

# VETERINARY NURSE TRAINING IN THE UK

Ms Barbara Cooper Hon Assoc RCVS Cert Ed Lic IPD DTM RVN

Principal, The College of Animal Welfare

Headland House, Chord Business Park, London Road, Godmanchester, Cambridgeshire PE29 2BQ

Dr. David Smith (PhD, MSc, BSc, Cert. Ed.), Veterinary Nursing Programme Leader, School of Life, Sports and Social Science, Edinburgh Napier University, Sighthill Campus, Edinburgh, Eh11 4BN.

## Abstract

Veterinary Nursing in the UK is still a relatively young profession. Whilst it is known that there were animal nurses in existence in the late 1800's the role and title 'Veterinary Nurse' has only been fully recognised since 1984. Opportunities to train to a national standard however have been in place since 1961. There are now 11,700 Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVN) in the UK, with ever increasing opportunities for career progression within general practice, referral practice, research, animal charities, pharmaceutical companies, boarding kennels and practice management. It is recognised that veterinary nursing is a vital qualification providing a critical role within the veterinary team, raising standards in veterinary practice, improving animal welfare and enhancing client communication. Veterinary Nurses must have the necessary training essential for the professional responsibilities that go with maintaining standards, autonomy and most importantly, the regulation of the profession.

## Introduction

Veterinary nurses work as a member of the veterinary team, providing expert nursing care for sick animals. They also play a significant role in educating owners on maintaining the health of their pets. Veterinary Nurses carry out technical work and are skilled in undertaking a range of tasks including urinalysis, haematology and a number of other diagnostic tests, medical treatments and minor surgical procedures, all of which are under veterinary direction.

Veterinary nursing offers plenty of rewarding career opportunities for people interested in animal health and welfare. Employment prospects are excellent with many veterinary practices highlighting a serious shortage of Registered Veterinary Nurses and their continuing difficulty in recruiting veterinary nurses. This is the result of years of insufficient numbers of new RVN's being trained each year, too many leaving and not returning

once qualified, and ever increasing demand by employers for larger RVN's teams. The answer is for the UK veterinary profession to train more and then to keep them.

Prospective vocational and higher education students must initially register with the RCVS regulatory body, in order to be able to legally undertake certain veterinary nursing procedures (outlined in Schedule 3 of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966). All student nurses complete the same general core units. They get the opportunity to specialise either at the end of their course or later in their programme, taking either small animal, equine or 'mixed' practice units. Small animal nurses work mainly with cats and dogs but will also learn to care for smaller pets, such as guinea pigs, rabbits and hamsters, and more exotic animals, such as birds, snakes, lizards and tortoises.

Equine nurses mainly work with horses and other equidae, whilst nurses in mixed practice will work with farm animals and

horses, as well as small animal pets.

All veterinary nurse training in the UK is conducted through colleges or universities that offer qualifications approved by the RCVS, all of which must involve real practical skills training in approved veterinary training practices. The RCVS annually inspects veterinary nurse education programmes to ensure that high standards are maintained.

Student veterinary nurses need to meet the minimum entry requirements which are normally set by the awarding organisation or the institution delivering the qualification.

Licence to practise qualifications leading to entry onto the VN register must articulate with the RCVS Day one skills for veterinary nurses and be specified, recorded and assessed in a format that is readily auditable and accessible to learners. The day one skills list is a regulatory benchmark of essential practical skills developed and reviewed regularly by the RCVS. These are based on the National Occupational standards for Veterinary Nursing.

The RCVS Day One Skills List provides the essential practical skills that must be assessed throughout the course of the students training. Day one competence may be gained in relation to the care of either horses or other equidae, large (farm) animals or small animals, which should include dogs, cats and exotic species or all or a combination of the three.

There are two primary routes to becoming a registered veterinary nurse; either via vocational training or via a higher education qualification leading to an Higher National Diploma, a Foundation degree or a BSc degree in Veterinary Nursing.

### **Vocational Training**

The Level 3 Diploma in Veterinary Nurs-

ing is a vocational qualification designed to prepare veterinary nurses for professional registration on the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' Register of Veterinary Nurses.

It is available on either a full-time basis (3/4 days a week in practice with the remaining part of the week at College) or apprenticeship-style alongside a job in veterinary practice which normally requires the student veterinary nurse to work as a contracted employee in a veterinary practice attending College one day a week or on a block release basis. Students will work alongside qualified veterinary nurses and veterinary surgeons and will have one person responsible for their in practice training called a 'Clinical Coach'. The training is quite intensive and takes between two and three years. A large proportion of their time is spent gaining clinical experience as well as competence.

The student will work under the supervision of qualified veterinary nurses and veterinary surgeons, learning how to provide nursing care and treatments in a range of different situations. They will be assessed throughout the course via theory exams, practical examinations, a work-based online nursing progress log and assignments. They are also expected to undertake several hours of private study each week.

### **Higher Education**

In the UK there are more than 15 higher education institutions offering full-time integrated higher education courses leading to a Foundation or BSc Degree in veterinary nursing. Such courses are either three or four years in length.

Student veterinary nurses following a higher education programme are also required to undertake clinical placements in an approved training practice in the same way that those following the vocational college

based diploma.

Each Higher Education Institute (University) is directly responsible to the RCVS for developing their Licence to Practise qualification for their own students. This will encompass a variety of assessment methods (which must include formal reading and writing assessment based on veterinary terminology at levels 4 to 6 in HE ) and ensuring that they have also met the Day One competences by the time they apply to register with the RCVS. The Universities are subject to the same annual quality monitoring and periodic accreditation visits from the RCVS.

In May 2015 the RCVS developed a new framework for accrediting international veterinary nursing courses and qualifications. The framework for accrediting awarding organisations and higher education institutions delivering veterinary nursing qualifications wholly or partially outside of the

UK allows international veterinary nursing training providers (whether awarding organisations or higher education institutions) to apply to have their qualifications accredited by the RCVS. If accredited, students would not need to apply to have their qualification assessed, or undertake pre-registration examinations or a Period of Supervised Adaptation (PSA) before joining the RCVS VN Register.

Such international qualifications must meet the same stringent criteria as UK qualifications. This would involve annual RCVS quality monitoring, including visitations, to review the standards of teaching and the curriculum. Students would need to spend a requisite amount of time gaining first-hand clinical experience in training practices and graduates would need to meet the skills and competences expected from all newly-qualified veterinary nurses. As part of the monitoring process, the RCVS would also conduct visits to affiliated training practices to en-

sure that the quality of their practical clinical training adheres to the same standards that are expected of UK practices.

### **The Importance of Education**

It is worth recognising that there are additional career opportunities open to graduates, other than in employment in clinical practice, that are not so readily accessible to those trained via the vocational Diploma, such as working in veterinary research, the pharmaceutical industry, education and academia.

Veterinary employers are also attracted to graduate RVN's due to their higher level skills such as problem solving, leadership, enhanced technical skills and a greater base level of academic knowledge.

For Veterinary Nurses, one of the most crucial factors in advancement is continuing education and personal development known as Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The RCVS specify CPD requirements for both veterinary surgeons and RVN's that must be met in order to maintain ones professional status. Failure to do so could lead to disciplinary action being taken by the RCVS. To ensure compliance annual monitoring is carried out by the RCVS

Many employers offer educational support, such as flexible scheduling to allow for night classes, or time off to attend conferences, seminars and workshops. Some employers offer tuition reimbursement or immediate pay rises in recognition of new qualifications and skills.

There are a range of courses offering programmes for nurses with associate degrees or to top up their qualification from a Level 3 Diploma to a Bachelor Degree. Advanced practice nurses, nurse educators and nurse researchers generally require graduate degrees, nurses on the management track generally benefit from degrees in business, man-

agement or administration.

## Conclusion

Veterinary Nursing is a career with enormous potential for anyone who is capable, ambitious and hardworking. Although it is possible to enter the profession after as little as two years training at Level 3 Diploma, the standard of practical training is nevertheless challenging and demands motivation.

Whilst the professional body sets standards it is the employers who influence what those standards will be whether the training course is a graduate programme or delivered by a College. Once registered as a Veterinary Nurse in the UK there are many pathways available leading to personal advancement and promotion.

Registered Veterinary Nurses who show the appropriate level of drive and ability can exercise the substantial levels of responsibility and as a result earn good salaries.

Registered Veterinary Nurses typically begin their careers as generalists and are employed in veterinary practices. Such nurses may opt to focus on surgery and become perioperative nurses or they may decide to work within a specific area such as geriatric patients or intensive care. There are a range of post-graduate qualifications which Registered Veterinary Nurses can take, which enables them to develop their professionalism, ambition and their ongoing willingness to learn. They pursue advancement through advanced nursing practice.

Although veterinary nursing is primarily a clinical profession, not all veterinary nurses practice their profession in veterinary practice. The veterinary health industry is increasingly computerised and nurses with skills and training in IT, the veterinary health care use of information systems are in high demand.

Veterinary nurse researchers can also apply their nursing skills to commercial and academic medical/veterinary research, working in universities, pharmaceutical firms and other settings. Veterinary Nurse educators have a very responsible role in training the next generation of veterinary nurses and may also be involved in the training of student veterinary surgeons in areas of specific veterinary practice such as theatre practice, post-operative care and rehabilitation.

Some veterinary nurses will possess a combination of clinical ability, leadership, organisational skills and time management that makes them natural candidates for advancement. Advanced roles in practice include team leaders, supervisors and even Head Nurses. Those veterinary nurses who choose a management track can gain responsibility for ever increasing parts of the work of the practice which in time could lead to becoming the practice Head Nurse. In substantial, referral or University veterinary hospitals such positions are held in high regard and carry profession wide status.

There are veterinary nurses as well as lay investors and corporate businesses that own veterinary practices and hire veterinary surgeons to deliver veterinary care at all levels from first opinion, emergency and out of hours services as well as specialist and referral centres. In recognition of such changes to the structure of the profession the RCVS have issued codes of practice that clarify the professional responsibilities of veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses. In June 2013 a veterinary surgeon was struck off the RCVS professional register for following his understanding of his corporate employers' procedures and thereby failing in his professional duties.

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