

My role as a clinical coach in veterinary practice

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Figure 1. The author (left) and student VN, Jessica Izzard, discussing her NPL



ABSTRACT: I have had the role of 'teacher' in many forms over the years. I have seen the training scheme for veterinary nurses evolve from the days of the 'green book', through the editions of the Portfolio with the NVQ qualification, and now to the Nursing Progress Log (NPL) with the Level 3 Diploma in Veterinary Nursing.

Over the years, I have been a trainer, a lecturer in veterinary nursing at Berkshire College of Agriculture, D32/33 Unit assessor, A1 assessor and now a clinical coach. Although the qualifications have changed, my role as a clinical coach still involves what it always has done – to provide a high standard of practical training of nursing skills to student veterinary nurses, while delivering this in a supportive way that encourages the students to be self-directed and enjoy learning for themselves.

My current role is in a large mixed practice with 28 veterinary surgeons and 26 nurses (including student and qualified nurses). It is a training practice for both small animal and equine nursing. We currently have nine students in various stages of training, three equine clinical coaches and three small animal clinical coaches.

To support the clinical coaches, a team of veterinary surgeons, veterinary nurses and support staff 'witnesses' help to observe the experiences that the students are gaining during their training. I am required to oversee the clinical coach team and am also a coach to two small animal students.

I liaise with the colleges at which our students are enrolled and find that clear communication is vital. It is important for me to pass on any relevant information to the other members of the clinical coach team to ensure that we are following all the guidelines correctly.

I feel that my role as a clinical coach is to guide the students through their training. Initially, I spend time explaining how the system works, what their responsibilities are and how the practice team and I will support them.

Although I encourage them to work out for themselves how they are going to gather experience, they do require guidance, support and suggestions to set

them on the right path. This is achieved by regular tutorials.

Completion of a learning style questionnaire gives me insight into how they learn and how I can adapt my approach to best suit their understanding. I encourage students to keep a diary of the nursing skills they complete every day to help them record experiences to complete the NPL. A plan can then be devised with manageable deadlines. If the goals are achieved, then step-by-step the listed NPL skills are completed.

This continuous achievement encourages the students to go on and work towards more units and momentum gathers, which further motivates them to complete their work.

If goals are not achieved in the agreed time-frame, the support structure allows the student to see where she or he can make improvements to meet the deadlines and complete the work in a timely manner.

I ensure that I keep up-to-date records of my meetings with the students and complete tutorial records and 'skills match' records to help me plan my support of their progress. Having a record in front of me means I can recap what was discussed at the previous tutorial, what deadlines are approaching and how the student is progressing with the NPL, studying and assignment work.



Figure 2. The author (right) working on clinical skills with student VN, Jessica Izzard, and 'Evie' the dog

Although the tutorial is led by the student and focuses on how they are going to tackle the various challenges facing them, I provide guidance without telling them what to do. This way they develop ownership of the process and become more responsible for their own training.

As a clinical coach, I also have a role in supporting the students through their college work. Students are assessed in many ways, including tests and assignments, along with the practical skills in the NPL. I find the approach of guidance rather than 'spoon feeding' works well to instil confidence so the student completes the task while learning through self-research.

Students need varying degrees of support in learning the topics they are taught; and additional explanations and help to apply theory to practice are all invaluable. Yearly visits from our Approved Centre are carried out to ensure the support that we provide the students is appropriate.

I co-ordinate these, as well as visits to observe clinical coaches at work, to ensure we are providing the right guidance and help. Clinical coaches also attend standardisation meetings every year to ensure we are all maintaining standards and are using the latest guidance.

My role also includes an element of pastoral support. The students have to fit

in their day-to-day job, including night duties and weekends, with college work and completion of the NPL. This can be overwhelming for some and guidance to plan for work, study and play can help reduce stress and set achievable deadlines.

Challenges of clinical coaching

Time management and flexibility are very important to meet the challenges of being a clinical coach. I can plan a tutorial and training session; but the best-laid plans can be foiled by an emergency case that appears, requiring all hands on deck.

Flexibility is key here and it is worth remembering that there will probably be some aspect of the emergency case that will provide a learning opportunity. Of course, the tutorial will still need to be carried out at another time!

Another challenge is being able to integrate student support and training within the working day of a busy practice. We are fortunate in that we see a large number of varied cases in the equine and small animal departments of the practice. Training occurs every day when working with our patients and it does not have to be limited to completing assignments or private study.

Three hours per week has to be allocated to each student for training. During

this time we carry out tutorials and give students time for private study.

As with all systems and individuals, it is not perfect for everyone. I find it is often a case of being flexible to accommodate the needs of the student while adhering to the guidelines and regulations. The Approved Centre will provide guidance and support in these situations to try and achieve the best outcome for all parties.

Rewards of clinical coaching

I have found training students in practice and when lecturing, extremely rewarding.

We need qualified veterinary nurses in practice and I feel it is important to provide opportunities for nurses to train. When you have been involved in the training of nurses from their first day at work to their final exams, and seen how they have developed into competent, talented nurses, it is worth all the hard work!

This summer (2013) all eight of our students were successful in their examinations (including Theory and OSCE exams). This was a direct consequence of the hard work of the students, clinical coaches and their lecturers in the colleges.

I feel it is important to put something back into the profession of which I have enjoyed being a part for the last 26 years. When I was training, I had help and support from the vets and nurses in the practice and it is only right that I do the same for our current students.

The practice also benefits as we have nurses who work extremely hard and are with us for approximately five years during their training. This helps to maintain a stable workforce.

The future

I feel that it is important that veterinary practices continue to train student nurses in the workplace and that the combination of theory and practice works well.

There are costs and challenges to be met, but with careful planning and organisation both parties can benefit. I hope to be a clinical coach for many more years. 