



Felicity Caldwell RVN, DipHECVN, DipAVN (Small Animal), BVNA

Felicity works in the UK's largest ECC hospital as a theatre and surgical specialist nurse. She gained the DipAVN (Small Animal) in 2012 and is currently awaiting results for her BSc(Hons) top-up degree in Clinical Veterinary Nursing. Felicity enjoys writing articles for nursing journals and delivering CPD on surgical topics.

Advanced nursing qualifications – a personal perspective from a surgical nurse

Felicity Caldwell RVN, DipHECVN, DipAVN (Small Animal), BVNA
PetMedics Animal Hospital, Unit A1, Priestly Road, Worsley, Manchester M28 2LY, UK

ABSTRACT: This article details the experiences, education and training that a veterinary nurse working as a surgical referral nurse in a busy emergency/critical care hospital has undergone to specialise in her areas of interest. The author is involved in both orthopaedic and soft tissue surgical nursing and currently holds a senior theatre position in practice. Any RVN considering further studies or advanced qualifications should be supported and encouraged to do so; specialising and furthering their clinical knowledge and skills will greatly benefit the nursing care they deliver to their patients.

Why surgical nursing?

Shortly after qualifying as a veterinary nurse (RVN) in 2007, I realised that my main interests lay in surgical nursing. I particularly enjoyed working within the sterile theatre environment and nursing surgical patients, notably orthopaedic patients, as I enjoyed the responsibility of maintaining high levels of asepsis and I found the surgery exciting and challenging (**Figure 1**). A few years post qualification, I was given the opportunity to work in orthopaedic and spinal referrals, and this was the starting point of my interest in these specialisms.

A question I was often asked by fellow nurses was, 'Are you surgical or are you medical?' Working within an orthopaedic referral hospital had really helped to reaffirm my decision and interest in surgery; I had learned many new skills and I took pride in the fact that the nursing care delivered was to an exceptionally high standard. I had gained experience of working in the theatres, ensuring high levels of infection control, advanced anaesthesia techniques and monitoring, as well as nursing a wide variety of orthopaedic patients in the wards.

It was at this point that I decided to enrol with Myerscough College to begin studying for the Higher Education Diploma in Clinical Veterinary Nursing (DipHECVN), which leads to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing (DipAVN). Although it is not essential to work in a referral environment while studying for the DipAVN, I personally felt that it made a huge difference because many of the specialist lectures were relevant to referral work.



Figure 1. Aseptic surgical preparation of a patient undergoing a fracture repair

To cite this article use either
DOI: 10.1111/vnj.12166 or Veterinary Nursing Journal
VOL 29 pp273–275

What was involved in the DipAVN (Small Animal) qualification?

The DipAVN qualification that I studied was the new integrated Small Animal award that replaced the previous DipAVN Surgical or Medical pathways. Most colleges that offer the RCVS DipAVN will require the RVN to have a minimum of one year's post-qualification experience prior to enrolment. When initially applying, we were required to write an assignment on a specified topic and attend an interview at the college. It was stressed by the college tutors at the interview that students would be expected to carry out approximately 15 hours of independent study per week and that we must attend the four study weekends each academic year.

The initial two-year qualification, the DipHECVN, must be obtained and all module exams must be successfully passed before you can go on to gain the DipAVN award. The first year of the DipHE CVN consisted of the following mandatory modules:

- **Applied Veterinary Physiology** – studying anatomy and physiology in depth and to an advanced level
- **Systematic Delivery of Veterinary Nursing Care** – analysing nursing models and care plans, and how to implement them in nursing practice
- **Law, Ethics & Professional Practice** – understanding veterinary laws and the associated regulatory organisations
- **Essential Study & Research Skills** – learning how to perform and critique research with grounding in knowledge of academic writing.

I personally felt that the first year was challenging, especially for anyone who had never written an assignment in an academic style before; but the tutors provided fantastic support and they helped to guide the students every step of the way. The module assignments had to be written in an academically sound style and we were required to reference our work correctly, using the Harvard referencing system.

The second year of the DipHECVN involved choosing three out of five optional modules, which you could apply to your specific areas of interest and specialism (**Table 1**). The modules that I chose to study were theatre practice, veterinary surgical nursing and

veterinary anaesthesia, which provided an excellent opportunity to expand and improve my skills and knowledge as well as my understanding of all aspects of surgical nursing.

Table 1. DipHECVN Year 2 modules

Veterinary module
Anaesthesia
Theatre Practice
Surgical Nursing
Medical Nursing
Diagnostic Imaging

For the final exams, students were required to write an academic assignment for each taught module, while some of the major modules also had a written examination at the end of the semester. The written examinations were based on a set number of questions that required an essay-style answer following an academic format with an introduction, main body and conclusion. In addition, the second year modules included a practical examination where specified tasks were performed under exam conditions and students were required to answer oral questions. For example, the surgical nursing practical required the student to perform a specified suture pattern and instrument identification and justify nursing interventions within a care plan for a surgical case.

The final stage required to obtain the overall DipAVN (Small Animal) qualification was to submit a 5,000-word dissertation on a topic of personal interest. This encouraged students to undertake research and gather information from relevant papers and studies on their chosen topic. The evidence gathered was then critically appraised and incorporated into the dissertation in the form of a literature review. Students were also required to present their dissertation as part of an oral exam in the presence of their module tutors.

For my dissertation, I decided to research and appraise evidence on the benefits of post-operative cryotherapy for orthopaedic patients. This involved obtaining research studies from both human and veterinary physiotherapy and orthopaedic practice, to gain an in-depth knowledge of the physiology of cryotherapy, its advantages and disadvantages, along with determining its relevance to veterinary practice.

Students were encouraged to justify how their findings could be implemented in practice to facilitate evidence-based changes to clinical nursing practice.

Once the dissertation has been passed and approved by the RCVS, the RVN is finally awarded the qualification and is therefore entitled to use the post-nominals 'DipAVN'. They also receive their blue DipAVN nursing badge.

The top-up BSc (Hons) degree in Clinical Veterinary Nursing

The top-up degree was a further two-year course, the first year of which consisted of a mandatory module in professional development skills and a module of choice in either nursing of life-limiting conditions or dental nursing. The professional development skills module was aimed at providing students with leadership, mentoring and teaching skills, which would prove beneficial if the RVN was interested in coaching students or lecturing. I chose to study the nursing of life-limiting conditions, which provided an excellent grounding in age-related diseases, the importance of geriatric nurse clinics and the provision of client support, for example bereavement, grief and loss.

For the final year of the BSc (Hons) degree, I chose to study a module on emergency and critical care nursing. This module was extremely useful as I am currently working in an emergency and critical care hospital: it has helped improve my critical nursing skills and provided me with knowledge of various critical conditions and their physiology. A 10,000-word dissertation was also required for the completion of the top-up degree, and I chose to research and study meticillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* (MRSA) and its relevance to veterinary practice and to evaluate the current infection control techniques we use in practice.

Originally, I was not going to continue my studies on to the top-up degree as I felt that achieving the DipAVN (Small Animal) was more than I could ever have dreamt of. However, my tutors, work colleagues and husband were extremely encouraging and talked me into carrying on to obtain the degree. For the sake of an extra 18 months of study, it was probably the best decision that I have ever made and I will hopefully soon have a degree under my belt.

What does the future hold?

I feel that this is just the beginning of my venture and I have many new ideas and plans ahead of me. I enjoy studying and I feel that, by doing this, I can continually strive to better myself and be the best RVN I possibly can. I am currently gathering caseloads and studying for the American Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS) certificate in surgery. I would never have believed it was possible for me to obtain the DipAVN or a BSc (Hons) degree because I was one of the RVNs who studied veterinary nursing via the old NVQ route.

Have further qualifications changed my nursing skills and practice?

Having studied the old NVQ veterinary nursing qualification, I know that it had a very 'disease-based' approach and students were taught how to treat conditions and given only a more limited amount of information on nursing compared with today's taught nursing syllabus. The DipHECVN and DipAVN (Small Animal) have given me beneficial and in-depth knowledge of nursing patients using a holistic approach, following the nursing process and implementing patient-specific care plans. This process is absolutely essential in providing expert and specialist patient care and ultimately allows the RVN to deliver 'gold-standard' nursing care and maximise patient care.

The specialist modules such as theatre, surgical and anaesthesia practice have proved to be invaluable in my work as a referral surgical nurse. They have enabled me to promote best practice in the surgical environment by utilising the evidence-based knowledge that I have gained throughout my study. For example, I am fully aware of the potential benefits of wearing adequate surgical attire in the operating theatre and which type of surgical drape is best for maintaining optimum surgical site asepsis. In addition, having a thorough understanding of the variety of surgical conditions and their physiology has also improved patient care – relevant patient care plans can be formulated, and the theatre environment and equipment can be correctly prepared prior to surgery (Figure 2). An important aspect of the DipAVN is to encourage the RVN to



▣ **Figure 2.** Promoting surgical patient safety by ensuring adequate pre-operative patient management. Pre-oxygenation and clipping of the patient before undergoing a diaphragmatic hernia repair

perform and appraise research which can then be implemented into clinical practice; this allows the RVN to stay current with evidence-based techniques, and also enhances patient care.

Since recently finding my dream job, where I can be involved in both soft tissue and orthopaedic referral surgery, I have taken on a senior theatre role in practice. The knowledge that I have gained throughout the past four years of study has greatly assisted me in fulfilling this role. I assist in ensuring maximum levels of aseptic techniques and promoting excellent standards of surgical nursing care, along with performing specialist surgical nursing duties, such as the scrub nurse role (Figure 3). I also deliver CPD lectures to our nurses on surgical nursing and theatre practice.



▣ **Figure 3.** Assisting the surgeon during surgery

Would I recommend further qualifications to other RVNs?

I would advise any RVN who is considering higher education and further qualifications to grab the opportunity with both hands. Gaining qualifications such as the DipHECVN and the DipAVN (Small Animal) is an excellent way for RVNs to improve their expertise and accountability within the profession, not to mention the benefits and positive impact that specialist studies can have on the quality and level of expert nursing care that is delivered to our patients. I will be honest: it is hard work and it does require a high level of dedication and determination, along with many hours of study per week. However, I can assure you that it is 110 per cent worth it and it will definitely change the way that you approach veterinary nursing for the better. [vni](#)

Further reading

MYERSCOUGH COLLEGE – Higher Education Veterinary Nursing Courses. [Online] Available from: <http://www.myerscough.ac.uk/?page=subjects-veterinary-HE> [Accessed: 8 July 2014].

RCVS – Education guidelines for the Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing. [Online] Available from: <http://www.rcvs.org.uk/education/diploma-in-advanced-veterinary-nursing/> [Accessed: 8 July 2014].