Professor of animal welfare

Sarah Wolfensohn is still surprised to hear herself being introduced as ‘professor’ since it had not been in her career plan. Here, she explains how she came to be professor of animal welfare at the University of Surrey’s vet school.

At the age of seven my parents decided I needed some extracurricular activity, so I was given a choice – ballet or riding lessons. As a result, my spare time was consumed with horsey and agricultural activities and my aim to get into vet school was formed. But fate intervened and I spent a substantial amount of time in hospital during those critical exam years and, disappointingly, my physics A level grade just wasn’t adequate to secure the offered place. I spent results’ night in the pub with my best friends and they sorted it out by randomly choosing a course for me to apply for through clearing. And that’s how I ended up studying physiology at University College London.

Fortunately, my health recovered fully and as graduation loomed I decided I still wanted to be a vet and applied to Cambridge as a postgrad. The next five years were then spent in an ivory tower idyll – except that as a graduate I had no funding for the preclinical part of the course and had to spend significant amounts of time doing a variety of character-building jobs to pay my way through vet school.

After qualifying, my first job was in a two-vet mixed practice where I had done much of my ‘seeing practice’. I was working a one-in-two rota, as was my husband, Simon, who had graduated a few years ahead of me and we had a few years ahead of me . . . except that he worked at the opposite end of the M11.

We sorted that out by buying a derelict shop with a flat above it in a small town on the Oxfordshire/Wiltshire border and put up our plate, not something one could do nowadays with the need to provide state-of-the-art facilities from day 1. We were on call 24/7; the clients became our friends, the animals were characters and life was pretty good. We had very little spare money as it all had to go into renovating – first the surgery premises, and then an equally derelict house. We learned how to plaster and paint and lay floors, as well as perfecting our techniques in orthopaedic and abdominal surgery.

After three years we felt in need of a brief holiday and since the BVA congress was in Exeter we thought it would be a nice place to spend a week – near the sea and the moors – with some CPD thrown in. But fate intervened and set me on a path that would change my career. It was 1985, and the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act (ASPA) was due to be enacted in 1986 to replace the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1876. I was in blissful ignorance of all this until a chance encounter, when I found myself in a lunch queue chatting to John Seamer, one of those venerable pillars of the profession.

He noticed my conference badge, which stated the town where I was based, and pointed out that there was a pharmaceutical company with a facility nearby that would need a Named Veterinary Surgeon when ASPA started. Was I interested? ASPA? Named Vet? What was he talking about? This was a whole new world of veterinary medicine that I didn’t even know existed. ‘Mice, rats and small furries are more your sort of thing than mine,’ said Simon at dinner that night. It was true that small pets generally came into the surgery to see me, but that was more to do with the small children that accompanied them than the animals themselves.

Shortly afterwards I found myself in the board room of the UK branch of a major international pharmaceutical company negotiating a contract on a part-time basis to provide advice on the health and welfare of its experimental animals.

The pharmaceutical company kept its dogs at a different site – it rented space at a farm belonging to the University of Oxford, so to get a complete picture of its research portfolio, I trotted off to see it. While visiting the dogs I was offered a complete tour of the facilities as they were at that time – a barn full of pigs, paddocks of sheep and goats, and a couple of buildings breeding rabbits and guinea pigs, and a building full of monkeys. I wasn’t really prepared for what I saw in there – rows of single bare cages, each monkey alone or with a baby, and an occasional big cage containing a seriously frightening animal with big teeth – the breeding males. The smell was overpowering and the noise of them banging the backs of the metal cages was intimidating. I left the site and went home, disturbed by what I had seen. Life moved on and our daughter was born and we juggled 24-hour on-call, child care and general practice.

A few years later fate intervened again; I had maintained loose contact with university farm staff and I received a phone call asking if I might be interested in providing veterinary assistance to the university’s research animals in the same way as I did at the pharmaceutical company, only full time. It seemed a crazy idea. I had a practice to run with Simon – why would I want to take a job like that? But then I thought about those monkeys. I could do nothing from the outside; I wouldn’t join an animal rights or anti-vivisection group because I had benefited from medical interventions myself and I fundamentally believe that scientific endeavour and medical research are right – if they are done properly. But here was an...
opportunity to work from the inside to effect a change and improve the lives of the monkeys I had seen at the farm. Also I would have paid holidays and regular hours, which was much better for managing child care. I took the job.

I worked on gaining the trust and respect of some of the senior scientists, working with them and listening and promoting the concept of improving animal welfare. Two years later the post of head of the veterinary services department became available. The job really split into two halves, the first being overall responsibility for the management of the breeding farm and the diagnostic lab, where I could make decisions and get on with it, provided the budget balanced. I set up programmes to define the health status of the monkeys and rehouse them in big enclosures. The other half of the job was that I became the Named Veterinary Surgeon at one of the largest academic institutes in the country, with all the responsibility that brings. The RCVS oath: ‘I swear that my constant endeavour will be to protect the welfare of animals committed to my care’, came back to me. I had plenty of work to do to fulfil that commitment, but the role was only advisory; I actually had no power. One way of improving the animals’ welfare was to train all those who had any interaction with them and, fortunately, in 1994 the Government introduced compulsory training programmes. We set up these courses at the university and wrote a textbook to go with them. I was fortunate in having a jolly team of veterinary, technical, research and admin staff who helped me bring about change. The work enabled me to publish papers and speak at conferences and travel to some nice (and some not so nice) places. I was closely involved in the UK Government’s development of its Animal Health and Welfare Strategy, which involved other animal-using sectors.

But in the labs where the experimental work took place there were challenges that had to be faced and, eventually, the university agreed to invest in a new animal facility. Animal rights activities spread to try to stop the construction and I found myself caught in the middle (Smith and Wolfensohn 2006). I had wanted to protect animal welfare while promoting research that cures disease, but I found myself caught up in a bizarre world of animal rights, antiterrorist devices, politicians, the army and multimillion pound pharmaceutical companies. It was a weird few years, but the building was eventually completed in 2008 and the animals have benefited from the improvements. After that I felt it was time for a change and left Oxford in 2010.

I set up my own consultancy business advising on animal health and welfare. I spent the next three years (during which time I was awarded an OBE for services to animal welfare) continuing to train those involved in the use of animals in science, and carrying out ethical evaluation of projects in both the animal and human fields of research, and continued as NVS for some smaller organisations. I also become a veterinary non-executive director for the Veterinary Defence Society – I recognise that vets need support in challenging times.

Then I heard that the University of Surrey was setting up a vet school, so I e-mailed and suggested it might like to include something on the use of animals in science in the curriculum – I was thinking I could offer two or three lectures each year. But fate intervened again, and I found myself being invited for an interview and then offered the position of professor of animal welfare. This has enabled me to focus more on the teaching of welfare and ethics and developing systems to objectively assess lifetime experience of animals, which is important in all areas of animal use. Perhaps if we can get people to be nicer to animals, they may end up being nicer to each other – and that has to be good for everyone.

Reference

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