Building on a bioveterinary sciences degree

Lilia Kazemi-Egbunike completed a bioveterinary sciences degree at the Royal Veterinary College and is now an information scientist and business support manager with the Veterinary Poisons Information service based in London.

GROWING up in south London, my exposure to the veterinary world was limited. However, I have always been proactive and can’t really sit still, so my teenage years were spent at work experience placements at veterinary practices, a wildlife charity and city farms. While I wasn’t brought up around animals, curiosity soon turned into a passion for animal welfare and biological science. As a self-confessed nerd, I pushed myself at school as I was very aware that education would be a crucial way to increase my involvement in this somewhat alien world, and eventually lead me to my dream job.

The bioveterinary sciences degree was established at the Royal Veterinary College (RVC) in 2008. In a nutshell, it is a three-year course in pretty much all aspects of animal science. Following a one-day taster course during sixth form, I decided to take up my place in 2011.

Our year groups were small, which was fantastic in terms of engaging with our tutors and collaborating on ideas. Year 1 covers the healthy animal, where there is a lot of overlap with the veterinary medicine degree. However, from year 2 onwards there was a shift towards disease, biobusiness, pharmacology, and so on. There was a focus on mechanisms and understanding why biological systems operate in the way they do.

In our final year, the course allowed for lots of flexibility in choosing modules, with scope to study at King’s College alongside medics. We were able to choose the direction we wanted to take our degree in, and potentially our careers. My final-year project, where I was able to carry out in-depth, independent laboratory work, focused on neonatal epilepsy, using zebra fish embryos as a model for human disease.

The concept of using comparative models of disease and One Health, bringing together human and animal biology, was championed throughout the course and opened my eyes to how crucial this field of work is.

What was clear to me was that I, unlike the majority of my peers, needed a break from studying. The thought of gazing at another textbook and making revision notes was, at the time, horrifying. I decided to keep my options open; offers for veterinary medicine were on the table, but the cost and intensity made me doubtful about embarking on the course. I wanted to stay within the field, but also wanted a career start that was fairly broad and would allow for growth.

Following my degree, I spent a short period working as a research assistant at the RVC’s Hawkshead campus. I was employed to help collect data, assisting a PhD student with her epidemiology project on dairy farming. This meant long hours travelling by car to rural areas, often alone. It really opened my
eyes to the fact that the working world could be tough, even though I was ready to take on the challenge.

Once my temporary role came to an end, I started looking for a new job online. I must admit that it was frustrating at first. Many veterinary research roles required a veterinary medicine degree. Laboratory roles asked for more experience. I felt a bit stuck. Then, I happened to come across a role based in London, looking for a biological science graduate to work for an emergency helpline. Further into the application process it became apparent that the role was focused on toxicology; veterinary toxicology to be exact. A few weeks later I embarked on my first proper job, as an information scientist at the Veterinary Poisons Information Service (VPIS).

The VPIS is a 24-hour telephone emergency service providing information on the management of actual and suspected poisoning in animals. We provide direct support to veterinary professionals and, as of last month, we opened a pilot scheme for the public. We handle calls on thousands of toxic substances in small animals, livestock, exotics and wildlife – meaning you never quite know who to expect on the other end of the line. For each inquiry, we essentially carry out a risk assessment for that toxin and species, the anticipated clinical effects and the ideal treatment protocol with prognostic advice, in order to ensure that the vet is in the best position to provide optimum treatment. You have to think quickly and work under pressure, but the potential lifesaving advice we provide to vets makes it very rewarding. We also work in supporting pet owners and are building a public helpline and awareness campaigns. Alongside this, I am able to be actively involved in scientific research and was proud to have my first publication accepted by the European Association of Poisons Centres and Clinical Toxicologists last year.

Almost two years on, my role has evolved. I now also work as a business support manager, where I help with the commercial aspects of the company. This involves helping customers with their accounts, organising our presence at veterinary conferences and arranging our CPD courses around the country.

Through helping our clients, I soon realised that, as much as I am an animal lover, I am a pretty good people person, too. I’ve ended up as a city worker in an office job, something I said I would never ever do. However, no two days are the same and I am able to incorporate scientific principles from my studies with new-found business skills. It’s been a great learning experience and has given me a great foundation on which to build a career.

As the world of veterinary and biological sciences grows and develops, new career paths that may not have even existed at the start of my degree are now possible. To have great responsibility as a young graduate was daunting and still brings its daily challenges, but I am glad I pushed myself outside my comfort zone and pursued this role. My best advice for new graduates would be to think outside the box. Be open to change and opportunities that you may never have considered.

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