Ten-minute chat

Tom McNeilly is a principal research scientist at the Moredun Research Institute and president of the Association for Veterinary Teaching and Research Work (AVTRW).

How did you become involved with AVTRW?
During my research career, I have been fortunate to be involved in a number of productive research collaborations with other scientists. As a result of one such collaboration I was approached by David Eckersall, the then AVTRW president (who taught me biochemistry during my veterinary degree) and he asked me to consider becoming junior vice-president, which leads to serving as president the following year. I am now president and enjoying it immensely.

What led you to this point?
I am a principal research scientist at the Moredun Research Institute, working on both government and externally funded projects related to controlling endemic diseases affecting livestock. After graduating from Glasgow with a veterinary degree and an intercalated BSc in biochemistry, I spent four years in mixed practice before deciding to pursue a career in veterinary research. I completed a PhD at the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in 2005 and from there moved to the Moredun, where I run my own research group.

What kind of activities does your job involve?
My job is diverse. It ranges from grant and report writing and other administrative duties to experimental work in the laboratory and on the research farms, giving seminars and other public engagement activities, and communicating with colleagues and other research scientists. It also involves a substantial amount of travel, both to national and international meetings and to visit research collaborators.

What do you like about your job?
My job involves working on a wide range of topics, interacting with intelligent and interesting people all over the world, and, as is the case with research, is constantly changing. As a result it is never boring, and is intellectually stimulating.

What do you not like?
Administrative duties are never very enjoyable, although they are unlikely to reduce. Also, it can be hard to switch off from research during weekends and holidays, although that is a small price to pay for having such an interesting job.

Why is your job important?
To enable the veterinary profession to continue to provide the most up-to-date service to its end-users (patients, clients, farmers, etc), there is a need to translate discoveries made in basic research into practical advice or tools that make a difference in the real world. This is particularly important in the context of global food security, which will in part require more efficient livestock production to feed an ever-growing human population. Veterinarians who have clinical experience and are also skilled in basic research can play a key role in engaging the clinical and research communities in order to facilitate this.

What advice would you give someone considering a similar career?
It’s worthwhile gaining some research experience before fully committing to a career in veterinary research, as it’s possible that it may not be for you.

Undergraduate summer projects and intercalated or masters degrees are particularly useful in this regard.

For veterinary graduates considering a career in research, I would strongly advise them to practise for at least a year. What makes a qualified veterinarian unique in research are the skills (surgical, problem solving, communication, holistic approach, etc) that they have developed in practice, rather than the veterinary degree per se. I spent four years in practice before embarking on a PhD; they were very happy years, which gave me skills that are extremely useful to my research career.

What was your proudest moment?
Professionally, my two proudest moments were probably completing my first consultation as a qualified vet, and having my first research paper accepted for publication.

And your guiltiest pleasure?
My guiltiest pleasure has to be cake; I cannot resist a slice of cake or tray bake from the Moredun canteen.
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