Undergraduate masterclass in veterinary public health

Veterinary public health is essential for protecting and promoting human health and yet is rarely at the top of the list of career choices for veterinary students. To raise awareness of the opportunities available to them in this field, the Veterinary Public Health Association is continuing the week-long masterclass started by Jill and Geoff Nute, offering students the chance to learn about the food production pathway. Lewis Grant fills in the background.

In the last two years of their degree courses, veterinary students can gain experience of meat production and processing by spending several days in appropriate premises under the supervision of Official Veterinarians (OVs) who attend such premises. Guidance in veterinary public health for UK veterinary students is contained in a publication called ‘Getting Experience in the Food Sector: Meat Production and Processing’, which is produced by the Government Veterinary Surgeons network, the Veterinary Public Health Association (VPHA) and the British Meat Processors Association (representing the UK meat industry). This gives participating students indicators regarding topics for consideration during their time spent at the various production sites.

Since 2011, visits to abattoirs and other food-producing establishments have been part of the core curriculum for veterinary students in the UK and not left to extramural studies alone. Practical experience in abattoirs is crucial to providing undergraduate veterinary students with the skills necessary to satisfy the Day 1 competences required for accreditation by the RCVS in the UK and by the European Association of Establishments for Veterinary Education.

Veterinary public health is an area of speciality in the profession that is often overlooked by undergraduates who are more attracted to disciplines providing direct involvement with domestic pets and farm animals or horses. However, for several years, students who wished to develop their knowledge and expertise in veterinary public health have had the opportunity to participate in an excellent masterclass organised by Jill and Geoff Nute near their practice in Cornwall. Students from UK veterinary schools were offered the opportunity to attend the course, which benefited from some financial support and input from the VPHA. I attended the course in a VPHA capacity in 2012 and 2013 and was impressed by the levels of enthusiasm shown by the students, most of whom, as the course progressed, became aware of the opportunities that are available to those wishing to pursue a career in veterinary public health.

Following their retirement in 2013, the Nutes understandably felt they could no longer fulfil the role of running an annual masterclass. The VPHA took the view that it should continue to promote and support the event, and it was agreed that a new annual course should be created, although owing to the logistics involved it could not be held in 2014.

From 2015, the new annual course in veterinary public health will be based in Scotland, around Glasgow university, offering the opportunity to visit relevant sites throughout Scotland. The week-long course is being organised by Alex Seguino from the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh and Noelia Yusta of Glasgow veterinary school, both of whom are VPHA council members. Initially, one student from each of the veterinary schools will be invited to participate. The course will be held in June or July 2015, and the students will be offered university accommodation at Glasgow vet school.

Visits will be organised to a variety of food establishments where public health issues are relevant. Premises to be visited include red and white meat abattoirs, to study a number of slaughter, killing and processing methods, as well as food processing in low-risk (cutting plants) and high-risk (producing ready-to-eat products) environments;
Ten-minute chat

Sara Jones-Richards graduated from the Royal Veterinary College this year. She was recently appointed as an ambassador for the National Sheep Association’s (NSA’s) Next Generation initiative.

What is the Next Generation initiative?
‘Next generation’ aims to encourage and support young people coming into and already involved in the sheep industry. The NSA also holds Young Shepherd of the Year competitions, provides sponsorship and scholarship opportunities and encourages young people to get involved at a regional level.

What does being an ambassador mean?
There are 12 young people in the group who are chosen annually to take part in technical and personal development. We benefit from 10 training days spread throughout the year. These cover things such as sheep health and husbandry, production optimisation, genetic development, brand promotion and market selection, business and time management, adding value to a product, and personal development in the form of presentation skills, conflict resolution and problem solving. In turn, we also aim to promote the sheep sector.

How will you benefit from the skills gained?
The programme of events through the year is great and the industry experts involved have a wealth of knowledge and experience to offer. I want to improve my skills in lamb production through lamb selection and marketing. I would also like to improve our farm’s grassland management and optimise profits though improved grass and forage crop use. Business planning knowledge is particularly important since ewe numbers are growing rapidly at the moment, so a structured financial plan is critical for sustainable growth of the business. I aim to raise the profile of the industry in return for all the great support I have had.

How come you were appointed?
I saw the scheme advertised and decided to apply. I had already been sponsored by the NSA to attend its sheep breeders round table in 2013, and had found out first-hand how friendly and welcoming an organisation it is. I filled in the application, attended an interview and was delighted to find out that I had been successful.

What sheep experience do you have?
I have helped my boyfriend, Hugh, on his sheep farm for the past nine years. Last year I bought my own sheep – pedigree poll Dorsets – and I am thrilled with their performance so far, and Hugh likes the breed so much he has bought some too. I did EMS on sheep farms and opted to do an extra sheep medicine module at college, as well as writing my dissertation on ultrasound scanning of back muscle and fat depth of sheep.

Tell us about your own sheep.
We have three types of sheep: 100 or so Friesland dairy sheep that are milked twice a day and whose milk is used to produce a Greek-style yoghurt for establishments in South-West England and London. Some of the milk is also bought by a local cheese maker.

We also have a flock of Friesland-poll Dorset cross, which are the lambs produced by the milking sheep. All of the dairy ewes are put to Signet-recorded high index pedigree poll Dorset rams. The female offspring are retained for breeding while the male lambs are sold. This cross exploits the good features of both breeds and produces what I hope will prove to be a prolific sheep with good milking and mothering ability, while retaining the Dorset’s capacity to breed out of season yet producing a fast-growing stocky lamb that will finish and grade well off grass. We also have just over 100 poll Dorset ewes and three rams. The flock was established in 2013 and they are hardy, quiet and superb mothers. We bought the best sheep our budget would allow and we are now the proud owners of some superb high index, maedi visna accredited stock, which are a great foundation to build on. We plan to continue Signet recording and aim to use this as a guide in our breeding strategy along with our own on-farm goals and maintenance of the Dorset breed type.

How’s the first veterinary job going?
I am currently looking in small animal practice to bring in some money to start pay off my hefty student debt. So far I have found the locum work very good as it is flexible and can be worked around the sheep, even if it wasn’t what I thought I would end up doing as a first job.

How do sheep fit into your future?
We want to build up the pedigree and Friesland-Dorset flocks, while maintaining the milking flock. We have secured Defra funding this year to allow us to purchase a mobile sheep handling system with an integrated electronic identification (EID) system and auto draft facility. We are delighted to be fortunate enough to benefit from this funding and are excited about getting the kit into action. The system will enable the sheep business to be run and grown with minimal labour costs and will also be beneficial in data collection for performance recording of the stock to help with breeding decisions and flock planning. The idea is to track and assess the performance of breeding stock and their progeny to highlight our highest performing animals and remove any potently underperforming animals from the flock. So, as you can see, sheep are very much in my future plans!

Applications for the 2015 ambassador group open in November and application forms will be available online at www.nsanextgeneration.org.uk
Ten-minute chat

Sara Jones-Richards

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