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Kelly started her career with cats almost 11 years ago, when she became a Cat Care Assistant for the Cats Protection. Kelly qualified as a Registered Veterinary Nurse in 2015 and began to delve deeper in to the feline world, where she set up the practice as a cat friendly clinic and went on to make many changes to how the practice approached cats. Kelly has recently completed the ISFM Diploma in Feline Nursing, and is currently studying towards the ISFM Advanced Certificate in Feline Behaviour. Kelly now runs the Royal Canin Feline Healthy Ageing Clinic at the University of Liverpool with Nathalie Dowgray.  
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# Working as an RVN in research

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**ABSTRACT:** Veterinary nurses often shy away from working in a research environment and this article will show that we can have a positive impact on projects. As well as veterinary nursing skills such as handling and restraint, nurses have a lot more to offer such as communication and problem solving to this type of environment. Research can give valuable information into health and welfare of animals and the Feline Healthy Ageing Clinic studies the feline ageing process and looks at interventions that can potentially extend their lifespan

Keywords: RVN; research; feline ageing

Being a veterinary nurse is not a simple role that needs one or two skills to be successful. We have many different roles in the veterinary practice, and often an individual has a passion for a specific area. Preferring inpatient care to theatre work, for example, does not make anyone a better or worse nurse. A feeling of satisfaction with our job impacts our mental health, and when experiencing excessive workloads, long working hours, decreased control over the environment and unrealistic expectations from pet owners, this lack of job satisfaction can eventually lead to a burnout.

Knowing my passion within the industry is feline medicine and welfare, and feeling confident in my communication skills, when I saw the job vacancy for a veterinary nurse working on a research study into how cats age, this seemed like an incredible job opportunity. To my surprise, I was invited for an interview at the University of Liverpool, and instantly felt overwhelmed. I was in a big city, surrounded by tall buildings filled with intelligent academics, scientists and researchers. There was no way myself, from a first opinion practice in Wales surrounded by fields, could ever get a job like this. Well, how wrong was I?

The first few months were a mixture of nerves, but also excitement learning all about veterinary research, and what would be my role as a veterinary nurse for this study.

## About the study

The Feline Healthy Ageing Clinic was established in 2016 at the University of Liverpool and is supported by Royal Canin. The study aims to study the feline ageing process and

look for places where interventions could be applied to extend their health span and potentially their lifespan.

At the Feline Healthy Ageing Clinic, we invite pet cats from 7 to 10 years of age in and around the Liverpool area to be part of the study. We have no other criteria, and we do not exclude cats that may already be suffering from a chronic illness of any kind. The owner receives a questionnaire to fill in at each appointment, and the cats receive regular assessments every six months, which includes the following parameters:

- Physical examination including body condition score (BCS) and muscle condition score (MCS).
- Blood pressure measurement.
- Heart assessment including a recording of the heart rate.
- Mobility assessment which includes gait analysis as well as an orthopaedic examination.
- Retinal examination and photography.
- Muscle mass measurement.
- Full haematology, biochemistry, T4, electrolytes and urinalysis.

Gait analysis is conducted using a pressure sensitive walkway which measures the high and low pressure areas of the paws, the force distribution between legs and how the limbs are moving in time. These parameters can identify changes over time that might be associated with arthritis. Data are generated as the cats walk across the pressure mat and, where possible, we encourage them to walk across the pressure mat up to ten times without stopping. This can be quite tricky, but bribery in the form of treats and cuddles often does the trick (Figure 1)!



▲ Figure 1. Cat walking on pressure mats.



▲ Figure 2. Cat relaxing having his blood pressure recorded.

After the initial enrolment visit, cats then return on a regular basis with a full reassessment (with both a veterinary surgeon and veterinary nurse) occurring every six months in cats >10 years of age. This involves repeating all the assessments conducted at the enrolment visit. If the cat is <10 years of age, full reassessments occur every 12 months, with interim assessments occurring every 6 months in between. These interim visits involve a veterinary nurse check and a more limited set of evaluations (e.g. blood pressure measurement, heart examination, BCS, MCS, dental examination and a check of general health and coat condition). Owners often talk about changes they have noticed in their cat's activity or behaviour at this appointment (Figure 2).

If we find any health problems, or we are concerned about any of the findings from the examination, we then refer the owner and patient back to their own veterinary practice for a full work up and treatment. We do not exclude the cats from the study if they become unwell. It is important that we gather all aspects of ageing, and by excluding any cats due to illness, we could potentially miss an important aspect of the ageing process. Even the mortality rates and why the cats pass away is a key part of the study and something we are interested in.

### Clinical work

The clinical work for the Feline Healthy Ageing Clinic is carried out at the University of Liverpool Small Animal Practice in the city of Liverpool. The practice runs day-day like any other veterinary practice, with the addition of the veterinary students. We have sole use of the cat only room here three days a week where we carry out the examinations of the cats. The owners are encouraged to stay with us throughout, and they often find it all very interesting. A large part of my role is the clinical work in the veterinary practice, assisting the veterinary surgeon with all aspects of the consultations, running blood tests and urinalysis and carrying out the nurse-only exams. My average day at the clinic usually involves a mixture of new case enrolments, full reassessments and interim checks, with approximately 3-6 cats seen per day (Figure 3).

### Other responsibilities

In addition to working in the veterinary practice environment, two days a week are spent carrying out administration duties. Our office for the Feline Healthy Ageing Clinic is in a separate building called the William Henry Duncan Building, on the University of Liverpool Campus, and is only a short five-minute walk from the practice.



▲ Figure 3. Room set up.

Within this building are also laboratories, a gait laboratory and a number of offices. There are a number of institutes working within the building, and we fall under the Institute of Life Courses and Medical Science. The first task after a few days of examining cats is to input the data on to our database so it is all safely stored for future analysis. This involves entering all aspects of the clinical exam in to a database which is in an online questionnaire format. The cats also have their own folder, with a separate folder for each visit. Within this folder are the photographs of the cat, their blood results, the gait analysis files, and their medical summary. A medical summary is completed after each visit, which then gets emailed to our clients to keep them informed, and a copy is also sent to their registered vet.

For any owners new to the study, they will receive an enrolment pack which includes an information sheet about the study, a consent form, a questionnaire to complete and some non-absorbent litter and a faecal collection pot. I put these packs together two weeks before the appointment is due, and post them out to the new owners.

Due to now having over 200 cats enrolled at the clinic, I have a colourful spreadsheet which keeps track of who has been seen, who is due to be seen and when. This gets updated weekly, and I contact the owners monthly to book them in for their next appointment.

In addition to managing the database, I also manage our biobank. Our biobank is the storage of our biological samples, which include blood, urine, faeces and fur. These are all stored in a -80°C freezer for future testing, which is added to weekly, and the records updated on a folder on the computer.

The administration days also include providing advice to owners and other veterinary professionals, designing a quarterly newsletter, putting together articles or presentations to educate the veterinary community and managing the social media pages.

As you can see, working within a research environment is very diverse and has many aspects to the role. It is very interesting, and it did feel very daunting to begin with, but I have learnt a lot about how research is an integral part of the veterinary environment, and how veterinary nurses have so many transferable skills which can be used in this area.



Figure 4. Three visitors.

## Communication skills

Retention of clients in research is important to keep any study moving forward, and being able to communicate effectively and form a client bond is a skill that comes naturally to veterinary nurses. A lot of my time is spent talking to the owners, giving advice and keeping in touch to make sure they are happy with the whole process. If the owners continue to return to the study every six months, this shows that they trust what we do and why the research is so important,

resulting in more data, lending more power to the final analysis, and therefore more impact in our conclusions (Figure 4).

## Problem solving skills

We are also great problem solvers, often finding a different approach to particular problems, adapting to changes and creating solutions. As the study expanded it became evident that the data management process we used was starting to become more time consuming and was no longer the most appropriate choice. I spent some time contacting other research assistants and carrying out some short online courses on data management. After collating all the information, and speaking with the computer services department, I eventually came up with a solution that would be much more effective than the previous option.

## Conclusion

Working within research has taught me so much. I now have skills in data

management, statistics, article and abstract writing, public speaking and even teaching. I have become more confident in myself, and have more job satisfaction than ever before.

Sometimes the thought of stepping out of your comfort zone is terrifying, to leave general practice and start a new challenge. We often doubt ourselves and our expertise, but if you are considering a change, and you are interested in veterinary research, I would encourage nurses to find out more. Research is not all about wearing a lab coat!

## Acknowledgment

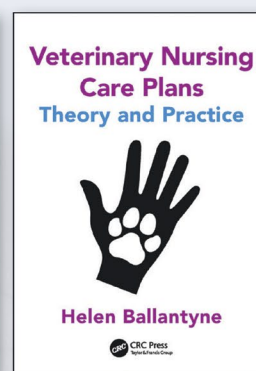
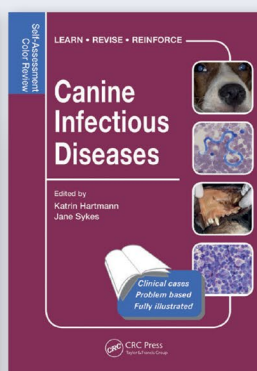
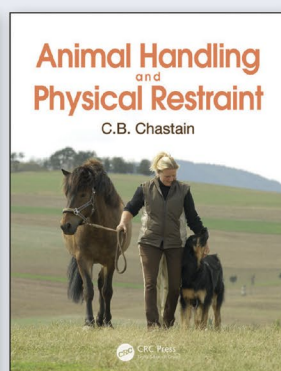
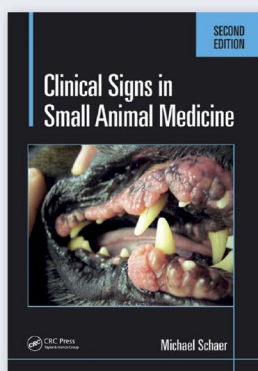
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