Pros and cons of working for a charity

David Grant, who was director of the RSPCA’s Harmsworth Hospital for 25 years, discusses the pros and cons of working in the charity sector

Traditionally, working for a charity in the small animal sector was not considered a ‘proper’ job, and the same adjective was often used by clients of the charity to describe veterinary surgeons working in private practice. Times have changed and working in a charity clinic is beginning to develop into its own speciality. The term ‘shelter medicine’ is particularly used in the USA and is gaining usage here in the UK.

Why would anyone want to work for a charity when the rewards in private small animal practice are potentially much greater? The answers depend on whether the work is going to be short term, say, less than three years, or long term, perhaps more than 10 years and potentially leading to retirement age.

Short-term option

Pros

■ Pay. For a recent graduate the pay is reasonable and compares favourably with what is available in the private sector. There may be additional payments for working in London for example, or in lieu of antisocial hours (if these are worked, although in some charities this work is increasingly outsourced).

■ Hours of work. These are usually less than in private practice with no evening surgeries. A 35- to 40-hour week is typical. With no evening surgeries, this allows time for a more active social life or family life. It is conducive to a good work/life balance.

■ Working in a team. Many jobs involve working with young colleagues in a team of five vets or more. Learning how best to work in a team is crucial, as the caseload is high and potentially stressful. It is important to respect your colleagues’ strengths and weaknesses.

■ Senior colleagues acting as mentors. Usually there is a good management structure in place where everyone has regular appraisals and receives help with clinical cases in order to build up expertise.

■ Caseload. Charity hospitals and clinics are usually busy and vets rapidly accumulate clinical experience. Learning new procedures, sometimes on an almost daily basis, is very enjoyable. Many different diseases will be seen in a reasonably short time, within a year or so.

■ Making a difference. There is the opportunity of helping those far less fortunate than yourself and making a difference to the welfare of their pets.

■ Social life. There is usually a good social life within the veterinary and nursing teams. Loneliness, which can be a factor in the early careers of vets, should not be a problem.

■ Focus on the future. For those who are not sure whether a lifelong commitment to small animal medicine and surgery is for them, a spell in charity work may help to focus their minds and help them decide between charity and private practice or some other branch of the profession.

Cons

■ Consultation times. Five-minute consultations used to be common and still exist at busy times. Ten-minute consultations are now more usual. It still does not allow much time to build up relationships with clients (a crucial element in successful private practice). As a result, communication skills may be less well developed over time. In addition, clinical shortcuts (on cost grounds) will often need to be made.

■ Following up of cases. In a busy clinic a vet may do the initial examination and admit the animal for further investigation. It is quite easy to lose contact with the case, and not learn from it as others in the team will take over. In addition, close contact with the client, with phone calls at every stage of the procedure, may not occur as things can be too busy. Therefore, a danger exists of neglecting people skills in favour of getting the job done as efficiently as possible within the constraints of time.

■ Difficult clients. Difficult or unpleasant people occur in all aspects of life. Whereas the majority of clients using charitable veterinary services are decent and appreciative there are some that are not. A charity veterinary surgeon will need to get used to occa-
sional abuse and neglect of an animal due to ignorance and cruelty. It can be difficult at times to care about your fellow humans and that could affect your relationship with other clients and your all-important people skills.

- Caseload. Although a busy caseload is usually one of the reasons vets (particularly early on in their careers) cite as a major incentive to working in a charity hospital, it is important to focus on the best areas in which to obtain expertise. Building up expertise in fracture repair, for example, is useful in the charity sector, where there are many cases, but less so on return to private practice where the cases are fewer and more likely to be referred to specialists. Vets may think that the caseload makes certificate examinations easier. Time constraints and the need to get through the large operating lists means that it can be quite difficult to study for and pass certificate examinations. The degree of support varies between charities.

- No on-call. Not being exposed to emergency work could be considered a disadvantage. Many interesting cases crop up out of emergency work could be considered a disadvantage, sick pay, holiday pay and pension arrangements, and there will also be a pay scale allowing for future pay calculation. There are opportunities with all the charities for non-clinical managerial roles. These attract higher salaries but due consideration needs to be given to the prospect of giving up the contact with owners and their pets, which for many is a key factor for enjoyment of the profession.

- Work/life balance. The hours per week worked plus absence of long evening surgery hours and in some cases no on-call lend themselves to a good work/life balance.

- Learning curve. With the large caseload it should be possible to decide what aspects of work you want to take further. Some charity veterinary surgeons have built an international reputation in areas such as early neutering, anaesthesia regimes in young animals and preventative medicine, including so-called shelter medicine in general. This branch of veterinary medicine is set to develop as a speciality encompassing all the core elements of good animal welfare and the time is ripe to take on these challenges.

- Cruelty. Paradoxically, although for some this is an unpleasant part of the job, forensic medicine is potentially satisfying if the animal can be made better and subsequently rehomed. Forensic medicine is increasingly a speciality in its own right.

**Cons**

- You are not your own boss. Clearly, anyone wishing to be self-employed and build a practice either as sole owner or in partnership may not be satisfied with charity work in the long term.

- Pay. You will have no say on how much you are paid and in times of economic recessions there may be a pay freeze.

- Getting left behind. There is a likelihood of being left behind in ‘high-tech’ areas such as MRI scanning, other advanced diagnostic and surgical procedures and other speciality areas. Being on a learning curve is an important aspect of job satisfaction, and unless a speciality supported by the charity is identified and followed up, boredom could set in.

It is advisable to do some research before applying for a charity job. It is a good idea to have some realistic goals that could come out at interview. Wanting to make a difference to the welfare of animals owned by poor people is very important. Clinically, becoming proficient at neutering (a core activity of all the charities), getting experience of common ailments, learning to do basic surgical procedures and doing them well are desirable and achievable goals in the first year or so. A year of previous experience in private practice is beneficial although not absolutely essential. It can be quite daunting for a new graduate to be faced with an outpatient clinic of more than 30 people. Some experience makes that easier.

Finally, personal happiness should be the number 1 priority in professional life. Too often it is forgotten about in the quest for perfection in knowledge and procedures. As a result, some vets might not find time to work out how to achieve greater personal and professional happiness. There is a great deal of flexibility in the veterinary profession and many possible niches. A spell in charity practice will almost inevitably be useful in helping focus on career development.

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**Diary of a parliamentary intern**

**Hannah Jordan, parliamentary intern to Lord Trees, describes the State Opening of Parliament and the events that have happened since.**

It is back to business in Westminster at last. On June 4, Her Majesty the Queen came to open Parliament, Black Rod had the Commons’ door slammed in his face and a small pageboy fainted. On my way across to the Palace I was complimented on my dress before being asked if I had realised I was wearing UKIP colours. Whoops. There was lots of finery and flummery: one seriously sparkly crown; something that looked conspicuously like the sorting hat (of Harry Potter fame), but I am reliably informed was ‘The Cap of Maintenance’, a sword (also sparkly); a lot of men dressed up as coats of arms and carrying what looked remarkably like wands; and plenty of men bedecked in feathered hats. It was all very exciting.

Since the return to normality, Lord Trees has been appointed to the EU Sub Committee for Agriculture, Fisheries, Environment and Energy, and we are hoping that, among other things, we may be able to raise concerns regarding EU diclofenac use and vulture populations (see letters VR, May 31, 2014, vol 174, p 562).

A particularly interesting meeting on antimicrobial resistance at the Foundation for Science and Technology highlighted the scale of the resistance problem and ranked it with climate change as a threat to the human race. As well as improvements in medical and veterinary use of antibiotics, the need for quicker, more effective diagnostics was identified as a priority. Dame Sally Davies, the Chief Medical Officer, urged us all to support development of such diagnostics through the Longitude prize candidates (http://antibiotic-action.com/longitude-prize-2014-please-vote/).

Finally, we have a (short) oral question on June 25 to question the Government about any changes it may have planned to the bovine TB strategy following the pilot culls. We are also in contention for a balloted debate on food security, with particular reference to land use and food production. If we manage to win a slot I will write about it in more depth, but we would be grateful to hear veterinary thoughts and opinions on this subject. In the meantime, I must busy myself skimming through the Infrastructure Bill and the Consumer Rights Bill to see if there is anything we could or should be sticking our nose in to.