Making the most of a veterinary education

Karen Hiestand grew up in New Zealand where the family business was dairy farming. Her desire to be a vet was fixed at the age of seven, but, after qualifying, the reality of practice wasn’t quite what she expected. Having made the decision to move out of practice, she found that there are many other ways to use a veterinary education.

I am one of those people who always wanted to be a vet. Growing up in a dairy-farming family in 1980s New Zealand I imagined myself as the person rocking up in a beat-up car (in those days a vet didn’t dare have a new car, as it was a clear sign that they were charging too much), a box of orange arm-length gloves and a bag of exciting-looking potions. I have very happy memories of the vet coming out to the farm – exciting nights being allowed to stay up late holding the torch so the vet could, sort of, see what they were doing for a caesarean section, and one excellent day with a cow postmortem examination. The vet took the time to give me, aged about seven, an anatomy lesson that included opening the uterus to reveal a foot-long fetus. While my older brother threw up in the corner of the shed, I was utterly entranced.

New Zealand has only one vet school and competition is fairly fierce to get in, and I did not make the grade on my first attempt. I needed to fill a year of university before reapplying and chose to enrol for a BSc, majoring in psychology. The years before you get into vet school, and once you are there, are often a very linear trajectory, leaving little space to indulge in other interests or see things from other perspectives outside a pure science view. I adored my year off the vet school escalator with the space it gave me to learn about other things, allowing time to explore the humanities and social sciences, opening up other ways of looking at things, which is something I’ve come back to more recently.

After vet school, I followed the traditional track of going into mixed practice. On the surface, my first job seemed perfect – classic 50:50 mixed practice, beautiful countryside to drive around in all day, great farmers, a cool car and I lived in a flat by a beach. At the time, stories were going round about young vets, especially females, being at risk of suicide and mental health issues, suffering bullying and lack of support at work. I believed I was a strong, capable woman, that I would choose the right job and that I wouldn’t let that happen to me. I was wrong. My experience in my first job was pretty traumatic and I can honestly say it felt at times that I was holding onto my sanity by my fingertips. The promised one-in-five on-call rota dissolved into back-to-back nights and every second weekend on call; there was gender discrimination by workmates and a terrible lack of support. With all the bad stories I’d heard, I’d always told myself: ‘Well, I’d stand up for myself – I’d just leave.’ In reality, though, as a new graduate, far from home, it turned out to be harder than I thought. After 15 months I finally did leave, moving on to another job with a greater level of support, closer to family and friends, but the legacy of that first experience will always stay with me.

Coming from a farming background, I would say I held fairly pragmatic views on animals. However, things started to change after a few experiences in practice. In New Zealand we call male calves of dairy cows ‘bobbys’ and they are picked up every few days by the ‘bobby calf truck’ and taken to the slaughterhouse. I knew that not all farmers treated them well, but seeing first-hand the treatment of these animals as a waste product pulled a thread in the fabric of my cozy view of the world, and it continued to unravel. Production animal work can be harsh, and I think I can say, along with many
vets, that there are things I have done to animals that, while they constitute standard or acceptable working practice, I am not proud or happy that I did them. With the value of hindsight and a few years of confidence under my belt, I wish I had pushed back harder against some farmers’ wishes.

Voluntary work

After two years working in New Zealand I followed a well-trodden path to the UK. With a massive student loan there was really no other option than to take advantage of a stronger currency. On the way over I spent a few months volunteering on a Thai island, working in a charity clinic doing everything from stomach tubing water buffalo to treating iguanas, but mostly neutering the island’s population of community dogs and cats. Perhaps due to my rocky professional start, I was not a confident surgeon. I had deteriorated to the point where I had regular panic attacks during spays, convinced I couldn’t finish the operation, and spent sleepless nights worrying that an animal was bleeding out somewhere. However, suddenly, I was the most experienced vet on an island with a number of new graduates needing help when they dropped a stump or the donated suture material wouldn’t hold.

I could certainly empathise with the panic I could see in their eyes and, to my surprise, I found a surgical calmness that I never knew existed. I also discovered that I loved teaching. My time on the island reinvigorated my love of being a vet and my belief that I could help animals, and began an enduring relationship with volunteer work.

Arriving in the UK in early April, after months in Thailand, was something of a shock. It was cold. Still, I got myself registered, said my oath, found my first locum job in Yorkshire, bought a coat and didn’t look back. I spent a happy six years as a locum, interspersed with travel and volunteer work. I lived out of a backpack and learnt that you just really don’t need much stuff to be happy – and that you can get by on just two pairs of shoes.

I continued to do mixed animal work and relished the variety. I chose jobs based on where in the country they were – if I’d not been there I’d take it – ultimately working in around 55 different clinics around the country. I liked working on islands, I liked out-of-the-way places, and I also enjoyed the challenge of lower socioeconomic areas, where you had to use your brain and think laterally. There were aspects of clinical practice I enjoyed, but over time I found myself becoming frustrated at my inability to have as much of an impact on animal welfare as I wanted to.

My voluntary work helped and I interspersed my years of locum with trips abroad, working in Greece, Gibraltar, Spain, and Thailand, to ‘refuel’ my compassion tank. However, after much soul searching I came to the difficult decision that maybe clinical work wasn’t for me. I did it for eight years and, knowing what I know now about mental health in veterinarians, I can see how my first work experience, coupled with the years of locumng and the lack of collegial support that can bring, may have fed into this. I experienced a real sense of failure in leaving clinical practice, a feeling that I’ve heard echoed by others. Thankfully, there is now a lot more discussion about the importance of vets in roles outside of clinical practice and I welcome the movement away from judging those contributing in non-clinical fields as not being ‘real vets’.

Giving up clinical work

I secured a job with Cats Protection as a Field Veterinary Officer. The job involves everything from advising on individual clinical case management to collaborating on charity policy, to providing education and training on cat welfare and shelter medicine to the design of animal shelters. Moving from clinical practice into a large organisation was a huge change, but developing non-clinical skills has proved very rewarding. And staying in one place means you can have more than two pairs of shoes.

After 10 years out in the world, my study hangover from vet school had finally abated enough for me to think about further education, and I undertook a Masters degree in animal behaviour and welfare at Edinburgh. This excellent course not only taught me a huge amount, but also started a bit of an addiction that resulted in my completing my long forgotten psychology BSc, and recently starting on an MA in medical ethics and law while on maternity leave. The next year is set to be a busy one, managing a return to full-time work at Cats Protection, motherhood and finishing my MA.

Finding a passion for education

I now have a passion for education and a soft spot for vet students and that rocky time transitioning into practice.

From personal experience and research in the course of my postgraduate study, I have become very engaged with the issue of mental health in our profession and have been working with academic colleagues to find funding for research into the experience of moral distress in vets, its impact on mental health and the role that increasing vets’ ethical reasoning might have. I have also moved into a purely education-based role at Cats Protection, working towards growing our education output further into both the veterinary profession and the public. I believe strongly that the role of the vet profession is to be at the forefront of animal welfare, and one of the most effective ways we can achieve this is through education of our clients, the public, legislators and also ourselves. Undertaking further education since vet school has shown me just how much I didn’t know and how much more there is to learn, even about topics that we vets think we are the experts in. A vet degree is a great way to start out, but there is also a lot more to learn and so many other ways (that we probably haven’t even thought of yet) to use the education we gain.

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