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Beach and teach

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ABSTRACT: This article outlines the experiences of a UK veterinary nurse undertaking a nine-week locum teaching position at Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine in St Kitts in the Caribbean. Teaching involved professional and communication skills education across seven semesters of pre-clinical students, and included large-group teaching using the 'flipped classroom' technique, and small-group work using simulated clients. The author also assisted with clinical teaching in the clinical skills lab, and physical examination and handling of canine patients.

How do you get a locum position in the Caribbean?

As I sit here at my computer on this cold, dreary January afternoon, the warmth, light, smells and sounds of the Caribbean feel like a million miles away. However, it was only a few weeks ago that I returned from my nine-week locum teaching position at Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine (RUSVM) in St Kitts. My legs still bear a faint tan and my ears can still recall the frantic singing of tree frogs at dusk.

It was March last year that a friend and colleague, Jenny Smith (Moffett as she will always be to me), director of communications at RUSVM, sent me an e-mail with the proposal of the position to cover her maternity leave. I was at my mechanic's paying the bill for a car service and will never forget my feeling of astonishment, excitement and disbelief. This sort of thing just doesn't happen to me!

Well it did, and being a great believer in the saying 'never regret the things you wished you'd done' (my interpretation being do everything that you think you may regret if you don't), I accepted the offer and began the arduous process of actually making it happen. Contracts, doctor's reports, extended travel insurance, international plug adapter purchase and a myriad of other matters organised, I was on my way.

Why me?

The position that I foolhardily accepted was as a 'Visiting Lecturer

in Communication Skills', which also involved some large-group lectures on various aspects of the 'Veterinary Professional Foundations' content of the curriculum. There was also an opportunity to dip into some of the clinical skills teaching where I could be of use.

Having worked at the University of Liverpool alongside Carol Gray – where amongst other things, I taught communication skills at each stage of the undergraduate programme – I have a passion for communication skills and what they can do for clinical outcome and client experience and this clearly led Jenny to think that I would be ideal for the job.

I was touched by her confidence in me; but I certainly spent a lot of time in the lead-up to my post reading papers and notes and muttering to myself about the Calgary-Cambridge Guide. Jenny was so helpful, and provided me with all the information I could possibly need to perform the role – from timetables to maps, teaching guides to restaurant and beach guides.

Running my own business, ONCORE ePD, that provides online courses for VNs, was ideal, as I could continue this from whatever part of the world I was in as long as there was an internet connection. I even ran one of my courses whilst I was on location in St Kitts!

The practice for whom I regularly locum was very understanding (although understandably envious) and employed a locum to cover for me! My dearest other half, Simon, was left with an arthritic

Border terrier, a renal-compromised stripy cat and a list of instructions. I must say, he was an integral part of the decision, since without him to care for my two 'oldies,' I would never have accepted the post.

RUSVM – where opportunity meets innovation

The RUSVM was founded in 1982 and has graduated over 3,000 veterinary students. It has a remarkable intake of approximately 470 students per year over three intakes. The students complete their seven semesters of pre-clinical studies at RUSVM, and then a final year of clinical training at one of Ross' affiliated veterinary schools in the United States. (Ross University, 2014).

I was involved in the teaching from the first to seventh semester, and it was really good to see the level of in-depth and practical teaching that these pre-clinical students receive.

The facilities at RUSVM are outstanding. If I'm honest, prior to my visit, I was a little sceptical about what could be achieved in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, but apart from occasional inconveniences such as not being able to find a photo printer, or lights going on the blink, the teaching facilities and support from staff were excellent. (Figures 1-3).

There are the communication skills 'simulation labs' that will be mentioned later, and the 'clinical skills lab', where a range of superb models are used for teaching skills such as phlebotomy and suturing. The enormous state-of-the-art lecture theatres each seat approximately 180 students, with facilities for laptops and internet connection for every student.

The students

The diversity of the students was wonderful. There were many who had worked in completely different fields, such as sales, engineering and music; whilst others had previously been employed as veterinary technicians (mostly uncertified) for several years, before making the move to 'vet' school.

I always made a point during the introduction to my small-group sessions of familiarising myself with



▲ Figures 1-3. The outstanding facilities at RUSVM

the backgrounds of my group, and also letting them know proudly that I was a veterinary nurse and how my work had developed and changed over the years.

We often had discussions on the roles of vet technicians and vet nurses, and it could be seen that the same issues are prevalent in US veterinary practice as here in the UK – the employment of unqualified nursing staff, lack of differentiation between certified and uncertified techs, difficulty obtaining training, being asked to perform work beyond training capabilities, and so on.

Flipped classrooms, fake veins, real dogs and simulation

Flipped classrooms

The role I performed whilst at RUSVM was varied, interesting, rewarding; and I am sure taught me as much as I imparted to my students.

I experienced the 'flipped classroom' – the premise of which is to have a theatre full of students in front of you who have already learned (self-directed, online or

by other means) the material, so that you can spend the time in the lecture theatre opening up and exploring the topic and holding discussions. I loved it – it really does work!

To illustrate how this works in the case of communication skills, the students are shown a video of a consultation and then invited to appraise and discuss, after having already watched an online lecture and studied the consultation guide prior to the session.

For financial planning, the students worked in groups to create their own budget whilst at RUSVM. Vet students can leave RUSVM (as indeed do most vet students per se) with a high level of debt, so this is a vital exercise, for any student.

In ethical decision-making, I had the fortune to work with Andrew Knight, an Australian bioethicist, and for our session we worked through thought-provoking scenarios with our group.

When you bear in mind that there are up to 160 students in these workshops, I'm sure you can imagine the challenge of running such a session; yet the rewards are tremendous and it was evident from how the sessions ran that the students get so much more from thinking, discussing and 'doing'; and not just listening.

Fake veins

I assisted with a phlebotomy class in the laboratory, which was great fun. I appreciated the introduction from the class leaders for these sessions, who always discussed consideration of the patient when blood sampling, including the approach to the animal, careful needle and syringe handling and use of only sharp needles.

It's so important to instil welfare considerations into students right from the outset, even if you are using a papier mâché cow's tail!

Real dogs

I also helped with the canine physical exam (PE) lab, which involved teaching students the 'head to tail' examination – but from which many different teaching areas could evolve, such as handling and restraint, reporting of clinical findings and teamwork, to name but a few.

One area with which I did struggle, from an ethical perspective, was the use of live animals for teaching. The US regulations

permit far greater use of animals than the UK, and I came face-to-face with this in the PE labs, where the 'kennel dogs' are used to teach the routine examination, which includes otoscopic and rectal exam.

The dogs are previous strays from the island, are cared for on-site and used for teaching for no more than two years. During this time, there is an on-campus programme where the students share in the responsibility of caring for, walking and training the dogs, which is great experience for them. The dogs are then re-homed (usually to vet students!) so their lives do generally reach a happy ending.

Donkeys and sheep are routinely anaesthetised for teaching, and surgery is performed on some animals. I did find some of these aspects rather tough, and found myself involved in quite a few conversations on this topic with friends and colleagues over the weeks.

Simulation

Communication skills teaching incorporated the use of 'simulated clients' and scenarios, to give the students 'real situations' with which to deal.

The students were fabulous – enthusiastic, open, friendly and keen to learn. The teaching facilities were brand new and the simulation lab consisted of a bespoke building created solely to replicate a veterinary practice, with a reception and waiting area and two fully functional consulting rooms.

The icing on the cake was two observation rooms attached to these, with one-way mirrors, cameras and audio, so that the person performing the consultation could do so without being distracted by the observing students. This soon became known as the 'interrogation room', and I always made a point of showing and familiarising new students with the set-up before throwing them in at the deep end (Figures 4-6).

The 'simulated clients' were wonderful, and are an absolutely integral part of this learning process. They were very varied in their backgrounds and experience, so gave the students a truly authentic learning experience. They became friends as much as colleagues, and I spent a couple of lovely evenings round at Rick and Irene's with their dog, Bingo, and had a memorable farewell meal with 21 friends who I had managed to acquire over the nine weeks!



Figures 4-6. The observation rooms, also known as the 'interrogation rooms'!

An inspiring colleague

My communication skills colleague was Elpida Artemiou, who started life at the University many years ago as a student counsellor, moved into teaching communication skills and has just achieved her PhD in this subject.

Elpida was a priceless colleague and friend – she looked after me, allowed me to shadow her for the first week, and was always open to discussion, suggestions and the sharing of thoughts, problems and ideas for teaching. She was

an inspirational teacher. I still miss our morning chats, which would vary from debate on euthanasia without consent, to how to make falafel.

Living in a strange place – especially one that is so different to home – would have been difficult and not nearly so enjoyable without the friendship and support of Elpida (Figure 7).

Figure 7. Elpida Artemiou (right), a priceless colleague and friend



Figure 8. Mount Liamuiga volcano crater

Thank you RUSVM and, of course, Jenny. Anyone else fancy having a baby?

If you would like to contact Jill, then she can be found at jill@oncoreepd.co.uk

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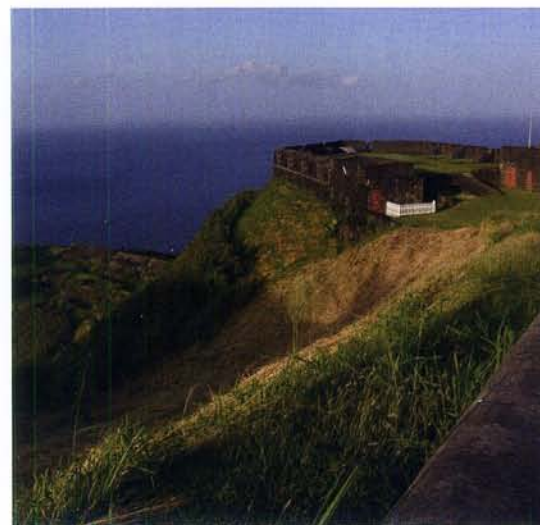


Figure 9. Brimstone Hill was a regular sunset spot

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What a wonderful place!

So, did I just work and teach whilst I was in Caribbean paradise for nine weeks? No! I visited and photographed pretty much every inch of the island; I swam, snorkelled, walked and sunbathed on as many beaches and bays as I had time for; I climbed to the crater of the volcano, Mount Liamuiga (Figure 8) assisted by Andrew Knight – the ‘Vegan Runner’; and Brimstone Hill became a regular sunset/sunrise spot (Figure 9).

I went to plantations, museums, churches, rode the sugar train, rode the boat to Nevis and drove right around the island many times. I experienced a tropical storm, whilst on a ferry in the middle of the Caribbean Sea, and saw a ‘water spout’ on Nevis. I went on charity walks, gala nights and had some glorious evenings out. I did just about everything I could, because I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss anything!

I made some wonderful friends, and had some unforgettable times, on a truly magical island. The Kittitians are friendly, warm, lovely people, and make St Kitts what she is. My experience was wonderful, in terms of the teaching, my colleagues, my workplace, the students and the island; and St Kitts will always hold a very special place in my heart.

