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Sally has worked in a variety of small animal first opinion practices in Kent over the past five years and qualified in her late thirties as an RVN from College of Animal Welfare in April 2019. She now works as an RVN at a referral hospital in Canterbury. Her special interests in practice lie within the worlds of wound management as well as communication, and she is currently working to achieve a Chartered Institute of Marketing award in Digital Marketing in her spare time. She currently lives in rural Kent with her partner, their working cocker spaniel Henry, two outdoor cats and four indoor cats including a very 'characterful' Cornish Rex called Fig.

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A complete career change from creative to classroom, learning to become an RVN

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ABSTRACT: In a more personal series of VNJ features on career path experiences from within the veterinary nursing profession, we begin with an unusual career change story from interiors stylist to Student Veterinary Nurse. This shows how diverse veterinary nurse backgrounds can be and how life experience can help with managing such a variable role.

KEYWORDS: career; veterinary profession; veterinary nursing; change

A look at the past

A registered veterinary nurse (RVN) in her late thirties with a Fashion Promotion & Illustration degree from the late nineties under her belt? Yes, that is me! I took a career swerve five years ago after several changes in my personal life prompted a “brave” move from a previous life, styling and writing for interiors magazines and client managing creative projects for bars and restaurants in London, to the veterinary world I had longed to be a part of since childhood. My career had naturally taken me in another direction from school, and now I wanted to take the reins back on my career and realise what I really wanted from it...

At junior school you could not tear me away from a James Herriot book or from watching *All Creatures Great & Small* on television. I could be regularly found in the garden tirelessly looking after my beloved pet rabbits from the age of six onwards, learning how to clip their claws, finding out what the best hay to feed them was; whatever it took to improve their lives. I was a member of the RSPCA Animal Action Club in my early teens and attended many an open day in London (once meeting the inspirational David Grant) to get some insight into what working in the veterinary world would be like. I watched BBC's *Animal Hospital* and dreamed of becoming an RSPCA Inspector.

But ultimately at school I was naturally and more successfully creative, as well as of that opinion which so many of the veterinary nurse peers I have encountered seem to also hold – that we did not believe that we would successfully gain the standard of A-levels needed for studying veterinary medicine to become a Veterinary Surgeon. I remember the thud of the UCAS book being placed on the desk in front of me, and a “Choose your career identity” type test being carried out (the results of which I cannot even remember) in order to determine my future career. Without any further careers guidance than that, I simply went ahead and chose what I might be good at.

One thing I know is that the vivid memory of my headmistress at grammar school walking right past me with my Arts subject A grades in favour of showering my best friend and her Science and Mathematics A grades with praise on results day; it certainly sparked something in me. I knew I would make a success of myself based on the career choices I would make for me.

Venturing into the working world

Whilst completing the final year of my Fashion Promotion & Illustration (BA Hons) degree in Surrey, I found myself in the fortunate position of contributing to

BBC Good Homes magazine each month. I went on to work as a freelance styling assistant then stylist and writer in my own right for popular consumer magazines from Marie Claire to Ideal Home and the Sunday Mail YOU Magazine. I went to people's homes, from castles to cottages, to style them and write about their interesting owners. I proudly saw the images I had helped produce on the covers of two magazines on the shop shelves, attended glamorous press events and parties, received press gifts at my front door... It was an extremely fun time in my life – not many would experience what I was able to experience with some lucky meetings, but also hard work and perseverance – I spent years whilst starting out also working any spare hours at a beautiful linen and perfume shop on Marylebone High Street.

Whilst venturing into the PR world in central London a friend asked if I wanted to join her in launching an online furniture company, I jumped at the opportunity of diversifying and taking my skills in a new direction. I worked on their PR, social media, buying, and eventually managing the day-to-day running of the company. I relished the breadth of this ever-changing role and the skills I was learning every day.

Career path

So, I hear you ask, why would I give this career path up for something so utterly different as veterinary nursing? To face a tricky couple of years going back to the classroom to learn complex biology, chemistry and ethics, struggle with a significantly lower salary, and deal with sad cases and upset every other day?

After many happy years working with my friends and growing the company, I took my next leap to work for a marketing agency in West London – within a week of being there I took my already-planned holiday in North Yorkshire and on day two found myself in hospital after being thrown from a horse and breaking my tibial plateau. I spent weeks in a wheelchair, undertook physiotherapy and hydrotherapy, and my new company were becoming less and less patient with me. Eventually after being rushed to the Trauma ward at Kings College Hospital twice with two pulmonary embolisms on my left lung and finding myself several days later on a ward and on oxygen. Shortly afterwards I was made redundant. My positive career's experience bubble to date was dramatically burst.

The months that followed were the opportunity I needed to get back on my feet as well as think about what I wanted from my career's next brave step. Whilst getting my ability to walk again up to speed, I took a part-time job in a little local coffee shop, as well as some hectic but happy days volunteering on the front desk at Celia Hammond in Lewisham. It was a steep learning curve, mainly because of the difficult phone calls which I would take... and discovering the abandoned cats who would be quietly left behind in their carriers in front of the shielded reception desk. But this planted a real seed. This was a tough but satisfying world to work in. I realised that I wanted the "end product" that I worked hard for every day to really matter and for my profession to make a real, significant difference.

But I still did not know enough about how to get a significant foot in the animal world door so I continued with my current career path and landed a role as a client and project manager, overseeing special projects and installs for bars – one day I would be sipping cocktails with the head mixologist at The Dorchester, another I would be discussing a serve idea with a *Great British Menu* contestant. But the hours were long. So long. I would be emailing all through my journeys to and from work, when I woke up in the morning and when I went to bed at night, and I still could not keep on top of my clients' requests and demands.

Life changes

When a very long-term relationship and home in London came to an end, I knew that this was the time to start making the change. I started volunteering once a week walking dogs at a rescue centre, and worked Sunday mornings cleaning out quails, rabbits, ponies and goats, and spending time with feral cat litters at a rescue and sanctuary in Kent. I gained husbandry and handling skills across multiple species and started to research the veterinary nursing course. I knew that I had the qualifications needed but needed to work out how I could train. I wanted to work with animals all day long and give them the highest level of care, educate owners, continue to learn myself constantly, and help others to learn.

I began to work my way through the RCVS training practice list, writing to and speaking to dozens of head nurses and practice managers, and soon learnt that I was going to need a nursing assistant role before I landed that coveted student veterinary nurse position and start my training.

When a veterinary receptionist job advertisement appeared in my daily trawl of veterinary job sites, I applied, visited the practice, fell in love with it, was offered the job, and was faced with decision time.

Could I justify losing over £10,000 of my salary to take this new position? How long would I work as a receptionist before I got the position I really wanted? Would my family and friends be supportive of this massive change, knowing that I had made a success of my creative career and was abandoning the safety of that, as well as the fact that I was still paying back the student loan for my initial degree?

Having a guaranteed job at the end of training and the luxury of being able to choose a workplace in which to practice that works for you was a real plus point in making the decision "safer". It is widely and regularly reported that there is a lack of veterinary nurses. Little did I know at the time about the retention issues which practices face though. In the 2019 published RCVS Survey of the Veterinary Nursing Profession, a significant 24.5% of respondents planned to leave the profession for reasons other than retirement within the next five years, citing poor pay (77.3%), and not feeling rewarded/valued (non-financial) (59.8%) as the top two reasons for this (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2019).

Making big decisions involving big money in previous jobs meant I must have had a sensible head? Being resourceful as a stylist and managing my time as a journalist working to strict deadlines, providing and communicating accurate information for readers and working to tight, concise briefs are all transferrable skills, super useful in the world of veterinary nursing, and this all helped the confidence in making this decision work. Veterinary nurses are known for their ever-expanding skills and knowledge bank so I believed as a mature person, my life experience and work ethic would be a huge bonus compared to that of a typical school-leaver age Student Veterinary Nurse.

Recently I spoke with my RVN colleague, Claire Pasquier Olcott about her career change decision. She explained that despite utterings of it being a "ridiculous" decision to re-train as an RVN in her mid-forties from her former husband at the time, her persistence led to RVN qualification success in 2017. Concerns about the prospect of being a "junior person" again in a classroom and then work environment after holding esteemed positions at financial and teaching institutions around the world, were quashed

by the positives that this experience could bring. "My background has helped me view a veterinary practice not only as a place of treatment for animals, but also as a business and to understand the challenges this brings" Claire enthuses. This is a very interesting view to me too in terms of how I may fit into the wider structure outside of the traditional veterinary team and venturing into the realms of the structure of the veterinary business and the opportunities that that might offer.

Nursing pathway

Back to my decision! Once I chose to take the receptionist position (without consulting my parents first for fear of panicking them I might add) I began to absorb everything I possibly could in practice, from pestering the nurses to let me hold patients to being allowed to watch surgeries performed in theatre. Only a few months later a position became available at a nearby low-cost veterinary practice for an Animal Nursing Assistant. I went for it knowing I did not have a huge wealth of veterinary practice experience but was offered the job, and eight months later found myself putting together a proposal for the director of the veterinary group to make my practice a training practice. They agreed. I started my diploma at College of Animal Welfare, then in Potters Bar, and was officially a Student Veterinary Nurse.

Jumping forward to just a few months ago, I had not long started work as an RVN at my current referral practice when I received an email from my Head Nurse calling for volunteers to represent the practice at a local secondary school's careers fair. I jumped at the opportunity, wanting to give the students the time of day that I do not feel I was given. Whether I inspired them to become a veterinary nurse or not, at least they were equipped with more information than I was! My new colleague and fellow career-changer RVN Claire Pasquier Olcott and I manned the stall, sharing past experiences and discussing how they might influence our futures as veterinary nurses. It transpires that between us, we were able to adjust and perfectly pitch to different age ranges, as well as offer a sympathetic and realistic ear to their career choosing dilemmas and inquisitiveness.

My experience has proven that there really is not always a straight climbing path or route towards the top of your one, single career. In their book *The Squiggly Career*, authors Tupper and Ellis (2020) explore the idea that for most, there is no longer a structured career ladder ahead of them, and that in the ladder's place is a "squiggly" career. Opportunities and connections present, and with hard work, gathering skills and experience along the way, curiosity and

determination, you can make your career work for you, whatever its direction. This is presumably why I currently work with three RVNS with former careers - a former financial trader, English teacher and Physics teacher!

And so, after successfully making it through the Veterinary Nursing diploma; with a large handful of theory exam resits and slightly extended course (the College of Animal Welfare presented me with an award for persistence and hard work on Leaver's Day), I started my RVN career.

In the next article, I will describe, fairly openly, my first year qualified in practice as an RVN - the highs and lows, the good decisions and the not so good.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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