Working in government service

After qualifying and working in practice, Claire Wade and Kate Burgess decided they wanted a new challenge and joined the APHA’s south east region. Here, they describe what their work involves and what they get out of it.

Claire Wade, senior veterinary inspector, Winchester

I qualified as a veterinary surgeon from the University of Bristol in 2007 and spent six years as an assistant in small animal practice in Worcestershire and Buckinghamshire. I joined the APHA in March 2013 as a senior veterinary inspector based near Winchester.

Since joining the APHA, I have embarked on a huge learning curve, adapting the skills I developed in clinical practice and applying them to state veterinary medicine. Field vets fulfil the APHA’s regulatory function of ensuring compliance with animal health and welfare legislation. My work involves a wide variety of subject areas from bovine TB, welfare and exotic disease to animal by-products, rabies quarantine and imports.

During disease outbreaks, field vets are at the front line, using our diagnostic, problem-solving and epidemiology skills. I gained first-hand experience of disease outbreak management during the 2015 outbreak of low pathogenic avian influenza in Hampshire. I was ready for it as, as part of my training, I had completed a secondment to the APHA’s veterinary exotic notifiable disease unit in London, overseeing investigations into reports of exotic and notifiable diseases and providing veterinary advice to policy teams. Coincidentally, the 2014 highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak in Yorkshire occurred while I was on this secondment and I was able to fully participate in the outbreak response at national level.

A more typical day often involves a field visit as well as time spent in the office responding to e-mails, writing up visit reports and communicating with customers. Of course, a typical day can rapidly change pace if you are on-call and have to drop everything to respond to a report of suspected notifiable disease.

Kate Burgess, senior veterinary inspector, Chelmsford

I have been with the APHA for just over one year, having joined the Chelmsford office in September 2014. I originate from a beautiful area of Devon, but left home for Sheffield university in 2003, where I completed a BSc in zoology. After this I moved even further north . . . to the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, Edinburgh, in 2006, to start my veterinary training, qualifying in 2010.

I believe my decision to study veterinary medicine was a case of nature rather than nurture. I can’t really answer why I wanted to be a vet, but for as long as I can remember, it is all I have wanted to do – and nothing was going to stop me.

As a child, most weekends were spent with horses, dogs, cats, sheep and goats at the local stables, despite my family being totally non-horsey. The vision of ‘James Herriot’ driving around the countryside all day and treating these species never left my mind, and being a vet was what I wanted to do.
Kate Burgess

Before joining the APHA, I worked in a mixed animal practice in Suffolk, working mainly with horses. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in practice; however, after four years, I felt the time was right for a new challenge, so I researched non-practice roles for vets. I also wanted a better work-life balance and was starting to think about my pension.

One of the main pulls of the job was the animal welfare opportunity, which I knew I would find extremely rewarding, but being a civil servant also brings benefits: a good pension, flexible working times, good holidays, maternity and sick pay and more. Becoming a government vet meant I could achieve a better work-life balance while maintaining an important role in protecting our UK livestock.

Working for the APHA allows me to work closely with farmers in many different ways in relation to endemic diseases, exotic disease situations and animal welfare. I enjoy being able to work with a variety of farm animals and horses as well as being involved in exotic disease outbreaks. I would say that that aspect has proved to be extremely rewarding. Much like working in practice, there is no such thing as a typical day – every day is different. One day I might be blood sampling pigs pre-export and the next I might be on a farm carrying out a TB breakdown investigation. A large part of my job, probably around 60 per cent, is office- or home-based, completing paperwork and training, etc. The main areas of my job include:

- TB (working with farmers who are going through TB breakdowns and the related paperwork, advice calls, etc);
- Imports (processing horses returning to the UK on international flights);
- General animal welfare (complaints and compliance farm visits);
- Broiler welfare (following up slaughterhouse issues/conditions on-farm);
- Animal by-products (inspecting knacker yards for compliance); and
- Exotic diseases (covering suspect exotic disease incidents and being involved in disease outbreaks).

The role is extremely varied and involves dealing with a wide variety of animals and people.

I thoroughly enjoy the opportunity to work closely with farmers and their families, often through hard times. My role still allows me to have contact with animals, although this is obviously greatly reduced from my experience in general practice. Being an APHA vet is more about ‘the bigger picture’ – protecting UK livestock rather than treating individual animals.

A huge passion of mine is animal welfare, and being able to make a difference in this area is an aspect of my work that I find extremely rewarding. My job really allows me the chance to get involved.

Since joining the APHA, I have been involved in two outbreaks of avian influenza. Although we never wish these episodes on our country, they are thrilling to be involved in.

I take great pride in my job – that of protecting our UK livestock and farmers from exotic disease and welfare issues. Outside work I enjoy riding, cycling and skiing. I have recently taken up side-saddle riding and I’m hoping to visit county shows next summer . . . on the side!

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