

Have we got over 'James Herriot syndrome'?

A LOT of us have stand-out memories of James Herriot – Alf Wight – and his writings, whether it be the moving stories from practice life, the clinical feats, or the bemusing clients he encountered. He is without doubt one of the best PR entities a profession could have wished for, a skilled and compassionate man whose works continue to touch the lives of those who are born into a post-Herriot world (I myself was born in 1995, the same year in which the country's most famous veterinary writer passed away).

It is unsurprising, then, that a man of such influence continues to shape the face of our profession long after his death. Many an applicant to vet school will have been inspired by, and referenced, his books in their applications. A vast swathe of our clients will have formed an image of veterinary work based on 'All Creatures Great and Small' – the British television series based on his books – although it's a slight concern that they don't seem to think that veterinary care has progressed since the 1950s!

As has recently been asserted in heated fashion in the letters in *Vet Record*, James Herriot is a treasured figure who represents all the self-sacrificing and noble aspects of veterinary work. Yet, expecting ourselves to be self-sacrificing at every moment of our professional lives is both unrealistic and harmful.

The recent move to protect mental health and resilience in the profession, and in society as a whole, should demonstrate that self-compassion and self-care are just as essential as self-sacrifice, not just for ourselves but ultimately for the patients we are responsible for. Veterinary care requires the sort of focus and diligence that can only be maintained by avoiding burn-out and compassion fatigue. Sometimes we must take care to avoid holding ourselves to the image of the legendary vet we have in our heads, the man we have made an internal idol of. 'What would James Herriot do?' is not always an appropriate or even helpful motto to leap to.

In fact, until I read the recent research published in *Vet Record* (<https://bit.ly/2K2Mx90>) exploring the expectations of university applicants, which



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highlighted the dominance of small animal surgery in the ambitions of future cohorts, I believed that the UK veterinary community still experienced what I termed 'James Herriot syndrome'. It seemed that most of my peers I studied alongside, and those colleagues who mentored me, had been aware of and influenced, sometimes unconsciously, by the stereotypical image of the country practice vet. The lone figure treating any animal in need, in spite of inclement weather, difficult clients, or any one of a number of unpredictable hardships. This 'syndrome' also seemed to account for the dearth of vets working in government, meat hygiene, or population medicine sectors and the

lack of coverage of these aspects in our veterinary curriculum. To summarise, I viewed 'James Herriot syndrome' as ultimately inspiring but limiting in the modern veterinary community.

However, it appears that this 'syndrome' is no longer as prevalent as I once thought. Applicants now envisage the profession as mostly small animal vets, with the majority expressing purely surgical-based ambitions. This brings its own risks in recruiting vets who wish to fill a range of veterinary career options. Surgery is a vital and inspirational element to add to the veterinary tableau, and one that seems to be increasingly resonating with future generations of veterinarians; but how do we ensure that the focus attributed to this particular skill set by applicants does not come at the cost of the more holistic approach to both patient and client?

I thought that a slight shift from the romanticised imagery of mixed veterinary medicine might help the profession progress. I still do. But it seems that you should be careful what you wish for; we don't want to shift so far that we lose all connection with the world that James Herriot worked in.