Achieving specialist status

Few aspiring vets enter vet school with the intention of becoming a government vet and Philip Robinson was no different. But having worked as a clinician, a state vet and an epidemiologist, his career trajectory has led him to become the first RCVS Recognised Specialist in State Veterinary Medicine.

At vet school, like the majority of my peers, my focus was on mixed private practice, albeit with a large animal preference, and with the possibility of academia also featuring as a consideration for the future.

Looking back on the 19 years since finishing vet school, those formative aspirations have been fulfilled. I started my career in mixed practice with a farm animal bias in Northern Ireland and Scotland, and am now an academic, teaching farm animal health and welfare as a senior lecturer at Harper Adams University in Shropshire.

Perhaps the unexpected part has been the time in between: the 12 years spent as a veterinary officer (VO) with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in Northern Ireland, and the three years of studying bovine tuberculosis (bTB) control as a PhD researcher at Durham University – 15 years that have brought me immense satisfaction and fulfilment. This career trajectory has culminated in me becoming the first RCVS Recognised Specialist in State Veterinary Medicine earlier this year, and in this article I reflect on my career to date, particularly the path to specialist status.

I qualified from the University of Glasgow in 1996, and my first job was in County Antrim in a nine-vet mixed practice. It was a difficult time to begin farm practice because of the BSE crisis, which seriously affected the financial viability of both the beef and dairy farming sectors, reducing the number of farm visits and the amount of money that farmers were prepared to spend on individual animals. Moving over to practise in Scotland I found a similar picture there, again working in mixed practice with a cattle and sheep bias. Farm visits were increasingly reduced over the succeeding months, and improving returns from small animal practice were supporting the deficits on the large animal side.

Returning in late 1998 to practise near to where I was brought up in Northern Ireland, I was questioning my future as a mixed practice clinician. I was spending a fair proportion of my time TB testing, and with many cattle being euthanased rather than attempting treatment for economic reasons, my focus for the future turned elsewhere. Having had a positive experience as a veterinary student on summer placement with DARD, and after talking to colleagues already working in the State Veterinary Service, I decided to apply for a position as a VO. The application was successful, and in the summer of 1999 I began my new career as a government vet in Ballymena Divisional Veterinary Office, where I worked for the next eight years.

There was still a lot of TB testing to be done of course, but now there was much more investigation of outbreaks and a wider perspective on control and eradication across herds and areas. In addition to TB control, I was also involved in the investigation of actual and suspect cases of other diseases of particular concern for the state vet, including BSE, bovine brucellosis, anthrax, other zoonoses of public health significance such as salmonellosis and *Escherichia coli* O157, sheep scab, and the epizootic diseases across the farm animal species. Although my duties majored on enzootic disease control, I was also frequently involved in export and import certification, animal welfare checks on farms and during transport, together with the inspection of bovine arti-
I was comfortable in both the natural and social sciences. Smitten by academia, I have been working at Harper Adams University since October 2014, but my love of state veterinary medicine has not waned, and remains extremely relevant for my academic role. I have been teaching veterinary epidemiology and veterinary public health to students of agriculture, animal science, bioveterinary science and animal behaviour and welfare, and have taught classes on zoonoses, enzootic and epizootic diseases, and animal welfare legislation as part of the farm animal health courses.

My research interests allow me to use the experiences I have gained over the years as a clinician, state vet and epidemiologist, and apply them to the often complex problems that we face in the animal health sector, not just in the UK, but globally. This was vividly illustrated to me on a UK Newton Fund trip to Brazil with a ‘One Health’ theme, organised and led by the University of Surrey and University of São Paulo earlier this year. We discussed zoonotic disease problems such as brucellosis, tuberculosis, glanders and rabies along with notic disease problems such as brucellosis, tuberculosis, glanders and rabies. Although I have taught classes on zoonoses, enzootic and epizootic diseases, and animal welfare legislation as part of the farm animal health courses.

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