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Jen qualified as a veterinary nurse in 2001, working as a head nurse in private practice for many years. She became a partner in Chesterfield Vets4Pets in 2009, solely running her own practice. Her main interests are exotic species, wound management and practice management.

# A nurse's view on practice ownership

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**ABSTRACT:** Over the years, joint venture practices have made it easier for veterinary nurses to become practice owners, usually going into partnership with veterinary surgeons. Across the Vets4Pets group there are approximately 12 veterinary nurse partners and within the Companion Care group there are approximately 11 veterinary nurse partners. Across the two groups there are only three nurse-only partners running their own practices – the author, Rachel Smith RVN in Sunderland, and a veterinary nurse with his own practice in Oldham. To my knowledge we are the only sole nurse owners of veterinary practices across the country. This is not something, that currently, is promoted by either corporate but arose through individual circumstances. So, although it is now deemed acceptable for nurses to own practices, the number is still relatively low. Why is this? What are the obstacles that face us? Why do we aspire to be practice owners? What do we as nurses bring to the equation? This article outlines some of the problems I have encountered, what we need to consider before becoming nurse partners, and offers the views of others already doing it.

Every morning, as I pull up outside work, I feel the same huge sense of pride when I see the practice in front of me with my name on the plaque outside.

When I qualified as a Veterinary Nurse (VN) 12 years ago, I didn't actually know in which direction I wanted the qualification to take me; and I certainly never thought I would be owning my own practice.

Since the RCVS changes in 1999 which allowed non-vets to own practices, veterinary nurses have been going into partnership with their veterinary colleagues in private practice. Becky Hodson, RVN from South Shields, says of her decision to become a partner in her own practice: "It was an exciting opportunity for me, as a nurse, to be able to take this avenue.

"I'd always felt that once you reached 'head nurse' status any further in-practice roles were very limited. The change in legislation that allows nurses to be practice owners is a fantastic way for us to move forwards in our roles and make a real difference in the way a practice focuses on clients."

I was fortunate enough to train and qualify at a great small animal practice,

working with some very experienced vets and nurses who taught me well. After qualifying, I was promoted to head nurse and successfully managed a large practice and branch practice – training nurses and gaining valuable experience.

It became clear to me quite early on that being someone else's head nurse was never going to be enough for me. I needed a plan to further my career. I was regularly asked by clients the question that many nurses have to field, "Why don't you become a vet?" or "Are you training to be a vet?"

The honest answer is that I never wanted to become a vet, although I did consider it briefly as I have four good A Levels and my nursing experience would have stood me in good stead. However, this was not an option for me as I love being a nurse: I love the variety each day brings, I enjoy the organising and running of the practice, and the client contact.

What I found frustrating were the negative elements of working every day as a veterinary nurse; namely, earning money for someone else and not feeling fully valued or appreciated for the job I did. I could see where things could be improved, but my input was never taken seriously.

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So I decided that running my own practice was where I wanted to be; I took a long look at my skills and abilities and felt that I had the qualities to run a successful veterinary practice.

I became a partner in a joint venture practice in 2009, going into partnership with a veterinary surgeon in her existing practice. In 2010, I was very fortunate to be given the opportunity to become the first nurse-only partner across the Vets4Pets group. Questions were asked regarding how difficult it would be to run a successful practice as a nurse, but I have proved to all concerned – and myself – that it can work.

Three years down the line and I am very happily running my own practice employing two full-time vets, one RVN, one student nurse, one animal care assistant and one receptionist. The team has doubled in size since I have been in sole charge and the financial improvements have been a gauge of how successful it has been.

## So how easy is it?

The simple answer is that it isn't!

Being part of the Vets4Pets group has given me access to a network of some very experienced professionals who will answer questions and offer guidance where required. It is very different to working for someone else but what I soon noticed was that I loved getting up each morning to go to work. Knowing I was doing something for 'me' was very motivational and it made the long hours irrelevant as I knew I was building a future for myself.

## Considerations and obstacles

### Employing vets

I think the veterinary surgeon's role in nurse-owned practices is the key element. Vets are the ones who generate the income and without this the practice will fail. It is important to define roles early on in the relationship as it is important to let the clinicians have the freedom to make clinical decisions; yet at the same time ensure that they understand the need to protect margins and make money.

Getting the best out of your relationship with the veterinary surgeon is of utmost importance. The key to this is to ensure

that they think like a veterinary partner but without having the stress and responsibility that comes with being the owner of the practice. This can be achieved in a number of ways.

Obviously the benefits will include a bonus framework and a fair salary as a 'must'. Also a good work/life balance is essential. Veterinary practice owners will often work six days a week, covering 70-plus hours. Employed vets would not expect to work such long hours, nor can they be expected to work effectively under those circumstances.

My vets work four days a week with no on-call shifts and this ensures that I get the best from them when they are in the practice. I count myself very fortunate with the staff I have, but would also like to think I offer them a pleasant working environment which ensures that they are happy in their jobs.

Karen Pearson, a veterinary surgeon who works for a nurse, comments: "I don't see any obstacles in working for a nurse. While many of the things that make you a good boss are personal to you, and vets can also make good bosses, in general I think nurses tend to have more to do with the management of a practice than vets and it is a more natural extension of a nurse's job."

### Debt

Owning any business is a financial strain and a veterinary practice is no different. Buying into a private practice

Figure 1. Practice management is an important function undertaken by veterinary nurses



is very difficult for nurses as obtaining financial backing on their salary is not easy. The average veterinary nurse salary as reported by the Society for Practising Veterinary Surgeons (SPVS) in 2013 is £19,676.

Joint venture practices give nurses the opportunity to own their own practice without the same initial financial input as a private practice.

### Staff input

One of the things I found most demoralising in my previous employment was that staff input was not taken seriously by the practice owners who had very clear ideas regarding how they wanted to run the practice. I wanted to have my own practice to learn from these experiences and fully appreciate the need for team work.

Laura Marks, a student veterinary nurse at a nurse-run practice says: "Having a nurse owning a practice has a more relaxed approach and, I feel, a more caring nature. My boss can relate to me and sees things from my point of view."

It is really important for all members of the team to feel fully valued, appreciated and happy in their work. It is invaluable to get everyone's input, listen to their views and give everyone the opportunity to be part of running the business.

Rachel Smith, RVN, who runs her own practice, highlights the importance of staff input by saying: "I believe the advantages of being a nurse partner are that I have the best interests at heart for the non-veterinary staff and I make sure the nurse's ideas, suggestions and concerns are all listened to. I believe nurses working for me get a good deal."

## Why do nurses aspire to become owners?

Speaking for myself, I felt undervalued and frustrated running someone else's practice for a relatively low wage. I wanted to have a successful practice which provided the best client care, in a place where people wanted to work.

Rachel Smith again: "I wanted to become a partner so that I could employ nurses who would be working in an environment that gave them opportunities as nurses to do the jobs they were trained to do – and I believe over the years I have achieved this. So



many businesses use nurses as animal handlers and cleaners without harnessing the skills they are qualified to deploy and, more importantly, want to use. I currently employ three RVNs and four student veterinary nurses in my practice.”

So whether it be for financial gain, to provide better working conditions, to improve staff morale, to be successful or to provide better client care, there is clearly a role for nurses as practice partners.

## What do we really bring to the equation?

### Organisation

I would say the majority of nurses who become partners start as head nurses of practices and gain valuable experience in running and organising a practice (Figure 1). How many vets do you know that sort rotas, staff holidays, appointments, open days and ops lists?

### Understanding

Nurses understand what the other roles in the practice entail and do not just see things through the veterinary surgeon/ employer's eyes. They understand how important it is to use everyone to their full potential, to give everyone job satisfaction and the importance of ensuring a positive working environment to prevent staff demoralisation.

They understand the importance of making everyone feel valued. They have the time to give to staff to listen to their concerns – something that is very difficult for vets to find the time to do.

### Allowing vets to be vets

Having a nurse partner allows the vet to have a clear vision that ensures that the best clinical decisions are made without having to worry about the issues that go with running a practice.

Alyson Moor, a veterinary surgeon who is in partnership with an RVN in South Shields, says: “I would be hopeless as a sole partner. Personnel management and day-to-day running of the practice is not my ‘thing’. Becky, as a head nurse for many years, has good staff management and practice management skills and we therefore have very different roles in the practice – and this combination works well for us.”

Scott Crichton, a veterinary surgeon from Edinburgh, had no hesitation in



Figure 2. Letting nurses work to their full potential is essential for them to achieve good job satisfaction

becoming a business owner with a nurse: “When I first entertained the notion of going down the joint venture partner route there was utterly no hesitation in co-owning with a nurse. The single most compelling reason for wishing to co-own with a nurse was to keep my focus firmly on the commitment to client and patient care, which I feel nurses are extremely good at doing. I hadn't considered a vet co-JVP at all; such was my belief that a RVN was the correct path to follow!”

Nurses can bring a whole new scope to businesses and I think we as a profession should be encouraging more nurses to become partners in veterinary practices. A winning combination can be formed by combining the clinical skills of the vet with the attributes of the experienced veterinary nurse (Figure 2).

## Summary

Owning my own practice is everything I was looking for. It gives me the freedom to make my own decisions and work as part of a team to provide the best veterinary care possible for our clients.

I believe I have created a friendly and stress-free working environment in which my staff enjoy working.

I value all my staff and appreciate the need for all of their different roles. I think it is important to fulfil the goals and aspirations of the whole practice team as it gives them the motivation to continue working to their full potential.

It is also important to provide them with approachable leadership which enables them to come to you and pass on their ideas and personal or professional concerns. I view my staff not just as employees, but also as my friends.

Of course, there are downsides to running a business and I think what I find the most difficult is underestimating the amount of time required to run a successful practice; and that you cannot expect everything to come overnight.

I would advise any veterinary nurse who is considering becoming a partner in a practice to ensure they realise the commitment that is required. Ensure that you are confident and happy with your business partner as this will potentially be a long-term relationship. It is essential that you ‘get on’ in order to promote a good working environment and run a successful practice.

Problems in the partnership will lead to unworkable conditions and more stress than necessary. Owning your own business should be enjoyable and give you the rewards that working for others just doesn't give you – not only financial rewards but also personal rewards.

I would just like to finish by stating that, from a personal perspective, I hope the joint venture businesses will change their rules on allowing nurse-only partners in the future, as it has been proven that with the right teams they can be very successful! 