

An adventure worth chasing

Eight years after qualifying, Pdraig Egan has embarked on a surgical residency fully aware that the rigorous training means starting his surgical learning from scratch. He will be sharing his experiences with Vet Record Careers

IT'S eight years since I stood waiting for the results of my final year exams to appear on the front door of Summerhall in Edinburgh. The relief of seeing those letters – pass – next to my name will always stay with me. I will be honest from the start: I was never a shining example of academic prowess, and university was a blur of exams, EMS and the odd pint of cider here and there. Five years passed in the blink of an eye and suddenly I found myself released into the world with an MRCVS after my name and an unbridled enthusiasm for my chosen profession.

Over the next few years I found myself working for charities, online retailers, a mixed practice and an out-of-hours provider. It was then that I had a minor existential crisis. I had explored many veterinary jobs. I had got the James Herriot bug out of my system; this decision was largely made for me as I was wholly inept at calving cows. I had spent a year doing emergency and critical care at a busy referral hospital, something that did little for my social life and a lot for my online gaming skills. But the fact was that I felt unfulfilled in my career. The lack of career focus was becoming a major problem for me personally, and there was a period of time when I seriously considered

leaving the profession and exploring another career path.

Through all these jobs there was one constant that provided me with satisfaction and contentment – small animal surgery. If I was to stay in the profession I loved, I knew I had to start focusing on an aspect of my day-to-day work that gave me real satisfaction.

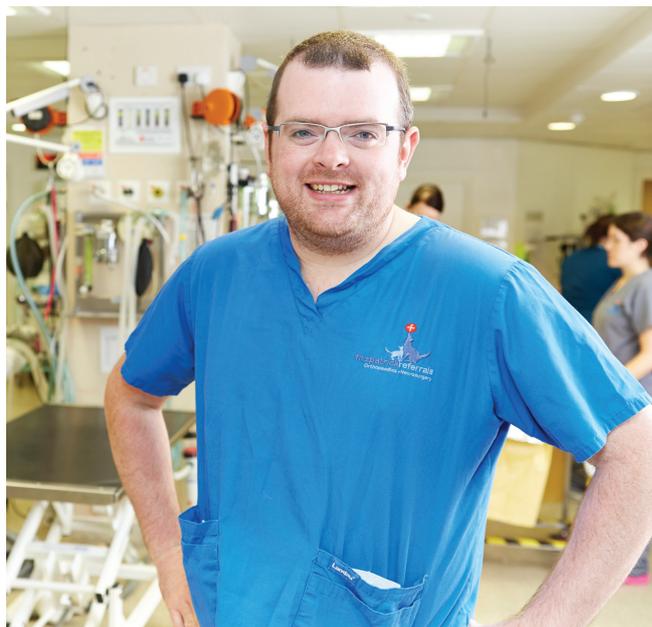
I started by embarking on the RCVS CertAVP in small animal surgery. I found myself drowning in essays and deadlines yet I was thoroughly enjoying myself professionally. My enrolment on the CertAVP somehow snowballed into me seeking out an internship in small animal surgery. My interest grew into an obsession and, after a long and bumpy journey, I find myself enrolled on a European College of Veterinary Surgeons residency in small animal surgery.

When I tell fellow vets about my current path I seem to receive an almost scripted response – what about the hours and the money? I am sure that these words are making people recall the residents they remember from their days at university. Gaunt, pale, vitamin D deficient workhorses who appeared to work every hour God sent. I

am also sure many will flick straight to the back of this very publication to confirm their thoughts on the terrible remuneration veterinary residents receive. But stick with me – making the choice to pursue a residency isn't for everyone, but, for those who are looking for the next step in their career, it may be something to consider.

I will admit the hours are long and the wage packet is not exactly overflowing come pay day, but I did not start down the path of a surgical residency without an acute understanding of the negative aspects of pursuing this goal. Embarking on a surgical residency involves long, largely unsocial, working hours. Longer than the working day of any other veterinary resident – when was the last time a pathology resident got called into work on a Sunday? But, jokes aside, this was an aspect of the job I was well aware of from the start and, to be honest, out-of-hours surgery is one of the most rewarding aspects of my surgical training. The working hours also prevent you from actually spending any money, so that is something you learn to live with.

There was one aspect of committing to a surgical residency that I did find difficult.



After being qualified for eight years I was wielding a scalpel blade with a moderate level of proficiency, and one of my major worries was being able to fully embrace starting at the beginning again with my surgical training. It would be untruthful for me to pretend this was something I found entirely easy, but, once I adjusted my mindset to realise that to become the surgeon I want to be I would have to start from the ground up, it was something I embraced. That is essentially what a residency programme entails: it's about starting at the beginning, no matter what your level of competence, and building a cohort of skills to prepare you for unsupervised, independent practice in a particular speciality of your choice.

Specialist practice is something that remains a hot topic in the UK and an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this article. Everyone has an opinion on what a specialist should be. Reflecting on why I want to do a residency, and hopefully one day reach specialist status, I find myself coming back to one word – 'safety'. I believe my surgical training will make certain I am practising the safest possible surgery by ensuring I am sufficiently trained in advanced procedures to improve the chance of a positive outcome for my patients. I also hope my training will allow me to offer a safety net to my colleagues to help with difficult cases. Lastly, and most importantly, I hope that my training, and the requirements for research and publication, will allow me to help the wider

profession carry out safer surgery via my contribution to research.

It's taken me eight years to find a career focus that gives me true satisfaction. I've explored lots of paths; I have made some career mistakes, and made some good choices, but I am without doubt glad I stuck with this wonderful profession. I am embarking on the very first steps of the next journey in my career and I hope over the coming years I can give you an insight into the challenges faced by a surgical resident working towards the ECVS diploma in small animal surgery. I suspect, given my track record, that this path is not going to be smooth but, hopefully, I may convince a few of you that it's an adventure worth chasing.

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