A life in veterinary public health

Milorad Radakovic studied veterinary medicine in Zagreb. Circumstances brought him to the UK in the early 1990s, and he worked in meat inspection while studying for the examinations that would give him full membership of the RCVS.

WITH a surname like Radakovic, it may not shock you to learn that I am not a born-and-bred Brit! Sometimes, people phone me and ask to speak with ‘Melord’. I explain that I am not a Lord (yet), and that I am a second-generation peasant (small farmer) from Croatia. This term, I believe, is my own invention and it means that my grandfather was a peasant (the word peasant is not derogatory in my mother tongue) and that my father was born as one.

Since my earliest childhood I remember working on my grandfather’s and uncle’s small (in British terms) farm, with approximately 60 acres of land (plus the thousands of acres of common grazing land that were available), 150 sheep, 15 to 20 cattle, two horses, pigs, chickens, dogs and cats plus all the machinery, such as a threshing machine in the 1960s (replaced by a combine harvester later on) and a tractor (an old McCormick). In addition, I had an opportunity to see all aspects of slaughtering and meat processing in a local, medium-sized multispecies abattoir that my father managed. One would say nowadays that I had a complete farm-to-fork upbringing.

I grew up in a small town, Gospic, where I attended the grammar school. A hundred years before me, a famous physicist, Nikola Tesla, who initially worked closely with Edison and, later on, against him, attended the same school. I graduated as a veterinarian in Zagreb (1989), being an average student with a good mix of pass and excellent marks. At the same time, like any other student in the world, I enjoyed life to the full: singing, playing the guitar and having a good time. In my free time, I regularly worked in veterinary surgeries close to Zagreb and during summers closer to my home town. This is where I gained invaluable first-hand practical veterinary experience dealing with animals, and, more importantly, with people of different background and cultures.

My father’s advice had been to study medicine or to follow in his footsteps as an economist, saying that veterinarians spent a significant proportion of time doing rectal examinations, having dirty hands and driving cars around on their own. Like the majority of sons (including mine, who, contrary to my advice, graduated in psychology), I loved and respected my father very much, I didn’t listen his advice. I followed my emotions and decided to be a vet for unusual reasons: I like animals and I love people. I thought that being a vet would give me plenty of opportunities and a lot of pleasure helping both people and animals. This philosophy has never left me.

Working career
Since I grew up around an abattoir and had the dubious pleasure of cleaning pig guts, I was determined not to be involved in that kind of veterinary job once I graduated. I began my career working in small animal practice in Zagreb, along with some large animal and abattoir work. Two years later, life brought me to the UK. At that time Croatia was not part of the EU so my veterinary degree was not recognised by the RCVS and I was required to sit the RCVS statutory exam. I got a job in Braintree, Essex, working as a meat inspector, studying English and preparing myself for the RCVS membership examination. My English was basic (I still struggle with the articles ‘a’ and ‘the’), and the only useful (employable) skill relating to veterinary work that I had was in meat inspection. I got a job in Braintree, Essex, working as a meat inspector, studying English and preparing myself for the RCVS statutory exam. I also spent six months on rotations with final-year students in Bristol.

I did not pass the RCVS exams on my first attempt. To the best of my knowledge, I may be the only person from Zagreb university who has passed these exams. Today, Croatia is a full EU member; therefore, its graduates are eligible for veterinary registration and to practise in the UK. On reflection, my experience with the statutory exams was invaluable and prepared me well for life in the UK.

It was not only technical veterinary competency that I had to improve.
Other challenges I faced were, first, the language itself, and then understanding the ‘British’ way of communicating (the ability to agree and disagree with someone at the same time). I also had to gain an adequate knowledge of British agriculture, animal husbandry, the pet-owning culture and so on.

Inevitably, over a period of time, my horizons on different cultures expanded tremendously (I was getting older). I realised that the British loved their animals and consequently expected the best possible care for them, and they wanted an explanation of why something had or had not been done for them. British vets do this by collecting and assessing the available evidence and then analysing the advantages and disadvantages of various solutions. Clients want these things explained to them each and every time; however, in other parts of the world, although people love their animals, they may not want lengthy explanations. After becoming a full MRCVS, I wanted to work in small animal practice, and did occasionally dispense flea treatment without asking for payment on the day (as I wanted to help people with no money). The problem with this approach was that some people didn’t come back to pay!

I was then offered a full-time job with the then Meat Hygiene Service as an Official Veterinary Surgeon (OVS), soon becoming Principal Official Veterinary Surgeon (POVS). I moved to the Food Standards Agency (FSA) in 2002 as a veterinary adviser. Since September 2014, I have been employed by the University of Cambridge, in the Department of Veterinary Medicine, as a teaching fellow in veterinary public health. I have also gained the RCVS certificate in veterinary public health (meat hygiene), and hold the status of advanced practitioner in veterinary public health.

Career highlights
I have inspected and audited many food-producing establishments in the UK as the UK official, and overseas (EU and South America) as the national Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) expert. During these official encounters I have met many nice, hardworking people (vets and non-vets). But let’s be honest: not all people are nice. Working in enforcement, I had the ‘pleasure’ of meeting people who were later convicted as criminals. I was involved with the police in raiding places where unfit poultry meat was being washed with bleach and placed back on the market for human consumption.

In this case, the police investigation cost £3 million and, I was told, the outcome depended on my statement and cross-examination in court. It was a challenging experience, but was made easier by following the oath: ‘The evidence I shall give shall be the truth the whole truth and nothing but the truth’ and acting with impartiality. I was on the side of justice, helping the court to understand the case. Since then I have had a completely different view of risk, in that there is no such thing as a risk-free activity and absolutely safe food.

For the majority of my career, I was a policy veterinarian working at the FSA. My role was to provide veterinary public health advice to policymakers nationally and internationally, to host FVO missions; and I was the OIE UK national focal point for production animal food safety for five years. During this time, no two days were the same. I travelled extensively, negotiating or sharing UK experiences with other EU member states or countries outside the EU. I was working closely with colleagues from Defra and other government departments, leading on or being a key member of various internal FSA, cross-governmental and international teams on a number of specific issues, from negotiating the hygiene package equivalency agreements with third countries, to emerging risks groups and many others . . . too many to list.

I am proud to be one of the pioneers in the UK and EU of the concept of taking a flexible approach to the implementation of EU legislation – currently a very sexy subject in the EU – especially for small, traditional producers. Some people tease me by calling me ‘Mr Flexible’, even my wife questions my flexible approach to, for example, cleaning the house, because I never want to define or agree on an acceptable standard of cleanliness.

Today I am still in contact with many colleagues and friends in the UK and around the world. As a teaching fellow, I find that a significant proportion of students are, contrary to many opinions, actually very interested in veterinary public health. It is that that inspires me to teach and I cherish every opportunity to tell them about my experiences and the experiences of my colleagues. I am also privileged and honoured to serve as the president of the Veterinary Public Health Association (VPHA) – a vibrant, dynamic association – with a wide membership of people from the UK and abroad. Our overriding philosophy at conferences and study tours is that we are all equal.

The future
What the future will bring I don’t know, as life is unpredictable. I would not have had such an exciting and interesting professional life without the full understanding and support of my family. It must also be said that I would not be where I am now without the help of many colleagues and friends; sadly some of them are not with us anymore.

Whoever says veterinary public health is boring is not telling the whole truth, as I explained in an article in Vet Record Careers in last week’s Veterinary Record (November 14, 2015, vol 177, p i).

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