Ten-minute chat

Richard Saunders works predominantly with zoo and exotic pet animal species and is based at Bristol Zoological Gardens. He also teaches at the University of Bristol and consults at a local small animal referral centre.

Did you always want to work with exotics?
Yes, even before I wanted to be a vet. My literary hero was Gerald Durrell rather than James Herriot, and, while I have never worked in the field anywhere more exotic than the UK, I’ve been able to fulfil my aspirations of working with zoo species.

How did you get to where you are today?
I started out in general small animal practice, following sound advice to develop transferable skills in surgery, medicine and communicating with owners and keepers before trying to get a post in zoo medicine. At this point I also felt more that I wanted to work with exotic pets only, and so this seemed a more natural career path. From there I took up an internship at one of the RSPCA’s wildlife centres in Norfolk, and spent several years there after my internship, gaining further experience in wilder species.

After that I moved to Bristol to do a residency in zoo and rabbit medicine and surgery, and stayed on as a staff vet at the zoo. I also felt, both from having kept rabbits as a child, and having seen how badly they are looked after during my time in first-opinion practice, that I wanted to work with them, and improve rabbit health and welfare; and the residency, which might not sound like a natural mix, was ideal for me.

What does your job involve?
There are several elements to my job. The day-to-day one is being part of a team of vets and vet nurses at Bristol zoo, dealing with the health and welfare of a variety of animals, from invertebrates to gorillas. We all also teach on undergraduate and postgraduate courses run by the University of Bristol, and spend time at a local exotic pet referral service. My other job is veterinary adviser to the Rabbit Welfare Association and Fund (RWAF), which, along with Bristol Zoo, funded my residency, and is the only charity looking solely at the welfare of rabbits. My work for it involves advising veterinary members of the RWAF, helping to establish the CPD programme, and education for owners and keepers of rabbits, as well as lobbying for better welfare and legislation to protect rabbit welfare.

What do you like about your job?
I like the variety: I don’t tend to get bored. Even just looking at the zoo work, there is tremendous variety within the species we keep, and maintaining the genetic diversity of some incredibly rare species, as well as maintaining and improving their individual welfare, is a privilege. I also feel that, among the companion species, rabbit welfare is probably the poorest of all, and that there are so many things that can be done to improve it.

What do you not like?
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Why is your job important?
There is still a lot that needs to be discovered about less commonly kept species, and huge amounts of even basic information about the husbandry and veterinary care of many zoo species. Improving their welfare starts there.

What advice would you give someone considering a similar career?
Get a good grounding in general transferable skills such as surgery and communication skills first. And consider developing another string to your bow, first because exotic animal medicine is probably the least well remunerated specialty, and also because, too often, it’s difficult to find anyone who is prepared to see, let alone is knowledgeable about, exotics, with a particular specialism such as orthopaedics, dermatology, etc.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?
I was lucky enough to be taught by Derek Knottenbelt at Liverpool. I might not remember much of what he taught me about horses, but he also taught me the importance of using first principles to examine, diagnose and treat any species of animal, starting with a good, thorough clinical examination.

If you weren’t a vet, what might you do instead?
Investigative journalist or environmental campaigner.

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