Helping veterinary graduates navigate the PDP

Agnes Winter is one of four postgraduate deans who support recent veterinary graduates during their professional development phase (PDP). Here, she describes the difference that the PDP has made to the working life of recent graduates, some of the difficulties they encounter and how she can help.

AFTER I retired as head of the department of veterinary clinical science at the University of Liverpool – where I had worked for more than 20 years – I thought that being a postgraduate dean would be an ideal position for me. I enjoy seeing young people develop professionally and gain confidence in what they do, and I wanted to help in this process. The postgraduate deans are responsible for monitoring the online progress of graduates and reviewing and signing off the PDP record, once the graduate submits their declaration form.

The PDP was introduced by the RCVS in 2007, and it has made quite a difference to the working life of recent graduates. Before the PDP, the level of support available for new graduates was very variable compared with, say, doctors and dentists. Both of those professions receive a huge amount of support in comparison, and the RCVS wanted to develop a system of structured support and self-assessment for veterinary graduates to take part in once they left university.

The PDP is a simple and inexpensive way of providing some structured support – it provides a pathway to meeting Year 1 competences (the clinical and general professional skills and attributes that a veterinary surgeon should have acquired after about a year in practice) and is also useful for employers so that they know what level of support they should be providing for graduates.

It is a bit more difficult to gauge how much of an impact the PDP has had from the employer’s perspective – we still hear of graduates who get little support – but I think that this is gradually changing, and some employers find the PDP a helpful structure around which to base appraisal of the development of their new graduates. The newer generation of employers is generally aware of the value of CPD and the need to support the next generation of vets.

Before the introduction of the PDP, there were, of course, good practices that provided support to graduates, with regular appraisals and lots of help where necessary, while other graduates were just thrown into the deep end, and provided with little support or feedback on how they were getting on. Although this does still happen, with the PDP new graduates are more aware of the support that they should be offered and can be more discerning when it comes to deciding the type of practice they would like to work in.

Some graduates take the PDP very seriously, they often write extremely good notes and contact the deans to make sure that they are on the right track, so that when they apply to complete their PDP, signing them off is a straightforward process. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a minority of graduates who really need to be pushed to produce anything at all.
However, some of those who contact me need some guidance on what is meant by self-assessment and reflection on their progress, although my overall impression is that this is getting better.

The amount of contact I have with graduates tends to be sporadic. The other postgraduate deans and I send a welcome message to each graduate when they first join the PDP. We develop a dialogue with some graduates and it is always gratifying when they get in touch to ask for help and advice, particularly when they say the process has been a positive one.

Issues
Problems can arise with the PDP if the graduate does not encounter the wide range of clinical work that is expected in general practice and is needed to complete the phase. Some internships, for example, are a problem because they are rather restricted in the type of work the new graduates are doing, making it difficult to gain the experience they need to meet their Year 1 competences.

The same issue applies to graduates who go straight into very specialised types of clinical work, although the number who do this is small. The PDP tends to be geared towards either small animal, farm animal, equine or mixed practice work, so those graduates who go into specialised fields – for example, pig or poultry work – can struggle to get the breadth of experience required. I make sure to give them a bit more flexibility about meeting the requirements of the PDP and the Year 1 competences but, in return, I expect a lot more information from them in their PDP notes.

Note taking
The notes that go alongside the record of what graduates have achieved are the most important part of the PDP. We don’t want a great amount of detail but, as part of the reflection and self-assessment process, we want to get a sense of how they feel about what they are doing, how their confidence is growing and how they are progressing. We do not just want a list of procedures they have carried out – as well as achievements, we want the notes to show how they might realise it could have been done better, areas where they need some more CPD, and so on.

Many graduates struggle to write the kind of notes that we are looking for in order to evaluate their progress, although we are getting better at telling them what we need. For example, we signpost graduates to the PDP section of the RCVS website (www.rcvs.org.uk/pdp) where they can find examples of the kind of reflective notes that we are looking for.

Employment or personal issues
It is important to note that, as a postgraduate dean, I can’t help with employment or personal issues, but I will always refer people on to organisations where they can get further help and advice.

Link with learning
Last year the RCVS introduced the student experience log (SEL), which allows veterinary students to record their learning experiences at university through the online professional development record (PDR). The introduction of the SEL means that students are getting used to the idea of self-reflection and progression before they graduate and enter the profession. It also means that, along with the PDP and CPD throughout their career, vets now have a lifelong learning record for all stages of their career.

If you are a recent graduate or an employer you can find out more about the PDP by visiting www.rcvs.org.uk/pdp. The BVA also produces guidance on the PDP for employers and employees. BVA members can download the guidance from www.bva.co.uk/publications_and_resources/leaflets.aspx

Diary of a parliamentary intern

February saw a mixed bag of issues discussed in the House of Lords, as Hannah Jordan, parliamentary intern to Lord Trees, reports

This month in the House of Lords began with issues surrounding badgers and bovine TB. After a brief foray through exotic pets and animal welfare, we explored neglected tropical diseases (NTDs) and food security, revisited welfare at slaughter and finished the month thoroughly lost in the depths of the Palace of Westminster.

In late January, the Parliamentary Scientific Committee held a meeting to broadly discuss badgers and the part they play in the UK bovine tuberculosis control strategy. Two weeks later, the Badger and Cattle Vaccination Initiative (BACVI) was launched by Brian May in a tiny, packed meeting room. Its aim is to generate sufficient funds and volunteers to develop five-year badger vaccination programmes in the areas worst hit by bovine TB.

In the meantime, we wait with bated breath for the Independent Expert Panel report on the pilot culls.

The sale and welfare of exotic pets in the UK was the subject of the most recent meeting of the Associate Parliamentary Group for Animal Welfare. There were firm views on both sides, but an important point was made about the value of taking the discussion further. It would be marvellous to see a collaborative effort between advocates of feline, canine and exotic companion animal welfare.

In February, Lord Trees spoke in Baroness Hayman’s debate on the progress made towards combating NTDs since the 2012 London declaration to urge the Government to exert pressure on the developed nations that have not already committed funds. I was interested to learn that only 0.6 per cent of overseas health development assistance is directed at combating NTDs, as well as the limited number of countries that have pledged funding.

There has been a constant stream of coverage in the press on food security and agricultural development including, but not limited to, antimicrobial resistance, the horsemeat scandal and, specifically, the pros and cons of large-scale farming. This last debate has opened my eyes to numerous factors (including animal welfare, environment, food prices and infrastructure) that will sway any political decision made on large-scale farming.

Discussion of welfare at slaughter has rumbled on since the debate in the House of Lords in January (VR, January 25, 2014, vol 174, pp B1-B2). The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Beef and Lamb and the APPG for British Jews have both met to discuss the subject, and Lord Trees commented briefly on Radio 4’s Farming Today programme. In Europe, the Danish Government has decided to follow the example of Sweden, Switzerland, Norway and Iceland and has banned the non-stun slaughter of animals for production of Halal or Kosher meat. We now await the European Commission’s report, which is due in April, on labelling products according to their standard of slaughter welfare.

In between all the excitement, I have busied myself investigating where all the doors and staircases in the Palace of Westminster – that I hadn’t yet acquainted myself with – end up. Thus far, I have spent a considerable amount of time lost, but have also discovered some nifty shortcuts.
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