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Susanna qualified as an RVN in 2006 and began work at the Royal Veterinary College in 2007 as one of its first specialised anaesthesia nurses. She became senior and then head anaesthesia nurse and then attained the VTS (Anaesthesia) qualification and the NCert in Anaesthesia and Critical Care in 2010.

After becoming a 'mum', Susanna left the RVC and now works as a part-time theatre/anaesthesia nurse. She regularly provides anaesthesia-based CPD and is the nurse representative on the Association of Veterinary Anaesthetists Executive Committee.

The long and winding road – a personal perspective on becoming a specialist veterinary nurse

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ABSTRACT: Veterinary nursing embraces a wide variety of skills and, traditionally, VNs cover many different areas in their day-to-day jobs. However, for a veterinary nurse to be able to specialise their work into one particular area has many advantages. The foremost advantage for most specialised nurses is the increased job satisfaction gained by being able to focus on something that they particularly enjoy. Another significant advantage is the improved patient care offered, as specialised skills develop and specialised teams with like-minded colleagues are built, standardising care at a high level.

The number of specialised nursing positions is increasing, particularly within referral practices, and common areas of specialisation include anaesthesia, surgical nursing, intensive care nursing and oncology. For UK nurses, however, there are limited options available for demonstrating specialisation in a formal manner.

Currently, the only advanced qualification for veterinary nurses recognised by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons is the Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing. This is a qualification of high standing and candidates demonstrate skills and knowledge across a variety of subjects; but there is no opportunity for specialisation. Therefore, nurses who have chosen a particular area of focus are required to look at other options to demonstrate their specialised skills in a formal manner.

For nurses starting out in a specialised field, or wishing to demonstrate a preference, there are a few CPD-based qualifications available. Such courses require delegates to attend specific CPD events and complete set coursework. Courses vary in their framework, recognition by professional bodies and academic accreditation. These differences should be compared carefully when considering choices.

One such course, new to the UK but well established in Europe, is the VASTA qualification for nurses interested in specialising in anaesthesia. This course is run by a European Specialist in Veterinary Anaesthesia and Analgesia and is comprised of taught CPD days, course work and a final examination. The detailed syllabus focuses on improving knowledge and skills of nurses working in general practice, and documenting this in an internationally recognised qualification.

Veterinary technician specialist (VTS) qualifications

Our nursing counterparts in the USA standardised specialised qualifications in 1994 when the National Association of Veterinary Technicians in America (NAVTA) formed a Committee on Veterinary Technician Specialties. This committee regulates specialised nursing academies that offer qualifications to veterinary technicians in their chosen specialised discipline.

The Committee on Veterinary Technician Specialties is recognised by the American Veterinary Medical Association and a full list of current academies and links to their websites can be found in **Table 1**.

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Table 1. Veterinary technician specialist academies and their website links

The Academy of Veterinary Dental Technicians	www.avdt.us
The Academy of Veterinary Technician Anesthetists	www.avta-vts.org
The Academy of Internal Medicine for Veterinary Technicians	www.aimvt.com
The Academy of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Technicians	http://avecct.org/index
The Academy of Veterinary Behavior Technicians	www.avbt.net
The Academy of Veterinary Zoological Medicine Technicians	www.avzmt.org
The Academy of Equine Veterinary Nursing Technicians	www.aaevt.org
The Academy of Veterinary Surgical Technicians	www.avst-vts.org
The Academy of Veterinary Nutrition Technicians	http://nutritiontechs.org
The Academy of Veterinary Technicians in Clinical Practice	http://avtcp.org
The Academy of Veterinary Clinical Pathology Technicians	www.avcpt.net

Although the academies are all based in the USA, the awards are open to applicants worldwide and there are now several UK RVNs with Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS) qualifications.

The main difference between the VTS qualification and the Advanced Diploma is that no formal teaching or training is given to VTS applicants and the application process is more akin to that of the RCVS Veterinary Certificates. Applicants to a VTS academy must already be working within their chosen specialised field and qualification is about demonstrating a current high level of specialised skills and knowledge, rather than learning anew.

Credentials

The first part of gaining the qualification is to apply to an academy by submitting a set 'credentials pack'. This generally takes a year to put together and varies slightly from academy to academy, but commonly contains:

- demonstration of qualification as a veterinary technician/nurse
- demonstration of required hours worked in specialist field over the previous 3-5 years
- 50-75 case logs demonstrating appropriate cases (usually gathered over one year)
- demonstration of mastery of a set of specialised skills (**Figure 1**)
- attendance at relevant CPD courses provided by specialists in the field (usually 40 hours)
- detailed case reports (usually four)
- two letters of recommendation, ideally from specialists in the chosen field.

In order to meet the criteria, applicants need to be working in a practice with a high case-load in their chosen speciality. A mentor should be available for applicants, and should ideally be a VTS or Veterinary Diplomate in that field. For some areas, such as anaesthesia and emergency and critical care, applicants will also need to have access to a range of specialist equipment, drugs and techniques.

Owing to these demands, applicants are often from referral centres and university veterinary schools; although there is no reason why nurses from large first-opinion practices cannot meet the requirements with the support of the practice and a local Diplomate/VTS.

Figure 1. An essential part of the 'credentials pack' is a demonstration of the mastery of a set of specialised skills



Credentials need to be professionally bound (or submitted online) and sent for assessment by the academy's Credential Sub-committee. Each academy sets a yearly date by which applications need to be received. Assessment of the credentials ensures that applicants meet the practical standards set by the academy and, if successful, applicants are invited to proceed to the second part of the process, a written exam.

Written examination

Exams are held once each year, allowing candidates who have been notified of achieving the credentials time to prepare. Exams are held at the national congress in the USA relating to that specialisation, so this does require UK applicants to travel. Further details of the exams, including subject areas and sample questions, are provided by each academy.

Candidates who pass the exam can then use the postnominal 'VTS (*chosen speciality*)' and become members of their academy for an annual subscription fee. Academies are run by a council formed of their members, with governance from NAVTA; and, therefore, there is an opportunity to become further involved with the running of the qualification and management of the academy.

Re-certification

To ensure members of the academies remain at the forefront of their speciality, they are required to re-certify every five years. This can be achieved either by re-sitting the examination or submitting 50 hours of taught or attended CPD. This ensures nurses using the VTS title remain current in their field and sets the VTS qualifications apart from many others.

Conclusion

Being able to specialise in a particular field of interest is a real possibility for the modern UK veterinary nurse. There are several options available to demonstrate specialisation academically. Currently the VTS qualification is the most highly regarded and allows specialised nurses to become a member of an academy with like-minded individuals.

Although the VTS and other specialised qualifications presently have no formal recognition in the UK from the RCVS, they still allow nurses to progress in their careers and gain recognition from their peers. 