



### Sophie Beckwith RVN

Having worked in the UK veterinary industry for nearly 20 years, Sophie now combines her time between registered veterinary nursing and freelance journalism. Nursing representative for the Animal Welfare Foundation and lead nurse on an annual neutering programme for stray cats in Greece, Sophie is committed to good animal welfare. She is communications officer for an animal welfare organisation and writes and blogs about animals, nature and the environment.

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# An inspirational RVN: making the most of your title

## Sophie Beckwith RVN

Freelance Journalist

Did you choose the veterinary profession because you cared deeply for animals and wanted to make a difference? I know I did. Did you see a role in the veterinary industry as varied, challenging and one where you could make a positive change for animals? So, this was your initial inspiration, but what about now? As you carve out a successful career, who or what is your ongoing inspiration and why?

Perhaps it's David Attenborough, you love that your job enables you to do exactly what he does every day – interact with animals (albeit they may be a little less wild). Perhaps the fame of top actors and musicians is the driver of your success and you aim to be the best in your field. Or, maybe a fellow veterinary professional is your inspiration? One individual that has crossed my path in recent years has become a source of considerable inspiration to me and indeed many other nurses. Shakira Miles is an engaging, passionate RVN and animal welfare campaigner, who represents a veterinary nurse's capacity to promote animal welfare at the highest level. She demonstrates a tireless dedication to both the veterinary nursing profession and to animal welfare causes that fall beyond its direct remit, and shows how RVNs can use their qualification to speak up for animals and push for animal welfare change.

### Gaining inspiration

When not working full-time at the RVC's Beaumont Sainsbury Animal Hospital in London, 29-year-old Miss Miles is campaigning to abolish breed-specific legislation and raise awareness of dog-bite prevention, via a veterinary-led campaign The SaveABulls, which she founded in 2015. The first veterinary nurse to join the British Veterinary Forensic & Law Association (BVFLA) and a member of the All-Party Parliamentary Group

for Animal Welfare (APGAW) – as well as a member of the *VN Times* editorial board – she certainly sets the bar high for veterinary nurses when it comes to animal welfare. Miss Miles' commitment was recognised in 2016 when, following two years as a finalist, she was awarded the prestigious Vet Nurse of the Year Award in the 2016 CEVA Awards for Animal Welfare.

So how does an individual become so committed and driven? Where do you find all the extra hours needed to work towards a cause and be so focused and successful? Since founding The SaveABulls in 2015, Miss Miles has been interviewed on Channel 5 news and BBC Radio and attended countless parliamentary hearings and meetings. She also runs highly successful social media channels



Figure 1. Shakira Miles with UK veterinary surgeon Marc Abraham, who she says inspired her to become an animal welfare champion



Figure 2. Founded in 2015, The SaveABulls campaigns to end breed-specific legislation (BSL)

and an informative website to support her campaign, which is now backed by the celebrities Peter Egan and Victoria Stilwell. I asked Miss Miles what inspired her to work with animals and go on to do so much for animal welfare. With her father's strong encouragement, she chose to pursue a career with animals and began working at her local vet practice – a nursing beginning familiar to many of us, I am sure. Commenting on her early days at work, she said: “The VN said to me ‘if they have suffered a trauma they won't want to be stroked near [the injury], as it

will be painful’, it sounds crazy, but it was something I never forgot and patient consideration became my priority. I simply put myself in their shoes, which led to my development of awareness for the needs of animals and animal welfare”.

The simplicity of this entry into animal welfare speaks volumes, I think. As successful veterinary nurses, empathy is everything. Having a unique connection to animals and understanding their needs is probably what first took us into the veterinary industry, and it enables us to build successful careers as caring professionals. It can also be what inspires us to do that little bit extra. You might think that working long hours, doing on-call weekends and filling in when the practice is short-staffed would be enough, but perhaps as caring individuals with an innate ability to empathise with our patients – with all animals – perhaps we have to do even more to feel we are truly giving enough to animal welfare. Miss Miles certainly thinks so, and thinks that despite the setbacks nurses might face when it comes to speaking up for patient welfare, we are all well-placed to use our expertise on behalf of animals. “It takes a lot of bravery and confidence to speak up for our patients and welfare in general, sometimes I think we all forget our own worth.

“Within the veterinary nursing profession, we are blessed with a wide variety

of nurses that have such incredible skills. I think we all develop our own path and when encouraged to work in areas that we are good at, we thrive in those areas.”

### Choosing your animal welfare mission

If you would like to do more for animal welfare, there is nothing that says you have to choose just one area to focus your efforts on, but for many of us there may be a particular topic that strikes a chord. For Miss Miles, this is bull breeds. Through The SaveABulls campaign, which aims to abolish breed-specific legislation (BSL) and change Section 1 of the 1991 Dangerous Dogs Act, some of the key animal welfare issues that surround existing dog breed legislation are being raised. Veterinary professionals and animal welfare organisations have to carry out the regular euthanasia of healthy dogs as a result of current laws characterising dogs as dangerous based on their breed or perceived breed, rather than by looking at them and their owners on an individual basis. It was this tragic conflict of interests that first motivated Miss Miles to start The SaveABulls campaign.

“[The UK] Government has inflicted the most heart-breaking deed on the veterinary profession, which is mandatory euthanasia for unowned or stray puppies



Figure 3. The SaveABulls has strong social media support and key celebrity endorsement



Figure 4. Miss Miles raising awareness of BSL with some canine support

and dogs perceived as banned breeds, after a glance from a police officer. In rescue this is the one part of the job we all hate. I simply couldn't justify taking an innocent life away because of what they looked like.

"It took me a while to realise that the profession never spoke about this. After being inspired by Marc Abraham, a vet who has dedicated his career to changing legislation to end puppy farming, I realised I also had the ability to put an end to breed discrimination."

The SaveABulls vision is for the formation of an alternative to BSL. Miss Miles strongly believes in education not legislation and breed-neutral laws that will ensure responsible dog ownership and result in a drop in the existing numbers of dog-bite victims. In May 2015, a piece by Haroon Siddique in the *Guardian* newspaper reported on recently published statistics that showed hospital admissions for injuries caused by dogs, had risen by 76% in England during the past 10 years. One of The Dangerous Dogs Act's main aims was to improve public safety, and to reduce the incidence of dog bite injuries. Miss Miles sees the 2015 statistics as clear evidence that the existing Act is not fit for purpose and has failed to carry out

its aims. Her work sees her meeting with MPs, dog behaviourists, the dog-owning public that SaveABulls helps protect and advise, and other key animal welfare organisations who are campaigning for changes to BSL. It is all done in addition to her full-time job and equates to an average of an additional two days each week. Meeting her, though, you cannot fail to be struck by her overwhelming enthusiasm and dogged determination to the cause, and if anyone has the tenacity and energy to fight seven days a week for what they believe in, she can.

### Riding the wave

Thrilled to be recognised with the CEVA Award for all the hard work of SaveABulls, Miss Miles recognises BSL can be a controversial subject, but one she is more than willing to take on. Privileged individuals in that we have one of the most well-respected veterinary nursing qualifications globally, as UK RVNs we should also realise the potential we have to use this good-standing to make our voices heard. Miss Miles campaigns on an issue that makes the headlines on a regular basis, but individually we may decide to contribute to a local campaign or cause. There are a huge range of animal welfare issues that affect the UK and as

professionals we should not lose sight of the power our opinion and experience can offer, on subjects like brachycephalic pets, keeping exotic species, the rise in overweight animals and the danger of fashionable breeds.

As well as the satisfaction of improving animal welfare, there is much more to gain from working to try and resolve some of these issues. As RVNs we can achieve more personal and professional recognition by speaking up and speaking loud and we can instigate real change. Miss Miles has ensured The SaveABulls is firmly established as the go-to campaign regarding BSL conflict and dog bite prevention and her RVN qualification brings added weight as the veterinary voice on these issues. The campaign has built strong relationships with MPs that are working to make animal welfare change at parliamentary level, and it has credible celebrity endorsement.

Campaigning was never really part of the plan for Miss Miles, but she says her work with SaveABulls really has changed her life and she would like to see more RVNs taking on the challenge of animal welfare. "We already make a difference daily, whether it is making a super thick comfy bed for a cat suffering from a fractured pelvis, to ensuring that lone rabbits are given a companion and speaking up for patients' needs, but I think we can always do more.

"The MPs I meet value my opinion and input, which is a credit to the profession, this itself allows me and fellow RVNs to impact on animal welfare through legislative changes."

### So, are you inspired?

If The SaveABulls campaign itself has inspired you, then why not get involved if you would like to do more for animal welfare. The BVNA has offered much-needed support and encouragement to the campaign already and will soon release its own position statement on BSL. Miss Miles would love to hear from any RVNs that would like to help the campaign continue its existing success. "[More RVNs] will have a direct impact on BSL on a campaigning front. I think spreading the positive awareness about dogs and always educating on dog bite prevention is paramount and also our responsibility."

You may have your own animal welfare cause that you would like to be more involved in. It could be simply taking a more proactive stance at work, or supporting a local, national or international effort. It could involve campaigning,



Figure 5. Rob Fello, MP for Stoke-on-Trent South, pictured here at a SaveABulls event. Miss Miles' animal welfare campaigning often involves her meeting with MPs

volunteering, taking time to contact your MP, raise money for a charity or even write a magazine article to highlight an issue. The choices are endless and the benefits will be many. Working in animal welfare can be emotionally challenging and physically demanding, we all know that. We may not be rewarded financially, but the bonus in terms of satisfaction, fulfilment and affecting change far outweigh this.

When I first met Miss Miles – having previously read about her work in the veterinary press – I was quite prepared for a fiercely determined individual who would make her points clearly and concisely, articulating in such a way as you could not help but be inspired. I was not disappointed and for this reason, I am giving her the final word. “We are valued and our voices matter, so please speak up, our patients need us. Campaigning for change in life is never easy, but it really is worth it.”

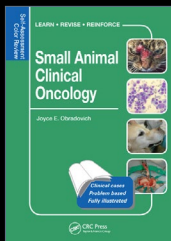
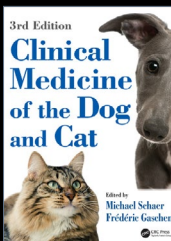
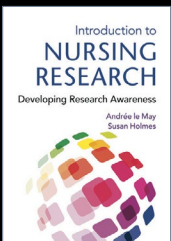
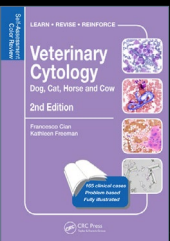
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Further information

[www.thesaveabulls.com](http://www.thesaveabulls.com)  
[www.veterinaryexpertwitness.co.uk](http://www.veterinaryexpertwitness.co.uk)  
[www.apgaw.org](http://www.apgaw.org)

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