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Anne is an experienced veterinary nurse who has worked in a variety of clinical and non-clinical settings. She is passionate about a range of veterinary nursing-related topics, including dog welfare. The fee for this article has been used to support the welfare of street dogs in Romania, by providing much-needed veterinary care. She can be contacted via the BVNA if you would like further information.

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Carry on ... Student Vet Nursing

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Introduction

Being a trainee veterinary nurse is not without its challenges. This article is a collection of memories from the turbulent days of being a trainee nurse in the 1990s. They may give hope to student nurses everywhere as this trainee did (eventually) manage to qualify and has been a qualified veterinary nurse for many years.

How (not) to make a good first impression

Your first trainee veterinary position is a momentous occasion, especially when you have written to over 250 practices in a desperate attempt to find that elusive first post. However, every practice is different and fitting in requires the student nurse to quickly ascertain practice culture. Particularly if you will be living with your fellow student nurses as well as working with them. What better than to prepare a sumptuous meal for them on the first week in your new job as a trainee nurse? A true bonding session for soulmates treading the same career path through life. And so it was that our trainee spent a half day preparing her new housemates a delicious stew fit for a king. Half-way through the meal, Jane commented that she did not recognise the meat and asked what it was. "Rabbit", our trainee exclaimed proudly. The room went silent, followed by trainee nurses looking very sick and some rather cross words were exchanged. How was our trainee to know that she had landed a job at a veterinary practice that prided itself on its modern approach to rabbit medicine and with staff that were particularly passionate about rabbits? It was perhaps not the best of starts to practice life ... But she was a quick learner and did not repeat this error when joining the Cats Protection.

Client communication skills are important

Every student nurse revels in the moment at which the head nurse deems them suitable to start giving clinical advice. Our trainee was no different. Early on in her student nursing career, she was given the supremely important role of explaining to clients how to apply Frontline to their cat. After many such opportunities, her client patter was honed to a fine art. Unless, that is, scary boss was present to watch and then she would watch his nasal hair nervously for signs of disapproval. One twitch for not good, two for really bad, and rapid twitches signified the need to run for your life. Oh, the imagination of a young trainee nurse! However, trying too hard to please is not always a good thing and leads to errors. She was being watched by the boss one day. After painstakingly explaining how to part the fur on the nape of the neck and apply the product, our trainee beamed at the client and finished off with a fake-confident flourish "And you should find that after 24 h it has killed your cat". Remarkably the client still bought the product. We guess she wasn't fond of cats. And the boss was not so fond of his newest trainee nurse.

Don't critique the octopus

Reception was a key part of the student nurse's job and we all used to take our turns on reception, learning the fine arts of filing index cards and client care from the matriarchs that controlled front of house. The newest receptionist was a formidable woman, newly retired from the NHS with the crisp posh tones of a lady born to old money and that she used to deliver her own brand of deliciously refreshing honesty. There are times when honesty is not the best

policy though, and our trainee learnt a lot about how not to do things. Top tips included: (1) don't send clients home with a local cat rescue leaflet after they have just had their cat euthanased. They don't respond well; (2) unemployed clients seeking cheap vet care do not want you to turn to the jobs page of the local paper and show them there are plenty of jobs available for a person like them. They don't respond well. Reception was not a long-lived career for our Violet, the boss taking an unreasonable objection to being told that he really ought to think about doing something with his nasal hair as it looked like an octopus. We guess he didn't respond well either, but he never talked about it and the nasal octopus lived to see another day.

Microwaves: an SVN's best friend?

Our trainee woke up on the Sunday in a cold sweat. She had put Mrs Jones' recently deceased Cavalier King Charles Spaniel in the freezer on Saturday but when she called to say she wanted to take him home to bury him after all, had completely forgotten to remove him. Now Mrs Jones was coming down, today, in just two hours. And our trainee was on with scary vet-boss who would kill her for sure. She had a brainwave. Well, technically it was not a brainwave, it was a microwave. The staff room microwave. She would pop Alfie in, pick the defrost setting, and gently prepare him for his owner's arrival. It was somewhat of a manufacturing oversight that there was no pre-set defrost button for Cavaliers, but this was not a significant barrier to success. Pork chop × weight in grams would do nicely. Just keep hitting the repeat button. Fortunately, our fuller-figured Alfie was too big to fit the microwave and they were both rescued by a more experienced nurse who ensured more appropriate measures were taken.

Oooh-la-la – the sexy French tumour man

Our trainee used to love helping the boss undertake lumpectomies and filling in the histology form for him. The boss would dictate what to write and she would jot it down feeling like a proper professional, then pack the sample and stroll off down to the postbox. Often he would say "suspected Marcelle tumour" and as she recorded this information on the form she would imagine whether this French man who had a tumour named after him was as dashing and fit as his name suggested. Was he a vet? How did he get to have a tumour named after him? Would there ever be a tumour named after a veterinary nurse? Maybe even after me? It was many years later that she realised that her boss had been saying "Mast cell tumour". Thankfully, the pathology lab never reported the error and we suspect the boss never knew what quality clinical histories were being attributed to his fine name. Alas, the boss did register our trainee's incompetence in discharging dogs post cruciate surgery, as she alternated between referring to the knee joint as the "stiffle or stiffler joint". Alas, an affliction that still plagues her today, despite many years in practice and several stints in orthopaedic referral centres.

Health and safety is over-rated

Every student nurse needs experiences to develop. In search of new opportunities, our trainee joined a new practice one year after starting her training. She had only ever used non-rebreathing circuits at her first vet clinic, but this new practice used something scary called a "Circle". She tried to tell the vet that she didn't know how to use one, but reassuringly he said he would mentor her through its use. The dog was anaesthetised, connected to the circuit and the anaesthetic gases turned on. A couple of minutes later she was instructed to "dump the bag to remove nitrogen". She looked at him blankly. "Empty the bag

of anaesthetic gas", he explained in more detail. "Ah ha, this is easy", our trainee thought, "I can so do this!" Immediately she removed the rebreathing bag from the circuit, triumphantly squeezed all the anaesthetic gas into the air surrounding them and quickly reconnected the bag to the circuit. The vet's mouth fell open as he looked at her, clearly dumbfounded. Finally, he composed himself: "That is one way to do it ... however, there are better ways." Our trainee clearly had a lot to learn about anaesthetics and health and safety.

The equine client

You can take the trainee VN out of the city, but you cannot take the city out of the trainee VN, and so it was that this townie started a stint working at country practice in deepest, darkest Yorkshire. While covering reception one day, she took a phone call from a client who wanted to book a sheath cleaning for her horse. She paused. Sheath? What on earth was a sheath? The penny was starting to drop. "Sheath", our trainee said. "You mean foreskin? As in Penis? As in a horse's penis?" It is not often that she was lost for words but she was at this point. Finally, she managed to rephrase the booking request to aid her understanding. "You want to book the vet to come out and clean your horse's penis for you? Seriously?" "Yes", said our client, clearly wondering who this idiot was on the end of the phone. Sweet "cheesus", removing smegma balls from a horse's willy?! Our trainee remained eternally grateful that she never trained as an equine veterinary nurse.

Being a trainee veterinary nurse is not an easy job to do and our trainee clearly had much learning to do about the art of being a competent veterinary nurse. However, she persevered and remains in practice today, many years later. She never tried to microwave a patient again, and remains relieved that willy washing is not considered a day one competency for veterinary nurses.