Giving your heart to pathology

Jim Klaassen recently joined Axiom Veterinary Laboratories as a clinical pathologist. During his career, Dr Klaassen has worked in small animal practice, lectured in clinical pathology, undertaken preclinical research and held senior roles in commercial veterinary laboratories in the USA, including as chief medical officer of Antech Diagnostics.

FROM the time I was a little boy, I had an interest in animals and medicine. My mom was a nurse and I used to look through her nursing journals, trying to understand them. At first, I wanted to become either a wildlife biologist or a doctor but, while I was in middle school, we got a puppy – my first pet. We took it to be vaccinated and, sitting in the clinic listening to the veterinarian explain about vaccinations, puppy care and nutrition, a light went on. I could be a veterinarian and work with animals as their doctor.

I wrote to Michigan State University (MSU) to ask for the requirements to enter its vet school (there was no internet back then) and found that it held an annual open day in the spring called Vet-a-Visit. I convinced my parents to take me every year right through my school years. Finally, I applied and was lucky enough to be accepted. While at vet school, I found looking through the microscope at all the different tissues and body fluids fascinating. In my senior rotations, I took extra credit courses in clinical pathology and really enjoyed them.

Once qualified, I entered small animal practice. It was great but, after a few years, I felt I needed another goal. My preference was to become certified in either small animal internal medicine or clinical pathology. By the time I had made up my mind to take this route, the only residency position open in the country was a clinical pathology position at Washington State University. Again, I was lucky enough to be accepted and, 37 years later, I have never regretted my choice.

As most residencies and postgraduate programmes are located at vet schools, teaching usually forms part of your training, whether it is giving clinical pathology lectures and laboratories to new vet students or working with the senior students who are rotating through your department. I enjoyed interacting with students at both levels.

When I left Washington State University, I worked in diagnostic laboratories for a few years but did not have the time or resources to study for the pathology board exams, so I took an instructor position back at MSU in clinical pathology for two years. While there, I passed the certifying exam for the American College of Veterinary Pathologists (ACVP). I became involved with computer-aided instruction and was part of the pathology department computer group that helped the faculty obtain IBM PC compatible computers and train the faculty on their use – for most of them, this was their first PC.

I also helped MSU vet school obtain a Technicon H*1 haematology analyser and train the lab technicians to analyse veterinary samples accurately. Bear in mind that this was before the veterinary software was even thought of so I was working with the
head software engineer to make the first ever vet software package for this equipment.

After working in diagnostic laboratories for most of my career, I moved to a contract research organisation in the Seattle area. It was my first experience in toxicological pathology and it was an interesting five years, but I soon wanted to get back to the diagnostic lab work that I enjoy most.

My new role as clinical pathologist at Axiom Veterinary Laboratories has me back to looking through a microscope, often for up to eight hours a day, on a daily basis. My responsibilities are to read cytologies, review haematologies, urinalysis, and so on, and I love it. I’m working with a great group of people and we share interesting cases and are always ready with a second opinion. For me, reading cases in a diagnostic laboratory is fascinating. With such a high volume of cases coming in, you never know what interesting material could be on the next slide. It’s like opening presents at Christmas.

Each one is unique and I like to think that I learn something from each case I read. The most rewarding part is knowing that I am contributing as a team member to the care, treatment, and diagnosis of many animals on a daily basis.

Qualities for pathologists
Pathology is a huge field, with clinical pathology, anatomical pathology and toxicological pathology as broad headings. Attention to detail and an ability to look through the microscope for long periods of time are perhaps the most important attributes. I enjoy it – but it doesn’t come naturally to us all. It’s important to not let your mind wander, so you need to be able to remain focused on what it is you are looking at. Good language skills, both oral and written, are also important to enable you to convey your findings clearly and succinctly.

Like most fields in veterinary medicine, the opportunities in pathology are almost endless. In addition to the three broad categories, careers can also be pursued under each of them in private labs, corporate labs, at universities, in government positions, in forensic pathology, zoological pathology and comparative pathology. I could go on.

If you’re interested, find a field in pathology that you like and pursue it. Don’t let anyone tell you that you can’t succeed, but remember that success in any field requires work and dedication. It also takes time. It is rare to leave your pathology residency and step into a top position somewhere, so make sure your expectations are realistic. However, if you take the opportunities that interest you, you never know where they will take you.

I haven’t always made the wisest choices but I have learned something from each decision I made and from each place I worked. I continue to have a rewarding career and am so glad I made the decision to become a pathologist. It is a hat I enjoy wearing every day.

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