draw on the relative clinical and academic strengths of primary care practice and the R(D)SVS to develop a synergistic approach to the promotion, support and dissemination of the results of high-quality research within the practice setting, with a view to improving the evidence base for clinical veterinary practice.’

First and foremost, the PALS network represents the ‘laboratory’ where important clinical questions can be addressed with appropriate scientific rigour; questions which, in keeping with the original ethos of the PRNs, have direct relevance to the practitioner members and their patients. Through two-way communication between members, the PALS network aims to encourage an evidence-based practice philosophy, developed and nourished from the continual analysis of practice-based evidence. These aims, as with sole reliance on much of the current veterinary scientific literature, inevitably fall short of fulfilling the true definition of ‘evidence-based medicine (EBM)’, i.e., that derived from conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence, primarily from clinical trials, in making decisions about the care of individual patients. However, the PALS network initiative shares the EBM ethos...
to standardise not individualise treatment, although within the network and based on data obtained from network members (assuming no conflicting evidence base exists within the scientific literature).

Structure
The PALS network has an organisational structure that transcends a single research project. Due to the extensiveness of data available from first-opinion practice and the pooling of research skills across the network, a wide variety of study types are possible, including case studies, qualitative inquiry and longitudinal outcome studies. Appropriate expertise in the design and execution of such analytical approaches will be made readily available from within the R(D)SVS and the Roslin Institute. Furthermore, the academic section of the PALS network has membership representation from a wide variety of veterinary disciplines and species specialties.

Inevitably, the validity of any research output will be largely dependent on the size of the study and the quality of the inputted data. Therefore, immediate prioritised areas of focus include recruitment of new PALS members (practitioners and practices) and the development of the research capability and capacity of network members, particularly in relation to the standardisation of recorded data. Consequently, the academic division is committed to the provision of appropriate training in study design and data acquisition and recording.

Benefits
With such a collaborative venture, the success of the initiative is wholly dependent on the commitment of all members and such commitment is highly dependent not only on the relative interest of each party, but also on the direct or indirect benefits to themselves or their clients. The benefits to the academic members include an improved awareness of the needs of the profession and access to a significantly larger and less biased dataset, thus optimising the clinical relevance and the robustness of the research output. The benefits to the practice-based members include the opportunity to direct high-quality research towards the requirements of their clients/patients, the receipt of formal training in research techniques and inclusion in a large-scale practice-based clinical governance and clinical effectiveness programme.

Additionally, mutual benefits can be achieved, both by bridging the real and perceived gulfs between academia and practice and through the establishment of professional relationships with a common goal. Finally, the sharing of information among members is essential to the success of the initiative. This applies not only to the rapid conveyance of study outcomes to all participants, but also to more general issues affecting the practitioner that may benefit from input from other network members.

The need for such an initiative is well recognised, the framework is applicable, the skill base appropriate, the aims achievable and the outcomes relevant. However, the success of the venture is dependent on the commitment, cooperation and honesty of the members. Over time, it is hoped that the PALS network will become an integral part of the professional life of its members, constituting a valuable research tool for addressing important clinical questions, a useful surveillance tool for monitoring the prevalence of specific diseases and a safe forum for the discussion of topical clinical issues.

More information on the PALS network can be found at www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/vet/services/pals-network. To inquire about becoming a PALS network member and contributing to and benefiting from the initiative, e-mail: scott.pirie@ed.ac.uk

Diary of a parliamentary intern

Hannah Jordan, parliamentary intern to Lord Trees, is often asked what a vet does in the House of Lords. As a firm believer that the completion of a veterinary degree broadens career opportunities and employability, she describes the versatility of the veterinary degree.

Since changes were made to the way higher education is funded, there seem to be new veterinary schools and faculties being proposed or developed all over the UK. On top of this, it is important to remember that veterinary graduates from the EU are free to register and work in the UK. Inevitably, there are some challenges facing the profession from the increased number of graduates, not least the availability of jobs in practice, but is being in practice really the only career option for a vet?

I am the first to admit that, at the tender age of 16, when I was faced with A-level options and degrees, I didn’t have the first clue what to choose. The reasons I aimed to become a vet included that vets can work indoors, or out; vets can pursue specialisation, research, business, academia, administrative or clinical work; vets can work abroad; vets can continue learning and developing throughout their working life; vets are hands-on; vets tend not to have desk jobs; and last, but not least, vets get to work with animals and their owners.

The versatility of a veterinary career has been proven to me as I have gone through the degree, graduated and begun to explore the job market. As a parliamentary intern, I keep discovering vets employed in roles I never would have expected; only a few weeks ago I enjoyed an article about Joanna Reid (VR, March 22, 2014, vol 174, Vet Record Careers, p 1) and her work in humanitarian services for the UK Department for International Development. The reason we are so versatile is because we are trained, among other things, to be formidable communicators, to problem solve, to consider the probability of various scenarios, to manage people, to work at pace and/or under stress, to use an evidence base for our decisions and to keep an open mind. These are incredibly useful, transferable skills. I don’t want to detract from our core work, but I want to emphasise that a veterinary degree does not limit you solely to practice.

So, what does a vet do in the House of Lords? I help Lord Trees keep abreast of the vast array of parliamentary business, external media sources and briefings. We help to scrutinise legislation that may impact upon the veterinary profession, agricultural industry or the wider public. We question the Government about its policy and future plans, and when there is an issue that needs more attention we can table a debate. I am delighted to be volunteering each week with the lovely PDSA team at Bow to keep to my roots and, in the meantime, my alternate skillset continues to develop.

Never quite all work and no play – I am just home from a wonderful rendition of ‘The Winter’s Tale’ at the Royal Opera House. Now, I shall ‘exit . . . pursued by a bear’.
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Hannah Jordan

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