Not the retiring kind . . .

Achieving partnership was an early goal for Tim Davies. Having spent 20 years building up a group of practices, he decided to sell most of them and think about retiring. However, he was soon approached by CVS and is now its veterinary director. Nonetheless, he still makes time to practise surgery every week.

I qualified from Liverpool University in 1983 and took my first job in mixed but mainly large animal practice in Wales. Farm practice is a fantastic training ground for a new graduate because, once you’re on the farm, you have to cope with whatever eventuality you find with whatever you have in the car. It taught me resilience and self-reliance, which are vital in our profession.

I soon realised that my real interest lay in small animal surgery and I just didn’t see enough cases in mixed practice. I moved next to a leading small animal and equine practice in Somerset, where I could start to develop my skills. But settling in Somerset wasn’t to be and, after a few months, I was invited to join the practice where I had done much of my EMS placement and there I developed a greater interest in small animal surgery.

Unfortunately, the practice was in an area which was, at the time, not particularly prosperous, and an affluent client base willing to invest in their pets, is a prerequisite for a successful surgical career. With this in mind, I moved to the Home Counties and, before long, I was in Wokingham, Berkshire, running a new one-vet practice as part of a group of four veterinary hospitals. I became a partner in 1986, two-and-a-half years after qualifying. Achieving partnership early was always my goal because I felt it would help me take some control over the direction of my career — and so it proved. I bought out the other partners in my hospital and introduced a new partner two years later.

We worked hard and grew the practice, now called Nine Mile Veterinary Group. By 1999, we had five sites around Reading, employing 17 vets. Unfortunately, my partner and I then disagreed about future strategy and concluded that the best option was to split the business. So, in 1999, I found myself with the Nine Mile Veterinary Hospital and Burghfield Veterinary Surgery, and six vets.

I did what came naturally — I started building a group again! In 2000, I opened new practices in Fleet and Farnborough. In 2005, I bought several practices around Guildford and we were soon back up to eight sites and 16 vets.

So often in life you don’t know what you had until you don’t have it, and, looking back, these were great times. We had a strong surgical ethos, I took a certificate in small animal surgery in 2005 and encouraged staff to do the same. Today, former Nine Mile employees are in referral practice in the UK and around the world. I have always been an early adopter of new technology. We had an in-house lab in 1987 and we installed a practice management system in 1986. We installed digital radiography in 2003 and an MRI unit in 2004.

By 2005, I was also involved with veterinary politics and was privileged to be a university visitor for the RCVS, a privilege that became a challenge in 2007 when I was part of the RCVS team visiting the University of Bristol, which highlighted the need for major improvements. The RCVS advice was ultimately well received and major investment from the university has greatly strengthened the Bristol vet school. I also served as a practice standards inspector for the RCVS for several years and this allowed me to meet many other practitioners and visit many practices. I was president of the British Veterinary Hospitals Association in 2007 and this sparked an interest in practice design which continues to this day.

Time catches up with all of us and, after 22 years as a practice owner, I was tired and in need of a change. In 2007, I sold six of the eight practices to CVS, though I kept and, in fact, still own a share of the Burghfield and Goring practices. My plan was to take a back-seat and think about retiring altogether.

As it turned out, CVS had other plans. I was asked to help some of its under-performing practices and I seemed to have a knack for turning them round. In 2009, I was appointed director of clinical services and, in 2010, CVS veterinary director, the role I hold today. It’s a varied role, which evolves as the company grows. I sit on the company’s executive board and participate in the development and implementation of our strategic vision. I’m particularly involved, for instance, in designing practices and planning major building works and refurbishments. I try to visit all our new acquisitions and endlessly discuss where we should expand with other directors.

I also chair our clinical advisory committee and am responsible for clinical governance. I’m a great supporter of the RCVS Practice Standards Scheme and we help our practices to achieve the standards it sets. The scheme will, of course, be relaunched in 2014.

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2015 and I’m waiting with some trepidation to see what changes are made.

These days CVS employs 650 vets and 1800 nurses, receptionists and administrative staff, so the development of training and career pathways is something I’m particularly focused on. I’m proud of our graduate and second-year graduate schemes although we constantly strive to improve them. Next year we hope the content will be even more case-based and practical. With the importance of actual qualifications over experience growing, graduates completing our programme can now move straight onto a certificate programme and, potentially, become an advanced practitioner five years after qualification.

I’m a passionate supporter of the ‘middle tier’ and am disappointed that the old-style certificate has not been given the recognition it deserves by the RCVS.

CVS offers a variety of career pathways. Vets can become clinical directors of small practices then grow to take on larger groups. If their interest is management, then a regional director role is possible. For colleagues taking on management roles we run an aspirational leadership programme, which teaches them about practice finance and the people management techniques needed to run successful businesses. I teach most of the practice management modules in the course. Clinically, we hope to develop pathways from graduation, through internship and residency within CVS referral practices. Our vision is that vets will ultimately move right through from graduation to become boarded specialists within CVS.

Oh, and I still practise surgery weekly. It’s important to me, and I think it’s important for any vet running a business to keep in touch with life as a clinician. I’ve learnt so many things over the years and I still learn every day, but three things stand out:

- Get the clinical side of your practice right and business will follow. I’ve worked with many practices over the years, which had been judged to be ‘underperforming’ financially. On closer examination, it was almost always the case that there were issues around clinical performance and, once these were resolved, business invariably improved.
- Value your people. We have some great people working in our profession. What’s important is to take time to consider what their individual qualities are and ensure they receive the right opportunities to thrive. There are so many options these days, both in the corporate sector and outside.
- Be ambitious! I was always driven and keen to get on and I think we need more ambition, particularly from women, today – after all, we are increasingly a female profession. We need the next generation of female vets, and their male colleagues, to step forward and provide the right opportunities to thrive. There are so many options these days, both in the corporate sector and outside.

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Ten-minute chat

Isabelle Vets on the island of Guernsey was the first practice to pledge to raise money for Petsavers under the charity’s 40th anniversary initiative asking practices to pledge to raise £200 annually. Sarah Baird was the vet who signed the practice up

What made you sign the pledge?

Petsavers is a charity that I have always been interested in, ever since my first job – I worked for Tony Barnes in Folkestone for nine years after I qualified in 1985. Tony was very involved with Petsavers, and I can remember spending all day on the Petsavers stand at Crufts promoting the charity. The main surgery at Isabelle Vets was redeveloped in 2013, so we had a tough time coping with building work, and when it was completed we felt that we needed a more positive and outward-looking focus. I like that Petsavers funds research into clinical problems, so that the results can directly affect how we work, and that experimental animals are not used. I had read about the Petsavers £200 pledge and thought that it would be a good idea.

How will the practice raise the money?

So far we haven’t decided definitely how we will raise the money this year, but all of the staff members are keen to get involved. We think that we should play to our strengths, so while two of the vets will be in a relay team competing in the Guernsey marathon in August, the rest of us think that having a cake and craft stall at a summer event would be a good idea.

Tell us about your job

I was born and raised in Guernsey, so after working in Folkestone I ‘came home’ and have been working at Isabelle Vets ever since. We are a mixed practice with eight vets, but I do only small animal work; I particularly enjoy working with rabbits and other small furries. I also do some administration in the practice, for example, for the Practice Standards Scheme, nurse training and insurance claims, all of which is challenging but (mostly) rewarding.

Why is your job important?

My job is important to me for a number of reasons. I do love working with animals, but also I enjoy working as part of a team with nurses, receptionists and administrative staff, all aiming to provide the best possible service for our clients and their animals. I enjoy using the knowledge and experience that I have gained over the years, and also trying to learn about new techniques and treatments. And I value being part of a practice that gives back to the local community, whether by doing talks for organised groups or in schools, supporting the local animal rescue organisations, or taking part in local events.

What advice would you give to someone considering a similar career?

Do it! I organise the students who come into the practice for work experience and EMS, and I know how hard it is to get into vet school now. I think students have to be realistic about their prospects, they need really good A-level grades, but being a vet is such a worthwhile profession. But I think that many students don’t realise what an advanced and technical job veterinary nursing is, and I think this is also a career that they should consider – I am often in awe of the knowledge and abilities of our veterinary nurses.

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

Regarding veterinary work, I can’t remember exactly who said this to me (it was one of the vets who I saw practice with) and it was two bits of advice: ‘Be honest with yourself. If you don’t know what’s wrong with an animal or you can’t do something, ask for advice or help; veterinary medicine is about team work, not individual glory.’ Also ‘Common things commonly occur’ – don’t go looking for the unusual.’

...and your most embarrassing moment?

I was still quite a new vet, and it was a really busy day. I had x-rayed a dog with a forelimb lameness – I can’t remember the exact details of the case now, but the dog needed a carpal arthrodesis. When I was explaining this to the owner, I couldn’t remember this term and so I said that we had to do an operation to make the bones in this joint all stick together so that it would be stable. It turned out that the owner was an orthopaedic surgeon.
Ten-minute chat

Sarah Baird

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