



**Philippa Richmond** BSc(Hons) RVN  
RSQP MBVNA

Philippa Richmond graduated from Harper Adams University in 2013 with a first-class honours degree in Veterinary Nursing and Practice Management. She is also a qualified RSQP. Philippa works at Willows Veterinary Hospital in Cheshire, as an RVN and clinical coach, and has particular interests in medical nursing, nurse clinics and research/education. She is currently studying towards the Vets Now Certificate in Emergency and Critical Care.

# My first six months as an RVN

**Philippa Richmond** BSc(Hons) RVN RSQP MBVNA  
Willows Veterinary Hospital, 267 Chester Road, Hartford, Northwich, Cheshire,  
CW8 1LP, UK

## Introduction

Starting your first job as an RVN may be a nervous, albeit exciting time. This article aims to provide peer support to students and newly qualified veterinary nurses entering their first job. It discusses the transition from student to RVN, and the author's experience of progressing through these phases. It highlights the importance of remaining confident in your abilities/knowledge and allowing yourself time to settle in and adjust to a new chapter in your life.

## Entering veterinary practice

I began my first job in July 2013 after obtaining my degree results. As I had not yet graduated I was classed as a *graduand*. A graduand is defined as a person who is about to receive an academic degree. I received my degree results in July but did not graduate and enter the RCVS Register until October. I felt as if I was stuck in limbo: due to the restrictions of Schedule 3. I was unable to do what I had been doing as a student as I was no longer enrolled on a training course, but could not yet perform the tasks permitted to qualified nurses.

On my first day, I was wearing the green-and-white striped tunic that I had worn previously during my training as I was asked to wear this until I had graduated. I was immediately mistaken for a student and was introduced to the veterinary team as 'Philippa, the new student'. This caused confusion, as the students currently working at the practice wore navy blue. Despite explaining my situation to each staff member I worked with, there was still uncertainty over what I was capable of doing and what I could legally do. I understood why others still saw me as a student but found this a little disconcerting.

I was classified as a graduand for over three months and, although it was frustrating to be unable to do tasks that I once could, for example venepuncture, a scale and polish and other schedule three procedures, there were numerous benefits. Starting my new job whilst a graduand enabled me to adapt more easily to working full time including the different shift patterns and the long commute, which were very different to my life at university. It also gave me the opportunity to familiarise myself with the practice and its protocols without the added pressure and responsibilities of being qualified – experience which I feel is invaluable.

## General worries

When I started my job I sometimes felt as if I didn't know how to do anything at all – even performing simple tasks such as cleaning a kennel. In my first week I was told by a student nurse that I was cleaning kennels incorrectly which I found disconcerting as I wondered how anyone could possibly clean a kennel wrong! I think it's important to remember that there may be a number of correct ways for things to be done, so it is necessary to be open to different methods – the learning process doesn't end upon qualification. However, the main point is to be confident in your ability to perform the method that you were taught; you wouldn't have successfully completed your practical and theoretical training if you weren't capable!

Having established rewarding friendships with the staff at my training practice, I was anxious that I wouldn't make new friends as easily, as my new practice was much larger than previous practices that I had worked in. I worried about this countless times during the weeks prior to starting my new job. This, thankfully, proved to be a waste of time and effort, as within a few weeks I was invited to social events outside of

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work and even stayed at a colleague's house overnight when going to the staff Christmas party. I quickly and easily felt part of the team. In retrospect I feel I put too much pressure on myself initially to make friends and fit in; I had hoped to be settled within a week but in reality it can take several weeks or even months. My advice when starting a new job would be to allow yourself time to settle in and adjust to the new practice and, most importantly, to be yourself.

During my first few months I didn't always feel confident to ask for help from my colleagues. On one occasion I was asked to hold a large Labrador Retriever for blood sampling; the dog was wriggly and very strong and rather than asking for help I ended up falling flat on my back. Don't be afraid to speak up and ask for help or say if you are not happy with how an animal is being restrained. Again, be confident, it's better to say something than to end up scratched or bitten, something which happens to us all too often.

## You've graduated/qualified!

You have finally done it. All the hard work has paid off and you are now qualified/graduated – finally having that little badge and knowing you are an RVN is one of the best feelings ever and cannot be beaten. As soon as I put on my bottle-green uniform I instantly felt more confident. Just that small change in tunic colour (don't underestimate it) meant my colleagues treated me differently – I immediately had more respect.

As an RVN you now have responsibilities and are accountable for your actions, and this may take time to adapt to. As a student you feel as if you are at the bottom of the hierarchy but as an RVN you may now have responsibility for veterinary care assistants and student nurses. I struggled with this initially as it felt very daunting being able to delegate duties to other members of staff, but remember, you have completed your qualification and in the process may well have gained more knowledge than them. Despite this however, you may have less practical experience and skills



which may need to be honed, sharing of knowledge and experiences between colleagues can be mutually beneficial. If you have problems with delegation and management, speak to your head nurse or line manager. They may be able to organise a training course or team-building activity that could help.

Whilst studying for your qualification you are taught the gold-standard techniques and practices. When you start working in practice you realise quickly that this is not necessarily the way things are done. It is vital that you don't rush straight in with new ideas to change things without first gaining the trust and respect of your colleagues including vets, nurses and support staff as, once you have this, they will then be more likely to accept your suggestions. Gain the respect of your colleagues and senior staff by first showing what you are capable of, before beginning to implement small changes. Over the course of my first three months I introduced a medicine administration chart for use whilst working on kennels. After the success of this and due to my interest in nurse clinics and nutrition,

I was asked to implement feeding guidelines for inpatients and to set up obesity clinics with a fellow RVN.

As a student you receive regular feedback on your performance. In the workplace your progress may not be reviewed except for a probationary meeting, so you may feel uncertain whether your managers and colleagues are happy with what you are doing. I found this difficult to adjust to, so I asked another RVN how she thought I was progressing and if there was anything I could improve on. This really helped boost my confidence and I would recommend this if you feel unsure about your progress. From my own personal experience I also feel it would be useful to have a mentor in the practice who is aware that the new nurse may value regular feedback.

## Conclusion

When starting your first RVN job (or any new job), remember to be confident in your abilities, be yourself and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it. Good luck!