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# A VN's contribution to the Dogs Trust Neutering Workshop

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**ABSTRACT:** It has been estimated there are in excess of 11,000 stray dogs living in the city of Sarajevo in Bosnia. With a human population of around 370,000 this works out at one dog for every 33 people. With no population control methods in place and that number rising by the day, Dogs Trust UK was keen to put in place a programme that could address this ever-growing problem. This article reviews the role played by a veterinary nurse in this programme.

Surgical sterilisation is not only important for the health and welfare of street dogs, but also a key component of dog population management as well as contributing to public tolerance of stray dogs and the image of a city.

Dogs Trust UK set up Dogs Trust Bosnia-Herzegovina in October 2012 and as part of their work there, they have developed an education programme run in partnership with the Veterinary Faculty of Sarajevo, Bosnia's only veterinary school. It aims to give participants (qualified Bosnian vets) the clinical and surgical skills and knowledge they need to be able to competently and confidently neuter stray dogs independently and humanely.

☑ **Figure 1.** The vets were very willing students, very respectful and had an amusing sense of humour that I loved immediately

By facilitating this access to further training for Bosnian vets, Dogs Trust BH can begin the mammoth task of reducing the number of un-neutered, stray dogs on the streets. The seven-day course is highly practical with tutorials on key topics and it is taught by a combination of Bosnian and British veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses.

As part of the Dick Vet's on-going commitment to animal welfare education, I was delighted to be seconded to the Dogs Trust to take part in the initial pilot course in February of this year and again for the second course in March.

## Bosnia – my first ever visit

After flying from Edinburgh to Heathrow, then on to Croatia – where I had a seven-hour wait in an airport roughly the size of the average practice waiting room but with less to read – I completed the final 45-minute leg of the journey to Bosnia and landed in a very cold Sarajevo, its capital city.

With a flash of forethought whilst packing, I had 'Googled' the weather for the time of year; so had packed every jumper, vest and pair of long-kneed socks I owned and was pleased I'd done so as the temperature was minus 5°C!

I must admit I had preconceptions about this city as the only time I could remember hearing anything about it, apart from the winter Olympics of 1984, was when the civil war was raging there



“During the seven days of intensive training I expanded my knowledge about pain management, anaesthesia basics and proper neuter/spay techniques. Thanks to this training and all the friendly staff, I am now more confident as a veterinarian, and also prepared for independent work. I am also happy that I can now contribute in the mass spay/neutering program in my country, and in that way help the society with the stray dogs issue”

*Ismar Lutvikadic – veterinary delegate*

from 1992 to 1995. However, that was nearly two decades ago and the city is an up and coming tourist destination, with picturesque buildings, beautiful bridges, a vibrant shopping area, amazing restaurants, great bars, generous, fascinating people all surrounded by stunning scenery.

## How I contributed

I have been veterinary nursing now for almost 17 years and, having worked at the The Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies in Edinburgh since last May as a welfare and anaesthesia nurse, I am now used to teaching veterinary students and find it a really enjoyable part of my job. However, never having taught qualified vets before, I was quite nervous as to how I would be perceived!

Bosnia doesn't have qualified veterinary nurses working in its veterinary school or private practices – but it is common to find veterinary assistants. So my first teaching job was to explain the role and importance of a qualified veterinary nurse!

The delegates on the course had not neutered many dogs, as it is still fairly uncommon in Bosnia, so they were keen to improve their surgical and anaesthesia techniques. I needn't have been worried about teaching vets because they were very willing students, very respectful and had an amusing sense of humour that I loved immediately (Figure 1).

My role was to teach the delegates about:

- anaesthesia, anaesthetic induction, monitoring and recovery
- analgesia and pain assessment
- how to place IV cannulas prior to surgery
- how to intubate a patient

- how to prepare a patient for surgery
- pre- and postoperative care of the patient.

I used videos that I had made previously as part of my work as the welfare nurse at the Dick Vet, to teach intubation, IV cannulation and other practical techniques.

I also gave short lectures, small group tutorials and, finally – using 'animal alternatives', such as animal models and manikins – demonstrated the various clinical skills they would be using, before getting them to practise on the models themselves.

By taking the time to do all of this, the delegates were well prepared prior to actually anaesthetising and performing surgery on a live dog.

We use this approach routinely in all of our overseas work. It ensures that the dog's welfare is not compromised in any way whilst vets/vet students are being

trained, which can unfortunately be the case in teaching programmes involving only live animals.

Initially, I stayed with the delegates for the entire length of the anaesthetic and neutering procedure, advising how to monitor the dog adequately so it remained at a good depth of anaesthesia despite having no access to gaseous anaesthetic (Figure 2).

The dogs were induced with an intravenous xylazine/ketamine combination and analgesia was facilitated with tramadol and meloxicam. This drug regimen is commonly used in Bosnia and patients are very prone to becoming light/conscious quite suddenly, so several intravenous 'top ups' were required throughout the surgery. It is not a relaxing anaesthetic protocol at all! However, with adequate training and very close monitoring the delegates were able to keep their patients anaesthetised and pain free throughout the surgery.

During our work in other parts of the world, we have learned how important it is to make the training situation relevant and realistic. So it is always important to teach using the drugs and equipment to which the vets have access in their own country, and not introduce unrealistic and unachievable protocols and practices from the UK. For example, we had no ECG or pulse oximetry to use in Bosnia, so we used readily and cheaply available oesophageal stethoscopes.

I was good naturedly labelled 'The Bossy Nurse' by most of the delegates and they

Figure 2. Initially, I stayed with the delegates for the entire length of the anaesthetic and neutering procedure





▣ Figures 3 & 4. I was good naturedly labelled 'The Bossy Nurse'

“When the week was over, each delegate had improved dramatically in their surgical and anaesthetic techniques and was now competent to 'go it alone'. And no dog's welfare had been compromised in the teaching process”

regularly played me 'Kelis - Too Short, Bossy' but that was OK! I'd rather have had that title than have a dog feeling pain or, worse still, die because I'd not supervised or instructed properly (Figures 3 & 4).

When the week was over, each delegate had improved dramatically in their surgical and anaesthetic techniques and was now competent to 'go it alone'. And no dog's welfare had been compromised in the teaching process. We had an awards ceremony where all the delegates received their certificates for course completion and they will now become part of the team of Bosnian vets who will be used by Dogs Trust BH to neuter some of the 11,000 stray dogs in their own practices.

### Final word

At the Jeanne Marching International Centre for Animal Welfare Education (JMICAWE) we believe that neutering projects must never be viewed as a numbers game. Each of those 'numbers' is a sentient being that is feeling scared, anxious, confused and lonely (Figure 5). Each 'number' is capable of feeling pain, suffering from inadequate anaesthesia and, worse still, death as a consequence of poor management and a lack of knowledge or experience.

Whilst population management is hugely important for all the reasons I mentioned earlier it is vital that the neutering

projects have the animal's welfare – and not just the removing of its reproductive organs – as the primary focus. And finally the project must be sustainable.

Any vet/vet nurse team can fly into another country and do a neutering sweep on a colony of stray animals; but what happens when they leave? It is of paramount importance that the local vets and assistants are adequately trained to do the work, so that they can continue the work once we are long gone.

As the Chinese proverb says: "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day.



▣ Figure 5. Each 'number' is a sentient being



*Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.* <sup>vn</sup>

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