



**Evie Yon BSc (Hons) PG Cert VE FHEA RVN**

I qualified as an RVN in 2015 and achieved my BSc in Veterinary Nursing from the RVC in 2016. I worked in first opinion practice for one year before returning to the RVC to work as a Surgery Ward nurse until 2018. I then left to pursue a career in teaching. I spent one year working for the College of Animal Welfare, before once again returning to the RVC as a Teaching Fellow in Veterinary Nursing. In my spare time, I ride and walk my dog, Horace. I also have two cats called Bea and Darcy. My husband and I are also training for our third half marathon. Email: [eyon@rvc.ac.uk](mailto:eyon@rvc.ac.uk)

# OSCEs: do you know how?

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**ABSTRACT:** Practical teaching and assessment of learned skills are essential components of any veterinary nursing course to ensure students can carry out RCVS Day One Skills safely. In addition, passing the objective structured clinical examinations (OSCEs) is also required for professional registration with the RCVS. OSCE examinations have been used for a long time to assess competence and thus safe practice due to their reliability to test each student on the same task. However, it is understood by many educators in this industry, and others, that OSCEs elicit anxiety and stress. Many students will worry about OSCEs long before they are due to sit the exams. Therefore, it is essential that we work together to guide students towards these exams to minimise the effects of this. One way we can achieve this is by offering clarity of the process of the exams. This article aims to assist clinical coaches, educators and students in their approach to the OSCEs, as well as offering explanation as to why we do them, how they work and what can be done to try to reduce the effects of stress and anxiety leading up to them.

**Keywords:** OSCE; examiner; practical exam; assessment; education; veterinary nursing

## Introduction

Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE). Four words guaranteed to instil fear in every student veterinary nurse (SVN) enrolled with the RCVS across the UK. This is exactly the opposite effect these exams should have. Changing educator and student perspectives of OSCEs are key to facilitating success. Throughout this article, I will focus on the point of OSCEs (yes, I promise there is one!), what examiners are actually looking for, and how training practices and clinical coaches can prepare their students to give them the best chance of achieving a pass. I will also be giving out some top tips for students.

## Why do we do them?

The 'best' way to examine students on their practical competencies is an area of education that is regularly discussed and questioned. However, the OSCE is an exam technique that is well established within healthcare, medical, and veterinary medical professions. They replicate a clinical scenario whereby the student carries out a clinical task to demonstrate competence. Although traditional assessment of clinical competence was arguably more valid as they were carried out in a real practice with real patients, OSCEs were developed because it was recognised that there were issues with the reliability of the traditional approach due to the unpredictability and individuality of our veterinary patients (May & Head, 2010). This essentially means that OSCEs are uniform and repeatable; they are effective in assessing the same skill in the same way for each student. Whist you might say that it can be hard to contextualise the task because they are quite different to the practice

environment, our patients are all very different, therefore it could be disadvantaging many students to be examined in a 'real' practice setting with variable equipment, patients and level of assessor training.

## What can be expected from the day?

Many institutions and OSCE centres, will be running formative, or mock, OSCE examinations which will replicate the real exams in structure (Figure 1-3). My biggest and most emphasised piece of advice to all SVNs is to attend formatives. Students have reported that they were very valuable for helping to reduce anxiety on the day of the real exam because they know what to expect from the structure of the OSCEs (Dunne et al., 2018).

The structure of the day will vary between centres and institutions, however, the overall format will be similar. It may sound obvious, but make sure that you plan how you are going to get to your OSCEs in advance, even if it is just a walk across campus, you need to decide what time you will leave your accommodation. Studies have found that students experienced the highest levels of anxiety on the day of, leading up to, the OSCEs (Barry et al., 2012; Dunne et al., 2018). Therefore, be as organised as you can beforehand to keep any stress to a minimum. You must wear your SVN uniform to undertake your exams so again, make sure you have washed and ironed it prior to the day. It is possible that there will be some mark allocations for personal hygiene, i.e. clean uniform and absence of nail varnish and jewellery. These are easy marks to obtain, so don't think



Figure 1. Clinical Skills Facility. Reproduced with permission of the RVC.

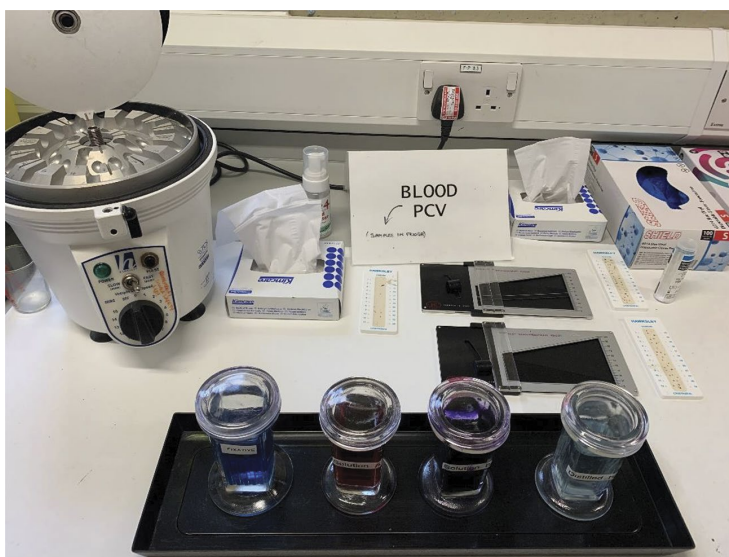


Figure 2. PCV Equipment for OSCE Practise.



Figure 3. Urinalysis Equipment for OSCE Practise.

that the examiners won't notice a bracelet or small ring; they will.

Once you arrive, you might be asked to present a form of photo identification. Check with

your centre or institution beforehand to find out whether this is a requirement or not. Once all of this is done, you'll be taken into the examination area. If there is a voice over facility, it is likely that it will be played so that you know

what you are listening out for. You will then be shown to your first station. You will work through each station and once you have finished the last one, you'll be free to go!

## How are they assessed?

Every OSCE station will have a designated assessor. You will have one person assessing how you carry out each task based upon their mark sheet. Yes, it can be off-putting having someone looking over your shoulder, but it's just so that they can see what you're doing. To help yourself and to help your assessor, try to make each step obvious. Although you are assessed on what you do, not what you say, talking yourself through each task can help you to remember what is coming next, and clarify anything the examiner may have been unsure of. Remember that their job is to assess you fairly, so they don't want to miss anything.

Each OSCE station will be marked in isolation to the others, meaning, you do not carry marks from one station to the next. Therefore, if you feel like one station didn't go as well as you'd hoped, the next station is a blank page for you to start a fresh, so make sure to leave any 'mistakes' behind you!

Depending upon the awarding body for your course, the way in which the OSCEs are marked may vary. Some will utilise a cumulative mark system, meaning that you will have a 'score' for each station which will then be compared to others taking the same exam and the pass rate is worked out using averages across each individual station. Other awarding bodies may mark similarly to how driving tests are marked; there are almost major and minor steps meaning if you make a mistake or forget to carry out a 'major' step, you won't pass that station. However, this article is not outlining how you might fail, it's all about what you can do to ensure that you pass!

## Clinical coaches, how can you help your students?

All too often I have overheard people discussing carrying out tasks 'the OSCE way'. This should not be a thing! Everything we do in practice should be following best practice guidelines, meaning the usual way should be exactly the same as 'the OSCE way'. Thus, practice is the perfect place for students to practise for their OSCEs. Encouraging all members of staff to demonstrate best practice at all times is essential to setting a good example, in addition to ensuring and maintaining welfare standards.

Your role and responsibility as clinical coaches should not be underestimated. A study investigating medical students' perceptions of their clinical tutors as role models found that students will identify behaviours, such as excellent clinical knowledge, high-level teaching abilities and personal characteristics, such as respect for other professionals and passion for their career, to emulate as qualified and professionals (Burgess et al., 2015). Although

there is currently no evidence to support this with specific relation to veterinary nurses, it may be sensible to assume that placements represent similar learning experiences and pressures for SVN. Therefore, if you are adopting these behaviours, it is likely that your students will respect your views and take on your feedback, meaning you can be key in helping them to prepare for the OSCEs. Maintaining an ongoing line of communication by means of regular tutorials can help you and your student to identify areas they are struggling with, in addition to helping students by running through day one skills under OSCE conditions. In my experience, the unpredictable nature of veterinary practice means that it is not always possible to allocate lots of time aside from patient care. However, incorporating demonstration and assisting students with carrying out OSCE tasks on real patients can help to contextualise and rationalise their actions, once again, facilitating learning they can then apply when undertaking the OSCE exams.

Some smaller practices may not encounter cases that regularly require more complex nursing techniques for their management. For example, handling of indwelling urinary catheters. If anybody in the practice feels like getting creative, models can be created relatively easily to enable students to practice.

Finally, I personally avoid using the word 'fail' when teaching OSCE tasks. Not because I feel that students should be sheltered from the possibility of being unsuccessful, but because I feel it is unnecessarily negative at the training stage. At no point in my own education did I find being told that 'if you do that in your OSCE, you'll fail' motivational or helpful. I also feel that students get very focused on individual reasons for failing instead of focusing on what they can do to

pass overall. Instead, I feel it is more beneficial to explain what could be improved upon and explain why patient safety or welfare has been compromised by the students' actions, and feedforward to outline what could be improved. This should be a more positive and supportive way of preparing students for their OSCEs.

### SVN survival guide!

One thing I cannot emphasise enough is that your examiners want you to pass! I believe that there are three key reasons for this:

1. The veterinary profession is made up of people who care about the health and welfare of animals: they are caring people.
2. Most of your examiners will be RVNs or MRCVS' and will have had to pass OSCEs: they understand what you are feeling and thinking!
3. OSCEs are fundamentally designed to be fair: no one is trying to catch you out.

Always remember that the purpose of the OSCEs is to assess whether you are a safe and competent practitioner. We have a responsibility to promote and protect the health and welfare of our patients, therefore we have to ensure that all RVNs meet standardised competency levels. If you are sitting OSCEs, you've probably completed your NPL, so you've pretty much already done it; the OSCEs are the final step.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, nothing that anyone says will eradicate all of your own reservations about

undertaking your OSCEs. But, you can do a number of things to prepare yourself for the day. These include attending formative, or mock, OSCEs to familiarise yourself with what to expect; seek help from colleagues, peers and lecturers; remember that the emphasis is yours and the patients safety and welfare. Everybody will have their own individual approach to tackling the OSCEs, so try not to compare yourself to your peers, and take control of your own learning! OSCEs are nerve-racking, so make sure to talk to people if you're worried.

#### Useful resource!

Veterinary Clinical Skills Manual, edited by Nichola Coombes and Ayona Silva-Fletcher, published in 2018. This book outlines approaches to different OSCE stations and has a great section about assessment of OSCEs; I'd highly recommend giving it a read!

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#### Top Tips:

- Believe in yourself! You will have spent a long time gaining and refining your skills before you get to your OSCEs. Be confident in your own abilities and don't worry if your version is different to someone else's; it doesn't mean your way is wrong.
- You can prepare for all aspects of your OSCEs, including how you feel about them. You can only be assessed on the RCVS Day One skills. As long as you know what they are, and how to do the tasks, there won't be any surprises. Make sure to talk to your tutors, lecturers or advice organisations if you feel anxious about the exams; it's expected and it is okay, but make sure to ask for help if you feel you need it.

- Look around the station. If there are gloves, use them. If there are aprons, put one on. There may be a choice of two or three variations of the same or similar type of equipment, but you can use what is there as a clue as to what you should select.
- Use videos to help you practise. Many students find watching themselves carry out a task useful to allow them to visualise what they are doing well, and where they can improve.
- The day of the exam will come around very quickly, so make sure you practice. This is something that I cannot stress enough. Doing the task once is not enough to show you are competent. Keep practicing until the tasks become like a

second nature. When you have practiced lots of times, you may develop muscle memory, making it easier for you to remember what comes next within each task.

- Attend help sessions! Staff do not put on these sessions for their own amusement, we organise them because we know they help people to be successful. Seek every opportunity to practise and get tips from your lecturers and coaches.
- Access and follow the guidance provided by your institution. Your institution will know the ins-and-outs of the OSCEs for their examination centre, chat to them and access their help to ensure you are well equip with all of the information available.