

Dream jobs don't exist

'AND tell the lady what you want to be when you grow up.'

I'm halfway through my morning consultations when I meet six-year-old Elsie. She walked into my consulting room with her mum and her dog Barney, wearing a surgery cap, a tiny set of scrubs and holding a yellow plastic stethoscope.

'A vet,' she tells me before she puts her stethoscope in her ears and leans down to listen intently to the top of Barney's head.

As we watch Elsie move her stethoscope from Barney's skull to another famously auscultative piece of anatomy, his cervical spine, her mother proudly tells me that being a vet is all her daughter talks about – 'It's her dream job'.

I know that feeling and what it is to be the little girl who dreams of saving animals. I also know what it is to be the young woman who gives up normal teenage experiences in favour of scraping excrement off walls because all she can think about is how much she wants to be a veterinary surgeon. It was my dream job too, a dream that came true. The problem is dreams, by very definition, do not exist, because if they do come true, they simply become reality instead.

Reality is never as straightforward as my teenage imagination assumed it would be, especially when it comes to this job. Being a vet can feel exceptionally wonderful, but at times, awful too. It can be stressful, it can be rewarding and it can induce all kinds of tears – from happy, to sad, to frustrated, to those delirious, tired tears that come when mundane things become inexplicably funny. It's a job that sometimes you want to define yourself by, and yet a job you often have to fight with to make sure it's not all that defines you. It's late nights and early mornings, it's missed lunches, and sometimes it's wondering why you ticked that stupid box on the UCAS form in the first place.

But it's also a job that, just when you think you've had enough, manages to throw you the incomparable joy of hearing a puppy you just delivered squeak for the first time. It's a job that reminds you that you're so wonderfully and yet painfully human when you feel the lump form in your throat as you help someone say goodbye to their beloved pet. It's a job that sits both perfectly and frustratingly at the centre of the art and science Venn diagram. A job that requires



pragmatism, compassion, intelligence and humour in what sometimes feels like impossible measures.

It's this incredible, soul-affirming, soul-destroying thing which is so seated in reality that I wonder, after five years of doing it, how it could ever be described as a dream.

But as I watch Elsie, who is now listening to Barney's left hip, I realise I don't feel worried that she might choose this job. I feel proud that she wants to do it, because although it's not perfect, nothing ever is.

And, on reflection, while my dream job may not exist, I think my ambitions have brought me to a place that makes me happy, or at least to a place that allows me to experience a plethora of different emotions on a daily basis, a place that shuns numb indifference and allows me, if nothing else, to experience life.

So, I kneel down next to Elsie and offer her my stethoscope.

'Shall I show you how to use it?' Her mum looks delighted as I place the earbuds gently in Elsie's ears and guide her hand to behind her dog's left elbow. Her eyes light up when she hears a heart beating for the very first time. Watching Elsie looking up at her mother with a massive open-mouth smile, I realise that moments like this are just another consequence of my childhood dreams. Another moment that makes me realise it was worth it after all.

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Lucy Dobree, BVM, BVS, MRCVS

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