Engaged with ethics

Vanessa Ashall’s first job was in mixed practice and was everything she hoped it would be. When the time came to seek further challenges she applied for a job as a Named Veterinary Surgeon and became fascinated by ethics. This lead to her researching the ethical issues surrounding companion animal blood and organ donation.

I was brought up on a smallholding and loved learning at school so a veterinary degree was a natural choice for me. My plans went well until I suffered a disappointment with my A level grades, which caused me to pause and reconsider. I still felt determined and decided to reapply with fast track A levels in English and French rather than chemistry, which seemed to suit me much better. This was a rather unusual entry for vet school at the time, so I was relieved to be offered a place at Liverpool university in 1995.

I loved the veterinary degree and found the challenge and reward of learning, combined with the fun and interest of practical work, completely absorbing. I graduated in 2000 with a commendation in small animal studies and was determined to make the most of what I had learned and get back to my roots with a job in mixed practice. My first position was as an assistant in a four-vet rural practice in south Yorkshire.

This job was everything I had hoped it would be, but as the initial daily challenges faced by a new graduate became more routine I felt I needed another goal. I did not think I had found my niche and was not inspired to study for a specialist qualification. I decided to spend a year making a round-the-world trip, working as a small animal locum in both Australia and New Zealand. It was amazing to discover how easy it was to use my skills abroad and, compared with other travellers’ sources of income, I was able to work intermittently and fund a great adventure.

When I returned to the UK I realised that I wanted a different type of job and fate took a hand with an advertisement in Veterinary Record for a Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS) at the Waltham Centre for Pet Nutrition. I was inspired by the challenge of taking responsibility for a large population of research animals, working with scientists and business people and taking on additional legal and ethical responsibilities. The recruitment process was a completely different experience from an informal chat in a veterinary clinic, but I was excited by the business’s interest in my need for personal growth and the opportunity for a change of direction.

Turning point

This position was a turning point for me. I was fascinated by my role on the ethical review panel and, when I learnt during NVS training that vets could gain a professional qualification in welfare science, ethics and law, I finally felt I had found what I was looking for. I joined the Animal Welfare Science, Ethics and Law Veterinary Association (AWSELVA), which was invaluable in helping me find a supervisor and sources of information for my certificate. At work, I was passionate about protecting the interests of the animals in my care and, while it would have been possible to move into a non-clinical role within this organisation, I soon realised that I was very much still a vet at heart. When I again felt the need for a fresh challenge, I decided to use my clinical experience and training in ethics and took up an exciting new position as veterinary ethics and welfare supervisor for the newly launched Pet Blood Bank UK in 2007.

Starting work with the Pet Blood Bank so soon after its launch gave me a unique experience in watching its rapid growth and the complex legislative, ethical and social boundaries that this area of clinical medicine experiences. Pet Blood Bank supported me in completing my certificate in welfare science, ethics and law, but I soon found I wanted to learn more about ethics. I was
particularly interested in the ethical questions I had faced working both in research and as part of a donation team, so I decided to enrol part-time on a Master’s degree in medical ethics and law at Keele university. It was fascinating to be taught within a group of medical professionals and to discuss clinical and research ethics in a way that was at times so familiar and at other times so different from how I understood them within my own profession.

As soon as I had started writing and reading about ethics in an academic environment I knew that I wanted to make this my career. I now held a position on the A WSEL V A committee and continued to use networking opportunities within this organisation to plan a career in veterinary ethics; however, it was clear that funding for veterinary ethics research was not easy to identify.

I met Pru Hobson-West, who lectures in welfare, ethics and society at the University of Nottingham’s School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, at an A WSEL V A conference. Spending time with her and talking about the relationship between animals, ethics and society helped me to see the multiple dimensions of the questions I wanted to explore. With additional support from the dean of the vet school, Gary England, and the director of the Centre for Applied Bioethics, Kate Millar, I put together a funding application for a Clinical Fellowship in Ethics and Society from the Wellcome Trust. My project would explore the ethical and social dimensions of companion animal blood and organ donation.

The funding application and the subsequent interviews were very challenging and, ultimately, it took over two years to secure an award. It was certainly a huge risk and, during an uncertain year, I worked as a research assistant at the Centre for Applied Bioethics, researching and publishing on animal research ethics for a European project. However, it was a risk worth taking and I became only the second vet to be awarded a Wellcome Trust Clinical Fellowship in Ethics and Society in 2013. We hosted the 2014 A WSEL V A conference at Nottingham and it was a great pleasure to finally speak about my own work to this audience. I graduated with distinction from Keele university in 2014 and am currently relishing having the support and space to finally explore some fundamental questions not just about the donation of healthy animal tissues, but also about our profession’s direction and future.

My career path has been the result of a relentless need to question and learn but also a genuine passion for animals and an enjoyment of hard work. I can see so many other avenues I could have taken and maybe more yet to come. A veterinary degree is certainly a qualification that opens up far more than just one career opportunity.

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