The journey that took a Barr to the bar

To build on an active veterinary career, and to sidestep the risk of succumbing to a bout of what he calls ‘past-presidentitis’ – failing to let go – Alistair Barr became a student again and did a law degree, before being called to the bar in 2012.

CAREERS are – to some extent – what happens to you when you aren’t concentrating! Suddenly you discover you are a fair way through one without much rational explanation as to how or why.

Suburban Bradford is arguably as good a launching site as any for a veterinary career, although it did mean that my early animal related responsibilities were limited to the standard round of family dogs, cats, hamsters and guinea pigs. If truth be told, my day-to-day focus growing up was far more on playing rugby and cricket, learning the guitar and keeping my head above water academically at Bradford Grammar School. The main advantage of that particular academic and sporting hothouse was that it very rapidly taught its pupils that however good they were at anything, there was almost certainly someone in the next classroom who was better and literally doing it ‘for England’. I discovered James Herriot in Wibsey library – in hardback, before his rise to fame – and with that as a (undoubtedly unrealistic) plan, and school as the means, found myself in autumn 1976 at Cambridge as an undergraduate veterinary student.

There is a popular theory in veterinary schools that all students need to be constantly reminded of the clinical relevance of the basic structure and function of the mammalian body, as taught in the first two years of veterinary undergraduate courses, in order to maintain motivation. Perhaps I’ve always been as interested in process as outcome, but, in any event, from memory I was quite content studying the extremely varied diet the course threw at me – from neurophysiology to casting a cow with a rope (expertly taught by Alison Schwabe).

In the middle, I took Part 2 physiology, which had genuinely research-led teaching (12 lectures on the sodium pump anyone?) and classes that first stirred an interest in surgery, which has persisted ever since.

The clinical years at Cambridge were equally rewarding, with young and enthusiastic clinical teachers willing to give students responsibility for many aspects of case care. Forty students in a year meant we could all be taught in three, eight-week terms each year without anyone being distributed round the countryside.

Working in practice

After graduating in 1982, I spent 10 weeks as a locum in Saffron Walden, cutting my teeth on the small animal clientele of a very tolerant mixed practice and learning that an experienced veterinary nurse can save your life as a new graduate. I moved from there to Norfolk and probably came as close to the James Herriot experience of genuinely mixed practice as I could have hoped. A day’s work could run the full gamut of domestic species; and the first glimmerings of professional independence stirred as I dashed around the Norfolk lanes in my green Morris Ital, feeling considerably more competent than I actually was and, in reality, being remotely controlled by Graham Duncanson on the end of a radio.

The interest in surgery was still lurking, so I applied for and was offered the post of house surgeon at Bristol veterinary school. At Langford, I joined a team in the department...
of veterinary surgery at the peak of its powers. There was cross-species involvement by virtually all staff in clinical service, teaching and research in each discipline. I was fortunate to be mentored in particular by Hamish Denny in orthopaedics, and Christine Gibbs in imaging, but also worked for Harold Pearson, Geoff Lane, Peter Holt and Avril Waterman, among others. They all engendered a desire to try to live up to their high clinical standards and disseminate experience through teaching and publication. Their publication output in clinical journals at that time was highly impressive, particularly given that no-one seemed to have any time off clinics, and that collating and writing papers was done in snatched hours between cases. The sum total of junior clinical staff in the hospital at that time was three – a house surgeon, a house physician and the Feline Advisory Bureau (now International Cat Care) scholar. A quick head-count of residents and interns in the hospitals today revealed at least 35. Junior clinical training posts have progressed considerably from 1983 but they have become increasingly specialised, and with perhaps not the same degree of primary care responsibility they once enjoyed.

Langford was also where I met my future wife Frances – who was combining studying for the diploma in veterinary radiology (DVR) with spending her mornings doing the veterinary work at Bristol zoo. We both had the ‘experience enhancing advantage’ of working on one-in-one out-of hours rota, and Fran also kept life interesting by bringing her work home with her, which included a pygmy hippo in our bath and various baby gorillas and orangutans in nappies. On Sunday afternoons we would go into Langford and pull out film readings for each other to attempt as part of our DVR revision – sad but true. The acquiring diplomas phase was largely (though not entirely) superseded for us both by the ‘becoming lecturers and acquiring PhDs’ phase, as the 1980s gave way to the 1990s and the concept at the time was that what the world needed was veterinary clinician-scientists. A couple of children also arrived to stop anyone getting bored. Nobody ever really stopped thinking about being a student somewhere where they have no more influence than any other student. I did re-learn just how frustrating some aspects of being a student can be (virtual learning environments probably heading the list), but also enjoyed getting back to studying something completely new.

Becoming a student again

A common and distressing disease of associations is ‘past-presidentitis’, whereby those who have been in office fail to let go and move on, and for some reason believe that the next generation will be incapable of functioning without the benefit of their wisdom. Determined to avoid this myself, I decided to become a student again. From 2007/08 I did an Open University degree in law and went back to having homework to hand in and sitting end-of-year exams. Subsequently, I did a part-time by open learning (weekend) bar professional training course at the University of the West of England and was called to the bar in 2012. All professors should be made to go and be a student somewhere where they have no more influence than any other student. I did re-learn just how frustrating some aspects of being a student can be (virtual learning environments probably heading the list), but also enjoyed getting back to studying something completely new.

Over the same period I also sat on the RCVS Council as one of the Bristol university representatives and spent two years on Preliminary Investigation Committee (PIC). Both bar training and PIC teach you that there are always at least two sides to every story and that you need to study both carefully and dispassionately and separate the irrelevant from the pertinent.

My interest in professional regulation suitably stimulated, I have recently become an appointed member of the RCVS Disciplinary Committee, which again promises to be an interesting journey. Virtually all professions have now moved from being self-regulated to being in effect ‘co-regulated’ by a mixture of both members of the profession concerned and appointed outside individuals (themselves sometimes members of other professions and often with considerable experience of regulatory matters in a variety of contexts). Both backgrounds have much to contribute to getting the right outcomes.

In the meantime, my own version of the midlife crisis has led to a renewed passion for cricket and continued dabbling with the aforementioned guitar, which probably confirms, as many suspect, that boys never grow up – the toys just get more expensive.

The various facets of my veterinary career to date have taken me round much of the world including most of Europe, North and South America, Africa and Australia and provided a constantly shifting emphasis in ways I could never have predicted reading James Herriot in Wibsey Library in the early 1970s. Spending the past 15 months playing a small role along with colleagues helping Sarah Baillie to redesign the veterinary curriculum at Bristol has emphasised that change is (strangely) constant. Long may it be so.
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