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The 10-year itch

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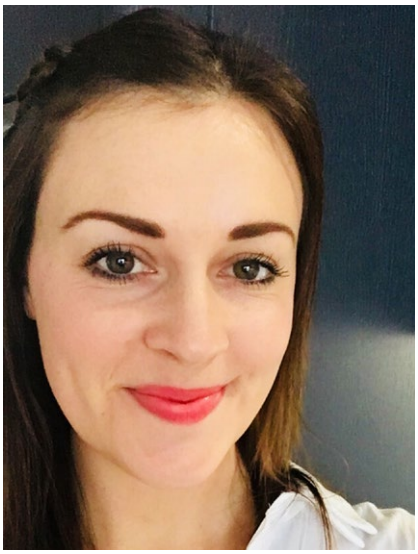
ABSTRACT: The retention of our experienced RVNs is poor and practices are struggling to keep a full team of nurses as well as maintaining a positive culture within the practice. Retention may be defined as the retaining of existing registrants' names on the RCVS register and is something that the ongoing VN Futures project is working on improving. Would the RVN retention rate improve if nurses had more choice and control over their career options? What can we do as RVNs? Within which direction can we progress our career? Is work–life balance ever achievable? This article will aim to answer some of these questions. RVNs are in high demand – we should be making the most of our position and driving forward a positive change for the profession as a whole. Change isn't scary, you just have to try.

KEYWORDS: RVN; retention; VNFutures



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Josephine graduated from the Royal Veterinary College in 2008 and worked in a variety of small animal and mixed practices in Norfolk, Essex, London, Wales and the Midlands. Josephine currently works as a locum RVN allowing her to fully engage with her role on the BVNA Council. Since graduating, Josephine has undertaken further certificates in Canine and Feline Clinical Nutrition, Feline Nursing and End of Life Care with Compassion Understood. Josephine also provides talks to primary school children about caring for animals and what working in a vets involves. She currently lives in Leicestershire with her husband, two children and a menagerie of animals from dogs to a horse; in any spare time she runs CaniCross with her collie and terrier.
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"The 10-year itch" – keeping our RVNs

I was driving home from work one day, it had been just an ordinary day, when I was struck by the question: "What next?" This question didn't leave me; in fact, it just festered, leaving me feeling a little unfulfilled. I had completed further study, had progressed in my career and in my personal life and yet something was niggling. I am ambitious and I couldn't shake this sense of something being missing, which led me to think, do I need to change careers?

After a much-needed cheese and wine night with my closest friends who are all RVNs, we concluded they also felt the same. Here we dubbed the feeling "The 10-year itch". It prompted me to research the wider aspects of our profession and the huge variety of paths we can take within our career. However, it has also enlightened me to the negativity that RVNs still face in practice, where their confidence is suppressed due to an inability to be allowed to fully utilise their skills within their practice. Once this confidence is gone, it is very hard to get back, and the likelihood of these nurses progressing or wanting to progress diminishes. I have been very lucky and I have always been used to my full potential, but I don't know how much of this is due to me being confident and able to voice my opinion. I have always been of the mindset that if I am unhappy going to work repeatedly, I need to change jobs. Therefore, I have previously moved on to a new practice if I become unhappy anywhere; I suspect this is not easy to do for everyone.

So what options are available for us?

What if you do not want to leave, or cannot leave? Push yourself within your practice and broaden your comfort zone. Is there an area you are particularly interested in? Focus on it and carry out CPD, becoming your practice champion in that area. Practices require our participation to implement change, and will listen to our new ideas. If you feel you deserve a pay review with a potential rise, then ask. Remember that although we provide a service, private or corporate veterinary practice is still a business. Maybe you enjoy consulting – why not develop a nurse clinic role where there is not one already? Charge for your time – you are valuable. You can write down everything you do within your practice to assist the business alongside your general job description and most importantly believe in yourself, justify why you should get a pay rise, but also have confidence in your value as an RVN. You may be surprised with the result!

VNFutures are holding a series of events around the country discussing a variety of topics regarding our profession and maximising nurse potential, including topics such as flexible working and career

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development. Flexible working suggested and demonstrated that you can hold a senior position in practice but work part-time or varied hours and how that can be achieved, shedding some light as to how that elusive work–life balance can be met. This requires careful negotiation with your practice and colleagues, but often a mutual working agreement can be met. Our BVNA Members' Advisory Service is always on hand to offer advice if it is needed.

If you feel your development needs are not going to be met in your current practice then try something new. Maybe referral practice and specialist nursing is your thing? There is a huge shortage of experienced RVNs and new practices that would support your ventures would snap you up! Get that CV up-to-date and look around. There are lots of recruitment agencies who would assist with the job hunt and the CV writing if you are unsure. I have found working as a locum has given me the variety of work I need without encountering the practice politics of being permanently employed. It has also allowed a greater freedom with my personal life, allowing time to focus on areas outside of daily work; if you really enjoy a practice you can ask for a permanent position (almost like a try before you buy!).

If working in general practice or referral practice is no longer for you, it does not mean the end of your RVN career either. There are many roles available for RVNs within academia or industry. Many colleges offer on-the-job training to teach veterinary nursing and animal care students. This means you do not need a teaching qualification to apply for the job. You can also be a visiting lecturer if you have a specific area of interest and you want to share your knowledge on the subject. Colleges or universities fund training qualifications once in their employment and offer full mentorship – where no experience is necessary – assisting you in taking this next step. You can be a visiting lecturer while still being employed; perhaps this will top up this your salary if you go to part-time hours or are a locum. This requires good time management, self-discipline to organise your time, and a good level of experience and knowledge – but it can be very rewarding.

Within the veterinary industry you can become a sales representative or a technical advisor. These roles can be very fulfilling although they require good time management and often a bit of travelling, although they often come with very good perks. There are also jobs that allow you to be home-based – some academia roles (these come up rarely) aim to support students doing online courses. A lot of insurance companies have a "Vet Line", which offers an RVN triage phone call service (similar to the NHS 111 service). These roles require you to be contactable for a certain number of hours a day at specified times and can be very useful for supplementing an RVN's salary. Aligned with this, pet insurance companies are often looking for experienced RVNs to be claims handlers, which in turn offers a routine office-based job for those unable to commit to the varied shift pattern found in practice.

These are just snapshots of the variety available to us if we want it: there are roles for RVNs in the military, charities and volunteering abroad (a lot of practices will allow some form of leave for you to do this as it only benefits them in the long run – you never know until you ask!). You may want to focus on one particular aspect, such as behaviour, and become the RVN for others to refer cases to. It does not stop there – if management is your thing, then focus on that; you can apply for regional management roles within corporates. Having experienced RVNs in these roles is advantageous for all involved, especially the nurses within the individual practices. You could set up your own business for pet walking/sitting/grooming/training/first aid; there are lots of nurses who have been very successful in these ventures. RVNs can own practices – you could truly be your own boss!

When I experienced the "10-year itch" I went through a variety of ideas – even leaving the profession to take on further study in a completely different area. For some of you this may be the answer. Perhaps you need a break – there is nothing stopping you coming back if it feels right.

Instead of leaving, I decided to get involved in shaping our profession's future and I joined the BVNA Council. This has opened so many doors for me – I no longer have the dreaded fear of public speaking, in fact I enjoy it, but it has also introduced me to a group of very driven, hard-working RVNs who do nothing but support and instil confidence in their peers. I now feel satisfied with my career choice and direction; I have my drive back that I thought was lost; and I have developed a huge passion for staff development within the profession, and want to implement a change of mind-set and appreciation of our value as RVNs – as well as encouraging others to have a voice, an opinion and most importantly self-belief. Make a change, for the better and for our profession.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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