Fifty years a vet

Agnes Winter wanted to go to Bristol vet school to become a cattle vet, but ended up studying at Liverpool and ultimately became a sheep vet. Here, she discusses the choices she made based on the opportunities available.

FIFTY years ago, July 10, 1965, I graduated from Liverpool. I had wanted to go to Bristol vet school to become a cattle vet, so how did I end up at Liverpool and a sheep vet? Mostly by chance! However carefully a career is planned, chance often intervenes and a different pathway opens up.

**Chance 1**: Bristol didn’t want me, Liverpool did. I think it was at least partly because, coming from a farming family, I could describe what a cow’s placenta looked like to Professor John George Wright at my interview. I spent five happy years at Liverpool, and a further two as house surgeon at Leahurst gaining a lot of bovine experience, particularly in abdominal surgery. So far, so good.

**Chance 2**: Looking for a job after completing my two years as house surgeon, I encountered my first and possibly only serious case of sex discrimination. A job came up in a big dairy practice that regularly referred cattle cases to Leahurst. I applied, but was dismissively told by the boss that he didn’t want a woman. What was I to do as there weren’t many other jobs I fancied at the time?

**Chance 3**: My colleague at Leahurst, the late great Barrie Edwards, did occasional locums in a single-handed, mixed, mainly agricultural practice just over the border in North Wales. An assistant was urgently needed and Barrie convinced the practice owner that I was worth giving a chance on a temporary basis. I subsequently spent almost 20 years working either full- or part-time in this practice.

The 1967/8 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease ravaged the cattle in the area and afterwards several of the go-ahead clients imported the first Canadian Holsteins. Although I still liked cows, I wasn’t particularly interested in cattle reproduction and didn’t really like the rangy Holsteins, having grown up with more delicate Guernsey cows. My attention began to wander from cattle as a main interest.

What kept me in the area was the farmer who I had met on my first day in the practice and who I married about 18 months later. He kept cattle and sheep. I decided a small pedigree flock of sheep would add extra interest, so bought a few Wensleydales from the flock that my parents had kept for many years. At the time the breed was struggling to survive.

In a weak moment I said I would take on the role of breed secretary and became further involved with organisations such as the Rare Breeds Survival Trust and the National Sheep Association. I also did farmer training for the Agricultural Training Board, which I enjoyed and it gave me confidence and experience in teaching. Probably most significantly, I joined the Sheep Veterinary Society (SVS), which has given me knowledge, a wide group of like-minded friends and worldwide travel opportunities ever since.

Over the years the practice became more and more small animal orientated until, by the mid-1980s, I was doing virtually all small animal work. I enjoyed surgery but not consulting, and began to wonder if I wanted to spend the rest of my working life doing this. I was fortunate that I had kept in touch with colleagues at Leahurst, which luckily was only about half-an-hour away; you can’t move farmers very easily, so it was by chance again that I was still nearby. Michael Clarkson and Bill Faull, inspired by the late Terry Boundy, were enthusiastically teaching flock health to final-year students and I joined them on some of their farm visits.

I realised that I wanted to expand my knowledge further and to stimulate my brain, and Michael agreed to take me on as a (rather mature) PhD student. I couldn’t have done this without the support of my husband as only a minimal amount of money was available. What subject was I to research for my further degree? By chance (again) we had recently had a few mysterious deaths in our own young lambs. I knew they were anaemic but not why. Then I saw reports from Holland of anaemia in lambs caused by feeding cow colostrum, and there was the answer. As part of my teaching farmers to reduce lamb mortality, I had promoted the recently introduced practice of feeding cow colostrum, yet here it was killing lambs. I had my topic, and for the next three years I scratched the surface of immunology, and
I learnt how to do laboratory work that I would never otherwise have encountered. During the same period, the RCVS introduced its diploma in sheep health and production (DSHP) and Professor Clarkson and I were the first to successfully sit this (the hardest and most searching qualification I have ever undertaken). I also wrote my first sheep book during this period with my much-missed colleague Jim Hindson, and have gone on to write a further five books with various coauthors covering many aspects of sheep management and disease for farmers, students and vets. Much of the foundation for these was the hands-on experience of actually keeping sheep myself.

By 1990 I had my PhD and the DSHP and had been the first female president of the SVS. I enjoyed academia, particularly teaching students, but at that time universities were shedding staff rather than taking on new ones. I managed to limp along on a part-time basis without a permanent contract, although, at the time, flexible working suited me because of my commitments at home.

I carried on attending sheep events, was appointed a member of the Farm Animal Welfare Council and travelled to national and international sheep veterinary conferences and on their associated tours, getting to know some of the foremost sheep vets and advisors in other countries with important sheep industries – New Zealand, Australia, South Africa and nearer home in Europe. All this time I carried on, with considerable success, breeding and showing my pedigree sheep and their fleeces.

In 1998, after my husband died, I at last got a permanent full-time lectureship at Liverpool and carried on teaching sheep medicine. I then climbed the academic ladder, becoming in turn Head of the Farm Animal Division, Clinical Studies Director and, finally, Head of the Clinical Department.

I particularly enjoyed helping and supporting students and hopefully inspired a few to realise that sheep are interesting and offer more than a wish to die at the first opportunity. I also became involved with the European College of Small Ruminant Health Management from its inception, becoming a founding diplomate. After I retired from the vet school as an honorary professor, I became an RCVS Professional Development Phase (PDP) dean, which allows me to have contact with new graduates and to keep in touch with modern veterinary practice, which is so different from the five to 10 shilling consultations I remember during my student ‘seeing practice’ days.

I’ve been fortunate to be able to devote the second part of my career to sheep as there are few jobs in the UK that would allow this. I think the most important lessons learnt are not to set career plans too tightly, to grasp opportunities when they present, even though they might not be quite what you had in mind. Most importantly, try to become involved in a broader way with whichever species area you decide to pursue. Farmers, particularly, love to hear of disasters (or triumphs) suffered by their vets’ animals, which helps with client rapport and you will see many diseases and problems you have heard of but many you haven’t a clue about. It’s a continuous learning opportunity.

Now I live in an apartment in the middle of a beautiful city and the only sheep I have are in the paintings on my walls. Having needed two new hips means that I no longer wish to wrestle with sheep on a daily basis, but I have plenty of friends with sheep when I feel the need for a fix.

I am now stretching my brain with a late-found interest in history. I look back over 50 years on a career that didn’t quite follow the path I planned, but chance happenings at several key points have resulted in it being successful and fulfilling. And I’m grateful to the interview panel at Bristol and to the dairy vet who turned me down – who knows what my life would have been like had either said ‘yes’!

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