

## Making the best start in practice

On graduation, many new vets will begin their career in practice. Rob Darvill offers some advice on making the most of that all-important first job

SO, you have finally fulfilled a lifetime ambition and gained your veterinary degree and become an MRCVS. At this point, the majority of new graduates take up a job in practice. A whole new learning curve begins as you learn the softer skills of thriving in a work environment with a team of colleagues while polishing your practical skills and learning which bits of academia are worth remembering, all under the scrutiny of the general public. I am not an expert and have made plenty of mistakes on my journey, but I aim to offer some ideas as to how you can make the most of your first job.

### Job selection

Every new graduate will have different priorities for their first job in terms of location, type of practice and on-call pattern. In a competitive job market it can be tempting to take any job that is offered. However, it is a priority for all new and recent graduates to ensure that they will be well supported by their employers and colleagues. This can be difficult to assess at interview, but good indications are employers who have recently employed other new graduates, promises of increased consultation time, supervision for early surgeries and discussions regarding mentors for the Professional Development Phase, etc. It is worth discussing this with

current employees and the person you are replacing and, if possible, to do so without the employer being present.

Consider working at a practice in an area you already know – either one where you have seen practice, near home, near university or near family or a close friend. This will make it much easier in terms of having support around you when you have had a tough day and need someone to relax with. It also reduces the stress of finding local shops, leisure facilities and pubs.

### Moving to a new area

A new area will be a challenge whenever you move job. It takes a while to find your way around. It is worth driving around at the time of interview to check distances to local shops, pubs, and sports and leisure facilities. During the interview, ask what local facilities are available. These things can make a real difference to your quality of life.

Be aware that living in a new place will be tough at first. It is not like freshers' week where everyone wants friends. Once you start work, use your half days or weekends, to make a more thorough exploration.

For those doing ambulatory work, maps and a sat nav are essential bits of kit. Discuss the location of the practice's big clients with other vets, and mark them on your map. Try to arrange routine visits to them, rather than making your first trip in an emergency situation. If possible, visiting with a more senior



Sat nav and map – essentials for a move to a new area!

vet can allow you to get your bearings and meet the clients.

When estimating your arrival times for visits always over-estimate the time you are likely to take to get there – no one complains if you are early.

### Fitting into a new practice

The first few months in a new job are an investment in the future. If you can make a good impression and establish good relationships with colleagues, it will make it a much more enjoyable job in the long term.

Keep the nurses on side, they are valuable allies, and can be very helpful at showing you where things are, suggesting additional treatments and management plans, and backing



Rob Darvill is speaking on 'Getting the most out of your first few years in practice' at the BVA Careers Fair on Thursday, November 15 as part of the London Vet Show. Entrance is exclusive to BVA members

Vet Record Careers aims to reflect the diverse range of career opportunities available to vets and related professionals. It includes features, tips, news and interviews on employment and educational issues, and on personal and professional development. Suggestions for articles are welcome, and should be sent to [vetcareerseditorial@bva-edit.co.uk](mailto:vetcareerseditorial@bva-edit.co.uk)

you up with clients. It can also be great fun to go out and socialise with them.

If the practice holds puppy parties or farmers' meetings, volunteer to get involved with them. Try to be helpful, clean up after yourself and assist with the more mundane tasks. It may well involve turning up early and staying a bit late for a few months. Making tea and providing cake also go down very well. Say thank you to those who help you; they are much more likely to help you again. Enthusiasm for what you are doing makes a real difference.

### Dealing with clients

There has been much written on the topic of developing good communication skills for dealing with clients (and this is another subject being covered at the BVA Careers Fair). Developing these skills is worth considering when starting out in a new job.

Always overestimate rather than underestimate, and be guarded on your prognosis. People are generally happier if you over-achieve than if you don't meet their expectation. Don't tell people that blood results will be back and you will call them at a specific time unless you are sure you can, otherwise they will be waiting on your call.

Remember that some people will always complain; you could have done the best job ever and someone will pick fault. Another

time you will make a total mess of something and be thanked profusely for what you did. Make sure you remember the times that clients have appreciated your efforts – keep cards as a reminder for the tough times. If something you do doesn't work out well don't blame yourself. In time, you will realise that some things just happen (when you have done the same thing a hundred times and it goes wrong once, this becomes more obvious).

Be confident in your ability, but not overconfident (this is a difficult balance!). Know your limitations and ask for help when you need to. Make sure that you know who you can ask for help within the practice if you want a second opinion; in most cases, clients will be pleased if it is something that requires the opinion of two vets as it justifies their bringing the animal to be examined and represents value for money.

If you do not know the diagnosis for a case (this is quite normal!), it is worth discussing it with a colleague to help you decide a plan for the next diagnostic step.

### If the practice does not meet your expectations

All new graduates will soon realise that their workplace has foibles. Every job has elements that irritate employees, but beware the temptation to leave a job to go somewhere



Keeping in touch with family and friends is important

that appears to be better; you will soon realise the new practice has its own foibles, too.

However, if there are elements of your job that are not what you thought they should be, especially with regard to support, do not just let them continue. Discuss the issue with your employer to ensure they are aware of the problem, and if there is no response, a written notice of your concerns would be the next step. If there is still no response, seek additional advice.

Use the PDP to your advantage: it may seem to be an additional burden, but if you are struggling clinically you can use it as a tool to approach your employer. If this seems a difficult avenue, contact your postgraduate dean to discuss ways of making progress.

### Support systems

Phone your family and friends. If possible set regular times to catch up when you will be around. Book in and prioritise some weekends that you will spend together right at the beginning. Swap on-call duties to make sure they happen. Find out who is near by, and make your own support network, so you can vent to each other, ask advice and swap stories.

If you have clinical questions, don't forget those who helped you to graduate – most of your university lecturers and those EMS vets who you got on well with will be happy to help if you call them.

Help is also available by phone from the BVA legal helpline and the Veterinary Defence Society. Get involved and supported by your local Young Vet Network or BVA regional meetings. Attend local CPD events to meet other local new graduates and other vets. Use the community forum on the BVA's website, [www.bva.co.uk/community](http://www.bva.co.uk/community) to discuss and share problems.

And don't forget the help offered by the BVA's mediation and free legal representation, Graduate Support Scheme meetings and CPD events aimed at recent graduates.