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 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. I have also gained the RCVS certificate in veterinary public health. It is that which some people didn’t come back to pay!

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).

do: 10.1136/vr.h6212
A life in veterinary public health

Milorad Radakovic

Veterinary Record 2015 177: i-ii
doi: 10.1136/vr.h6212

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/177/20/i

Email alerting service

These include:
Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

Topic Collections
Articles on similar topics can be found in the following collections
A career in veterinary medicine (46)

Notes

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/