Preparing for OSCEs

Personal reflections, tips and advice

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Amber qualified in 2017 and is currently practising as a veterinary nurse lecturer at the College of Animal Welfare, while furthering her qualifications to a Certificate in Advanced Veterinary Nursing. She enjoys all aspects of practice but is particularly interested in wildlife, exotic species and medical nursing. Amber is interested in education and standardising patient care across all species.

ABSTRACT The veterinary profession is notoriously competitive and veterinary practice can be inherently challenging and stressful. Student veterinary nurses (SVNs) are often expected to learn a wide range of nursing theories, conditions and practical skills alongside working in veterinary practice. All SVNs will be expected to sit practical examinations or objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) prior to qualifying. This article discusses how to prepare for practical examinations.

Keywords OSCE, practical assessment, revision, video demonstration

Introduction

A veterinary nurse's role is multifaceted and includes providing animal care and nursing, assisting veterinary surgeons and educating and supporting owners with the health and wellbeing of their pets. Broadly speaking, there are two routes into the profession: a higher-education qualification or a vocational certificate, both of which lead to a professional registration on the RCVS Register of Veterinary Nurses.

Both routes require student veterinary nurses (SVNs) to sit a number of written and practical examinations on a wide range of topics. All SVNs will be expected to sit objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) prior to qualifying. Preparing for OSCEs while studying and working in veterinary practice can be difficult, so this article aims to help SVNs prepare effectively for mock and final exams.

What are OSCEs and why do we do them?

The OSCE has been used in both human and veterinary medicine for over 40 years (Davis, 2006). It was first introduced at Dundee Medical School and is now used throughout the UK. An OSCE is designed to test clinical performance and competence in skills that are deemed essential for a day-one competent veterinary nurse as outlined by the RCVS. The Nursing Progress Log or E-portfolio allows SVNs to demonstrate a level of competence, and OSCEs confirm the knowledge and skill prior to qualification (RCVS, 2015; Davidson, 2017).

OSCEs do not test real practice with real patients because veterinary patients and practices are unpredictable, but they can facilitate a more reliable and repeatable examination (May & Head, 2010). OSCEs have been shown to be a uniform way of assessing the

same skill in the same way for each student, confirming competence and safe practice in a number of skills without endangering a patient's health (Gwynne & Morgan, 2014; Yon, 2020). The exam itself usually comprises a circuit of 12 stations. On each station, the candidate is examined on a task on a one-to-one basis by an examiner, and using an assistant (if required) and a simulated patient. SVNs rotate through all of the stations and are given 6 minutes to complete each task.

Revising for OSCEs

Revision and preparation are key to success in OSCEs. They will help instil confidence in you and your skills, which can reduce anxiety prior to the exam. There are lots of revision methods and resources available. The more you do, the better prepared you will be. Start revising well in advance and use a revision planner to schedule times and topics to study and practise, and access resources right up to the date of the exam itself.

Useful revision methods

TAKING MOCK OSCES

Mock OSCEs replicate the real exams and are often run as a revision resource. They help to reduce anxiety prior to exams by giving SVNs an insight into what to expect (Dunne et al., 2018). Mocks also provide opportunity for SVNs to improve their time-management skills, receive feedback on their clinical skills and become familiar with equipment they may not have encountered often, or at all, previously. Mock OSCEs are often limited and SVNs may only experience them once or twice before the real exams, so attendance is highly recommended.

PRACTISING OSCES

As mock OSCEs are limited, it is important to revise practical tasks as often as possible. Being well prepared for OSCEs is critical, so practise the tasks plenty of times, well in advance of the exam. Use your time at college, at work and at home to repeat the tasks you find more difficult; repetition is the best way to ensure competence (Dunstone, 2005).

Consider creating an OSCE revision group with fellow SVNs to practise together and test each other. Interpersonal interaction between students, in revision groups or by having family/friends test your knowledge, can aid revision (Chi, 2009). Practising OSCEs while in your veterinary practice can also increase confidence and boost the effectiveness of your revision. With the help of your clinical coach/workplace supervisor, try to implement OSCEs in day-to-day activities at work, as this may help you relate these skills to specific patients and their conditions. Wider knowledge of why we perform these skills will increase your confidence when it comes to OSCEs.

WATCHING VIDEOS OF PRACTICAL TASKS

Removing the mystery behind OSCE grading helps reduce student assessment anxiety (Byrne & Smyth, 2008), so watching video demonstrations of the tasks being performed by the assessors, and using equipment that will be present in the assessment, will increase familiarity with the practical tasks and improve confidence (Massey et al., 2017). If students are on placement, or not easily able to access the training centre for multiple revision sessions and equipment familiarisation, online videos can be helpful. Online resources ensure all students have access to centre-specific revision materials, no matter where they are based or when they are free to revise. Creating videos is also a great way to check tutor standardisation and can be used for OSCE examiner standardisation training (Hall & Simpson, 2018).
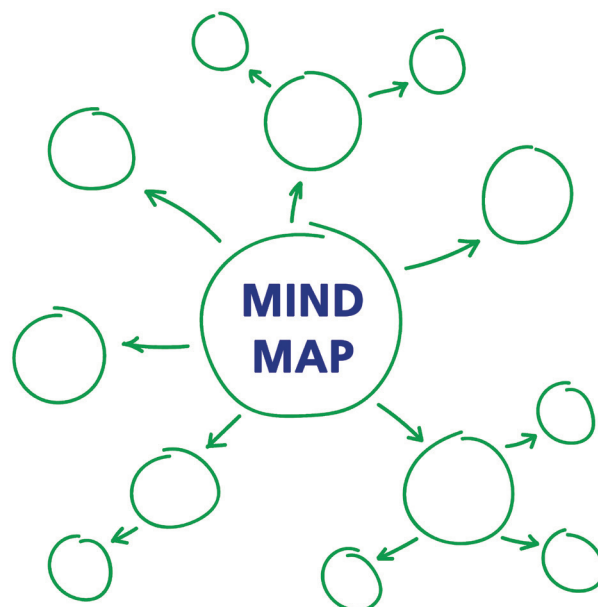
REFERRING TO VISUAL AIDS

Creative visual materials such as mind maps (brainstorming), diagrams and flow charts are often used as a revision resource for written exams, but they can also be helpful for OSCEs. Flowcharts can be used to create step-by-step visual aids and directions for OSCEs, which can serve as portable memory prompts when you are not able to physically practise a task. Mind maps can help you visualise links between OSCE tasks and the topics they relate to. Mnemonics or rhymes can be a good way to link the steps of an OSCE task together, reinforcing all of the steps and their order.

Preparing for OSCEs

OSCEs are stressful for students and it is well recognised by many veterinary educators that students become anxious about practical exams (Dunne et al., 2018; Yon, 2020). Studies have found that students experience the highest levels of anxiety leading up to, and on the day of, the OSCEs (Barry et al., 2012; Dunne et al., 2018). Therefore, it is essential that SVNs, RVNs and education providers work together to guide students toward OSCEs to minimise these effects (Yon, 2020). Dunne et al. (2018) found that students were anxious from early in their training, and that the stressors identified resembled those reported by nursing and midwifery students. Clarification of the exam process, practising with a clinical coach and doing mock OSCEs have all been shown to reduce anxiety significantly (Yon, 2020). Students can also minimise their stress by being organised beforehand and implementing the revision methods discussed.

Additional coping skills and focusing on self-belief and resilience can also reduce exam anxiety in the run-up to OSCEs. Recognising stress and taking care of yourself around the time of written and practical exams can help to improve outcome. Mental wellbeing is increasingly acknowledged and supported in the veterinary profession, and the Vetlife organisation has a student support section you may find helpful if you feel overwhelmed. One of the most important things to remember, throughout the whole revision process, is to stay calm and positive – if you have a bad day, rest and allow yourself time to recover before revising again.

Conclusion

Veterinary nurse training is competitive, challenging and stressful. From the outset, SVNs are often intimidated by OSCEs and are expected to learn a wide range of nursing theories, conditions and practical skills, while also working in veterinary practice. Clarification of the exam process, practising at work and doing mock OSCEs have all been shown to reduce anxiety significantly and improve OSCE outcomes. Revision resources such as videos, mind maps, flowcharts and mnemonics can also prove useful. Balancing student life with working in veterinary practice can be difficult, so it is important to take time for yourself and maintain a positive outlook.

Support links

https://www.vetlife.org.uk

https://www.vetmindmatters.org

https://www.vetlife.org.uk/self-care

https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness

https://www.vetlife.org.uk/self-care/sleep

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Reflective professional development notes. To access hyperlinks to the references, scan the QR code on page 3.