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Marie obtained a First Class Honours Degree in Equine Sports Science in 2005. Marie has worked at Scarsdale Vets in Derby since 2003 and qualified as an REVN with merit in 2007. In 2012, Marie completed the Diploma in Higher Education Clinical Veterinary Nursing (Dip HE CVN) and obtained the RCVS Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing (Dip AVN) in equine context, with distinction. Marie has been lecturing on the Veterinary Nursing Diploma course since 2010 at Bottle Green Training in Melbourne. Marie has had articles published in a number of veterinary journals including *The Veterinary Nurse* and *Veterinary Practice Today*. Marie's special interests include foal nursing, bandaging, radiography, anaesthesia and intravenous catheter care. The proceeds from this article have been donated to The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust. Email: mariediddles@gmail.com

Helping horses and donkeys in The Gambia

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ABSTRACT: As a Registered Equine Veterinary Nurse (REVN), Marie had always been interested in equine welfare. In 2015, she flew out to The Gambia, Africa to work at The Gambia Horse and Donkey Trust (GHDT). The REVN spend two weeks at GHDT helping to look after inpatients, treat horses and donkeys out on visits and at markets. This article focuses on Marie's second trip out to GHDT in December 2017 and demonstrates that it is both challenging and rewarding for a REVN to go abroad, and share skills and knowledge, to help animals and owners in need.

Keywords: horse; donkey; welfare

On 5 December 2017 myself and Jan Puzio MRCVS (Endell Equine Vets) flew out to Banjul, Gambia for a 10-day trip. The Gambia is a small north-west African country, bounded by Senegal. This trip was kindly sponsored by The British Equine Veterinary Association (BEVA) Trust. The purpose of the trip was to help out at The Gambia Horse and Donkey trust (GHDT), which is a small charity, registered in both the UK and The Gambia. The GHDT was founded in 2002 by the late Stella Marsden and her sister Heather Armstrong, who is the charity's Director. With no tradition of horsemanship in The Gambia and a combination of poor management, high disease risk and poverty, farmers were investing comparatively large amounts of money for a working animal only for it to die, too often within six months. Not only was this causing further hardship for the farmers, it was also creating a serious animal welfare problem and the veterinary services did not have the infrastructure or finances to be able to help the farmers. The aim of the GHDT is to reduce rural poverty in The Gambia through improving the health, welfare and productivity of working animals.

This was my second visit to The Gambia, I had already been out to work at GHDT two years previously in 2015. During this 14-day trip, I worked at the original GHDT centre with two UK vets, Jenny Croft and Nancy Homewood. The original centre was situated four hours from the coast at a place called Sambel Kunda. The

centre at Sambel Kunda was very remote, which presented us with many challenges during our stay.

After a six-hour plane ride, myself and Jenny Croft arrived at Banjul airport and were greeted by Heather Armstrong, the director of GHDT. We were then driven to the new GHDT centre that had been built at Makasutu, just 30 minutes from the coast. This new centre had been built using funds raised and donated by The Vets with Horsepower Team. This new centre was a fantastic sight. There was a reception building with a lecture theatre on the ground floor. On the upper floor, there were eight bedrooms and four bathrooms for volunteers. There were many nice stables and some turn-out paddocks, a feed room, two examinations rooms and a pharmacy.

Most mornings involved an early start to go out and help the GHDT staff to feed, turn-out and muck out the inpatients. We would then have breakfast. After this, myself and Nancy Homewood would go and begin treatments on the inpatients. Cases presented included: fistulous withers, an abscess, cellulitis, a leg wound on the medial tibia, a cutlass wound to the flexor tendons on a foreleg, an ear wound and a land-mine wound. Treatments involved cleaning wounds, lancing the abscess, opening up and flushing the fistulous withers, re-bandaging the wounds, and administering intravenous and intramuscular medications. The main aim of myself and Jan being present for



▲ **Figure 1.** A patient receives intravenous fluid therapy (IVFT) at the centre



▲ **Figure 2.** The entrance to the show ground at Abuko



▲ **Figure 3.** Show entires being judged



▲ **Figure 4.** Happy recipients of a much desired GHDT rosette (photo credit Kathy Sharman)

these treatments was to teach the para-vet apprentices how to assess conditions and make treatment decisions. The apprentices we worked with were enthusiastic, knowledgeable and keen to learn. They were an absolute joy to teach. On two days, in the afternoon, we ran some lectures for the students. Jan did a presentation on dystocia and foaling on one day. On another day we both ran sessions on antibiotic identification and use, correct administration of medications and blood transfusions. The lectures were given in a purpose-built lecture theatre, which provided a good learning environment.

Some of our time was taken up going out on visits or “trekking” as it is known at GHDT. We would go out with a driver, one of the GHDT staff and one of the

apprentices. Again, the main aim was for myself and Jan to show the apprentices how to approach and treat the cases with the materials available to them. We saw many cases while we were trekking, these included a distal sesamoidean ligament strain, some general wounds, a road traffic accident and a case of suspected epizootic lymphangitis. One of the cases we went out to see was a pelvic flexure impaction. When we arrived, the horse was in considerable pain. We examined the horse, administered pain relief and stomach tubed her with electrolytes. We eventually ended up bringing the horse into the centre for intensive treatment. This included intravenous fluid therapy (IVFT) (Figure 1), frequent stomach tubing, which we did through the night, pain relief and regular colic checks. Within

24 h, the horse had passed the majority of the impaction, which was a great relief to myself and Jan, as we were scheduled to leave the next day. One of the GHDT staff named the horse after me, because I had spent all night with Jan helping to check and stomach tube her.

The main reason that myself and Jan went out to The Gambia in December was to attend the GHDT annual show (Figures 2 and 3). The show was held in Abuko, about 45 minutes away from the centre at Makasutu on Saturday 9 December 2017. The show had been held at the old centre at Sambel Kunda in previous years, but this was the first time it had been held at a new venue. The show was set up and run by GHDT director Heather as a way to motivate people to care for their animals



▲ **Figure 5.** Marie and Jan ready for action at the GHDT show (photo credit Jan Puzio)



▲ **Figure 6.** Marie carries out a TPR examination on a donkey foal (photo credit Jan Puzio)



▲ **Figure 7.** Marie administers a wormer to a patient (photo credit Jeanette Aron)



▲ **Figure 8.** A saddle cloth adapted to relieve pressure over fistulous withers

correctly. Well cared for and turned out horses and donkeys received a much-desired GHDT rosette (**Figure 4**). Horses and donkeys that got placed in their classes won a rosette and some prize money.

Myself, Jan and some of the GHDT staff set up a vet clinic under some trees at the show ground (**Figure 5**). Both myself and Jan were assigned a para-vet apprentice to guide and teach during the day. We were joined by three Equine Dental Technicians (EDTs) and a farrier from the UK. Other volunteers came out from the UK to help at the show. Upon arrival, every horse or donkey that came to the show got a free headcollar, snaffle bit and saddle cloth. The owners were given a free

high-visibility vest and then they were sent on to get free vet, dental and farrier treatment. For the majority of the day, myself and Jan carried out general health checks, including TPR (temperature, pulse, respiration) examinations, general check overs, wound cleaning and administering a wormer if necessary (**Figures 6 and 7**). We also treated a number of horses and donkeys for trypanosomiasis, which is a parasitic disease that causes serious economic losses in livestock from anaemia, loss of condition and emaciation. Many untreated cases are fatal. The disease is difficult to control as it is spread by the tsetse fly. Other cases treated included fistulous withers and colic. Some of the fistulous withers were so chronic that they could not be drained, so I

adapted the saddle clothes that had been given out to relieve pressure on the area (**Figures 8 and 9**). Overall, it was really nice to see so many healthy, well cared for horses and donkeys at the show. The owners were knowledgeable, very friendly and a pleasure to work with. The show was a great success and it was estimated that over 100 horses and donkeys attended. The Gambian Minister for Agriculture also made an appearance and some school children gave a performance.

Overall, the trip was a great experience. Jan and I learned a lot from each other and made a good veterinary team. We met some pretty amazing people at GHDT (**Figure 10**). The students were very enthusiastic, talented and keen to



Figure 9. A saddle cloth adapted to relieve pressure over fistulous withers

learn. The staff at GHDT are wonderful, very friendly and welcoming. They do an outstanding job with limited resources. I think I learnt as much from them as they

learnt from me. One of the greatest challenges of the trip was to go out and treat diseases that I had never seen before using very limited veterinary resources. This



Figure 10. Volunteers and GHDT staff

situation really pushes you to think on your feet and makes you quite resourceful. I would encourage other Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVNs) to go out and work in other countries. It really does present a unique challenge, and you will meet some amazing people on the way. My visit to The Gambia made me really proud to be an REVN, and proud of the veterinary profession, where so many volunteers are willing to give up their time for free, to go out and help animals and owners in need, in a different country.

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