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Sue qualified in 1976 and worked in a variety of veterinary practices for 18 years before she embarked on a teaching career – firstly at the Berkshire College of Agriculture and latterly at the University of Bristol, where she worked for over 20 years until taking early retirement last year.

During her career, she served two terms as a BVNA Council member and became president in 2010. She has received both the CAW Award and the RCVS Golden Jubilee Award and was awarded honorary membership of the BVNA at this year's congress.

Sue now works part time for several institutions on a number of projects, including the development of the veterinary nursing benchmarks for QAA. She is an education consultant for Central Qualifications and she has continued her involvement with the VNJ. She admits to quite liking Border terriers!

# Role of the Nurse Mentor – Part 1

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**ABSTRACT:** When newly qualified nurses are asked to identify the most influential person in their training, many will quite rightly cite one of their college tutors. But, it is also very likely that many of them will name an experienced nurse that they worked alongside in practice, be it their clinical coach, head nurse or a qualified RVN who supervised their practical experience.

In this, the first of a series of three articles, the author considers the factors that come into play, and concludes it is hardly surprising that a senior, more experienced, nurse would have such an impact upon a less experienced one.

The opportunity to work alongside a good role model is critical to the development of the student veterinary nurse and yet it is one that is largely overlooked by everyone involved in the training process, including many of the role models themselves!

Think back to the potentially aspirational people that you knew during your own student experience. Was your head nurse patient, calm, considerate, knowledgeable, empathetic and professional; or impatient, inclined to moan about others behind their back or work-shy?

In reality, it is highly unlikely that your head nurse fitted into either of these categories, as human personalities are far more multi-faceted. However, it is worth reflecting on how your relationship with that individual influenced your subsequent behaviour as a veterinary nurse and, if they were very influential, even as a person.

## TASK ONE

With your colleagues, draw up a list of all the qualities required by an ideal veterinary nurse role model.

It is highly unlikely that one individual will have all these qualities, so identify the specific skills and personality traits that you possess. This is very difficult for most people to do, as it demands a significant degree of personal insight, so ask your colleagues to identify the nursing qualities that they admire you for and do the same for them.

Then explore ways to ensure that your students can work alongside the various team members in order to gain maximum exposure to the different skill sets and traits that you have identified.

✔ **Figure 1.** The coach generally has a well-defined part to play in the relationship



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## What's in a name?

There is a wide variety of terms that can be used to describe the relationship between the teacher or tutor and the learner; some have very specific meanings whilst others cover a range of aspects of this relationship.

### Clinical coach

The coach generally has a well-defined part to play in the relationship – think of sports or life coaches. The main aim of the relationship is to help the individual achieve predefined, focused goals, be they personal or sports related.

The coach will need to be capable of monitoring and motivating the learner and will set increasing levels of performance; in addition coaching tends to focus on a very specific target rather than ongoing performance.<sup>1</sup>

In veterinary nursing, the term describes a relationship that focuses on the end goal of gaining the RVN qualification and, whilst this is appropriate, it does not necessarily encompass the additional elements required to turn the student into a meaningful member of the professional community (Figure 1).

### Facilitator

This term describes someone who enables both individuals and groups to work (or in this case, learn) more effectively. The facilitator works in a neutral manner to provide a synergistic environment that improves outcome.

### Role model

A role model is an individual who others may wish to emulate for a variety of reasons.

In today's society, the phenomenon of 'celebrity' has given rise to numerous role models who are seen as aspirational because they are well known, for example, film or music stars; or because they are the best at what they do, such as celebrated sports stars; whilst some are famous just for being famous, or even infamous!

Whilst some may influence impressionable individuals for less constructive reasons, in general a role model provides a positive developmental influence. Student veterinary nurses generally aspire to be like their more senior colleagues for a variety of reasons including:

- Experience – they wish to emulate the apparently effortless way that experienced staff accomplish tasks, apply theory to practice, interact with colleagues and clients in a relaxed but professional manner.
- Knowledge – the ability to recall information without reference to books or websites gives an impression that the experienced individual is all-knowing and reliable.
- Professionalism – the display of adherence to clear ethical guidelines by experienced staff provides a supportive environment for more junior team members, who would otherwise find the challenge to their emerging professional identity, by potentially unethical behaviour in those who influence practice, disturbing.
- Interpersonal skills – confident interaction with other team members, including those who are more senior than the role model, as well as the ability to relate to demanding or emotional clients, are both seen as aspirational qualities by students as being indicative of confidence – a trait that is generally beyond the ability of the inexperienced practitioner at that stage in their career.

### Assessor

An important aspect of the learning experience is that of assessing progress, and this is no less important within

the clinical environment, where both the application of theory and the performance of clinical skills must be monitored and a decision made regarding the student's competence.

Although assessment is relatively informal within the veterinary practice environment it is important because it is conducted in real life situations and, as such, it may be more demanding than similar assessments in the college environment as it requires consideration of complex factors by the student (Figure 2).

Benner (1984) describes competence as being the stage between the performance of the novice and the smooth adaptable performance of the expert.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of the Nursing Progress Log/Clinical Skills Log in veterinary nurse training is to test the student's progress across the skills base that it is essential to master in order to become a competent and safe practitioner. Thus, the nurse assessor's role is pivotal, not just in making decisions regarding student progress, but also in providing feedback, which is an essential part of the learning experience.

### Supervisor

Whilst most people would describe supervision simply as the observation of the learner, it is generally considered to be a more complex process that involves

Figure 2. Although assessment is relatively informal within the veterinary practice environment it is important because it is conducted in real life situations



formalizing the relationship between the student and the experienced staff members.

Clinical supervision can be variously described as, a process for safeguarding standards of care, a recognition of individual practitioner responsibilities under clinical governance, as well as a method of practice-based learning which contributes to individual CPD.<sup>1</sup>

To achieve this, clinical supervision is best described as 'protected time' that allows for in-depth reflection on clinical practice. This is not generally a feature of VN training owing to a perceived lack of time, but it should be attempted because it provides an opportunity to reflect on, and improve, practice for the whole team, not just the learner!

### TASK 2

Would you appreciate the opportunity to formally stop and discuss your work with someone in whom you have confidence, on a regular basis? How would you achieve this within your working environment?

### Preceptor

The National Health Service (NHS) advocates a period of 'preceptorship' for newly qualified health practitioners, because it recognizes that the immediate post-qualification period can be very challenging.<sup>3</sup>

Expectations on the part of colleagues and the individual themselves can be unreasonably high and initial experiences during this period will have a profound effect on future practice and levels of confidence may be undermined if some of these experiences are negative. For that reason it is important that these 'emerging professionals' are initially fully supported in their journey towards Benner's 'expert' status.

This concept is not one that has been adopted in veterinary nursing, but it has significant advantages; so for those who are interested in the process, further information about the role can be obtained by going to the RCN website [https://www.rcn.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/307756/Preceptorship\\_framework.pdf](https://www.rcn.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/307756/Preceptorship_framework.pdf)

### TASK 3

How do you support your newly qualified team members?

Think back to your career immediately after qualification, how did you feel about your newly acquired status?

Can you recall a significant experience during this period – why did it have a profound effect on you at the time?

### Mentor

The mentor is someone who supervises and directs the novice. She or he will encourage support and offer direction;


**“Most student veterinary nurses will train in a single practice for at least two years and undergraduates will often return to a single practice during their extramural periods throughout their degree”**

in fact they will undertake all of the elements of the previously discussed roles to a greater or lesser extent. The major difference is that ideally, the relationship is generally a long-term one and as such, the relationship is closer.

Most student veterinary nurses will train in a single practice for at least two years and undergraduates will often return to a single practice during their extramural periods throughout their degree. Therefore, the opportunity for a much more supportive relationship will present itself, which can be fulfilling for mentor and mentee alike.

Of course, this relies upon the two individuals being able to build a meaningful relationship and it is therefore important that the two have an affinity. The mentor must have positive feelings about the mentee, whilst the latter should, in addition, view the mentor as an aspirational individual in whom they can confide their concerns.<sup>4</sup>

There is a much greater emphasis on the effective domain for the mentor – rather than being purely outcome related, as the coach is, or focused on the measurement of performance as an assessor, the mentor approaches the role in an holistic manner which incorporates all of the other roles; and additionally builds a close relationship with the mentee, which allows for a more profound learning experience.

**The next article in the series will explore the role of the mentor in greater detail. **

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