Making a business of CPD

David Babington is managing director of Improve International. Here, he describes how he made CPD his business

THE year is 1981 and I’m in the main hall at the Royal Veterinary College in Camden Town. The principal, Alan Betts, is welcoming the new intake of students to begin their undergraduate training. I am one of 70, a roughly equal mix of males and females. My ambition is to become a large animal vet.

Fast forward 32 years and I am still a vet, but I’m sitting in a small animal referral hospital just outside Copenhagen, Denmark, visiting our partners who are running modular programmes in small animal medicine and surgery. I am the managing director of a Europe-wide veterinary training company.

How did that happen?

I knew from an early age that I wanted to be a vet. The success of the James Herriot books and TV programmes in the 1970s no doubt helped to fuel the desire and I really enjoyed being out in the countryside and visiting farms.

I qualified in 1986 and then worked as an assistant vet in a mixed animal hospital in Alton, Hampshire. Finally, I was a real vet with a crisp, clean brown coat and a Mini Traveller as a practice car. I remember an early visit to see a sick horse and being greeted by the owner with the nervous question: ‘Are you the vet?’ I did manage to say ‘yes’, but only just!

After a couple of years I moved back to London and joined a progressive entirely small animal practice in Pinner. I had become a little disillusioned with farm animal practice in that environment filled a much-needed gap and provided important training in key clinical areas such as diagnostic imaging, dentistry, soft-tissue and orthopaedic surgery. Some of the early practical courses were held at a nearby university medical school. This proved interesting as we had to take delegates through the human dissection rooms to access the lecture facilities. We had to remember to warn them! In 2002 we moved to our own training centre in Cricklade, north of Swindon, where we had our own wet-lab and lecture facilities, together with office space.

In 2003, we linked up with the European School of Veterinary Postgraduate Studies (ESVPS), a move that enabled us to help vets in practice to study for an achievable postgraduate qualification, the GPCert. We then started to look overseas and, in 2006, ran our first modular courses outside the UK. In partnership with a veterinary wholesaler in Norway and a CPD company in Italy we ran two successful programmes in small animal practice. I was contacted by a Portuguese veterinarian and this led to the establishment of Improve International was born.

Interactive Modules for Progressive Veterinary Education (IMProVE) was established in May 1998 by three likeminded vets who had qualified with me from the RVC. By this time I was running three small animal practices and had started a veterinary magazine called ‘Veterinary Scope’. When my friends invited me to get involved, I jumped at the opportunity. I started off as marketing director, helping to develop the company while continuing to practise. Evening classes helped me get to grips with marketing.

We expanded the portfolio, adding a series of short one- and two-day courses while increasing the number of more in-depth modular programmes. We started to run small group, practical courses and found these were very popular. The wet-lab environment filled a much-needed gap and provided important training in key clinical areas such as diagnostic imaging, dentistry, soft-tissue and orthopaedic surgery. Some of the early practical courses were held at a nearby university medical school. This proved interesting as we had to take delegates through training sessions, some of which involved hands-on practical instruction, but felt there was a lack of structured training to help me study for the examination. In 1990, Alison and I were offered the chance to purchase a small animal branch practice in my home town of Swindon. The next eight years were a whirlwind of practice development – we set up two new practices from scratch – as well as starting a family.

New opportunity

In 1994 one of our practices suffered a major fire, which caused me to rethink our future. I was concerned about the potential vulnerability of the business and how dependent its success was on Alison or me. I decided to research other business opportunities.

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Today, we are based at a state-of-the-art conference and training centre, Alexandra House, in Wroughton near Swindon. We run more than 50 modular programmes across 13 European countries. Thanks to the recent
partnership between Improve, ESVPS and Harper Adams University, vets and nurses can now gain a university qualification by completing a modular training programme and passing the examination. Vets can gain a postgraduate certificate and then build on this over time to achieve a postgraduate diploma and, finally, a masters degree in advanced veterinary practice sciences. More than 1500 vets have now achieved a general practitioner certificate from ESVPS, gaining new knowledge and skills to apply in practice, and this year we will launch programmes in Holland, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand.

For me, the change in career direction has proved very satisfying. I am still passionate about being a vet, but am using my skills in a different way to help the profession as a whole develop in new ways. After all, the UK profession is in transition. With new vet schools on the horizon, corporate practice expansion and an increasing number of foreign vets looking for jobs here, the competitive environment for both new and experienced vets is much tougher. I believe that studying for a postgraduate qualification will soon become the norm and that the majority of vets will need to develop special interests within their particular species focus.

The good news is that there is much more choice available when it comes to CPD and it can be delivered in a flexible way with minimal time away from practice.

Ten-minute chat

After qualifying, Jenny Stavisky worked in mixed practice before completing a PhD in epidemiology and virology. Now a clinical lecturer in shelter medicine at the University of Nottingham’s Centre for Evidence-Based Veterinary Medicine, she studies the health and welfare of unowned animals.

How did your interest in shelter medicine come about?

I’ve volunteered at shelters since I was a kid, and there were always waifs and strays at our house – my mum would end up bringing things home, too; my poor dad used to tear his hair out. Once I qualified, I worked in mixed practice but in my holidays I started doing some overseas trap-neuter-return (TNR) with a small charity called the Kismet Account. This morphed over time into training trips to engage local charities, vets and welfare workers.

Meanwhile, I started my PhD in epidemiology and virology, which involved spending quite a bit of time in shelters. It was at that time that I met Kate Hurley, who was one of the first shelter medicine practitioners in the USA. I heard about the things she did and realised that someone really ought to do them in the UK – and that if nobody else was doing so, maybe I could. I was also fortunate enough to meet Rachel Dean, director of the Centre for Evidence-based Veterinary Medicine (CEVM) at Nottingham; who was also interested in shelter medicine. She was planning to fund a post in shelter medicine and I was determined that I was going to get it! Since then we’ve worked closely together to learn about shelter medicine, and spread what we’ve learnt within the profession and also within the curriculum at the vet school.

What kind of activities does your job involve?

I spend quite a lot of time visiting shelters and finding out what they do, and about their problems and concerns. I also get involved with clinical work, and that will be increasing as I now have a clinical lecturership. I’ll be spending more time out in practice with the final-year students, helping them to get hands-on with first-opinion work, with a strong shelter/charity client component. I also give some lectures, practicals and facilitation at the vet school – my main interests are in shelter medicine and infectious disease, but I’m involved in a variety of teaching relevant to first-opinion knowledge and skills.

The rest of my time is spent carrying out research into population health, welfare and infectious disease problems, both with colleagues here at Nottingham and further afield. I’m also part of the CEVM, which focuses on delivering relevant research to clinicians in a useable format to facilitate evidence-based decision-making to improve patient care (www.nottingham.ac.uk/cevm/).

So on any given day, I might be going out to a shelter with students, teaching, supervising research projects and spending some time doing stats in front of my computer – every day is different.

What do you like about your job?

Everything! It has tons of variety and every day I learn new things. Our students are great; they are smart, motivated, lovely people and being around them is really inspirational. Plus the people I work with are a joy – I have the best job in the world.

What do you not like?

Nothing – I know how lucky I am.

Why is your job important?

I think it’s great that shelter medicine has been acknowledged as a topic of importance in its own right. I really hope that I can use this job to continue educating myself and others to improve the health and wellbeing of animals in shelters, and also of the people caring for them.

What advice would you give to others who are interested in this subject?

I would say get out and do it – there’s always somewhere to volunteer if you can’t commit full time. And join the Association of Charity Vets – it’s a great forum for people working in this area to exchange ideas and push the discipline forward.

What’s the best piece of advice you were ever given?

Try not to worry. It wastes energy, and most of the things you worry about never happen.

What was your proudest moment?

Watching my mum graduate with her Open University degree, aged 67, having left school 52 years before.

... and your most embarrassing?

My most embarrassing moment is quite difficult to choose as I seem to have a bit of a knack for that kind of thing. However, I will share what was possibly my poorest piece of judgement, which was to think that running the London Marathon four weeks after fracturing my foot would be a good idea. It’s never healed right, and I did it in a rubbish time, too.
Ten-minute chat

Jenny Stavisky

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