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Clare is Registered Veterinary Nurse who qualified from Myerscough College in 2013. She worked at Birch Heath Veterinary Clinic, a small animal and exotic practice, for over 6 years, and then a small animal hospital in Mold for 6 months. Clare now works for Dogs Trust as a Campaigns Veterinary nurse. Clare has a particular interest in exotics, running weight clinics and education. She has a handsome black labrador and a bouncy springer spaniel.

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A move from practice into community nursing

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In this article I discuss the changes I have experienced when changing profession from a Veterinary Nurse (VN) in practice to a VN working in the charity sector. I hope to encourage those VNs who may be considering a change of career path, and also conversely, give some clarification to the VNs who want to stay in practice but have a little self-doubt as to if “the grass is greener” in a different role. Firstly, I will give a brief description of my VN history.

In 2008, at the age of 24, I was offered a part-time maternity cover position on the reception of a veterinary practice in Cheshire. The job was great; I loved engaging with clients and making a fuss of the animals that came through the door, tails wagging. It also got my foot in the door for interviews at other practices when my time came to leave. I happily realised that nursing was what I wanted to do, knowing full well it wasn't just 10 hours a day cuddling cute puppies!

I spent the next six years at a small animal and exotics practice in Cheshire where I did my ANA qualification and then qualified as an RVN. I loved my job and team and was amazed at what each new day had to bring me in the way of experience and challenges; I was taking in information like a sponge and was simply in my element (**Figure 1**).

The time came when I wanted to try something new, expand my nursing skills and make that dreaded move to a new practice – not knowing if I would enjoy it or also if my skills would be good enough (I think a common fear among VNs!). I went to a small animal hospital in Flintshire for six months, and whilst I thrived in this busy practice, I simply wasn't happy in my role.

So here I am – eight years of experience in practice and at the relatively old(ish) age of 32. The BVA (2015) stated that the average age a VN will leave the profession

is only 30 and will only stay within the profession for an average of 7 years, which was true for me.

I was searching for something that I had an interest in that potentially didn't leave me exhausted at the end of every single day, something that made my job worthwhile, as well as something that paid well for what I did.

Most VNs are aware at an early age that we don't get into this profession for the money, it's the love of the job, which is fine when we are young, living at home with parents and with few responsibilities, but when you are trying to support a house, a partner, a family and have luxuries like a car or pets, the long hours you work, the physically and emotionally challenging daily duties and the low pay that goes alongside it can sometimes leave you feeling tired.

So what do I do? Do I stay in the profession? What aspects of the job make me personally happy? Do I leave altogether and train in something completely different? Ultimately I know that I love being a veterinary nurse, so I looked back at all my achievements over the last 8 years and I realised that something I was personally passionate about was education and awareness.



Figure 1. Clipping my own dog for castration – enjoying prepping and monitoring anaesthetics in practice.

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Figure 2. A notice board I made following a successful weight loss clinic.
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I saw this in a variety of things I had achieved within nursing. Some of these include:

- Being in charge of the waiting room displays, the practice Facebook and website. I created adverts for the local magazine on current issues and offers.
- I created the “31 days of Veterinary Nursing” group on Facebook for VN Awareness Month, outlining and educating people on a daily basis about all aspects of our profession – we all know that getting our VN title protected via knowledge of our profession is vital.
- I wrote kitten and puppy booklets for new owners, and created individual species reference guide posters in our reptilian and small mammal wards.
- Giving exotic advice to owners made me want to write articles to help other nurses too – so far I have written three, one on blood sampling reptiles, and the other two on the care of bearded dragons and parrots – their basic needs, signs of illness and how to advise a client on basic husbandry. I had seen too many neglected ill animals due to an owner’s carelessness and poor understanding.

- I also have a love of weight clinics. After winning the 2014 National Royal Canin Weight loss competition I have become more passionate about pet obesity – equally strict with my own two dogs (don’t ever talk to me about measuring cups!) (Figure 2)

When searching for a new job an advert jumped out at me – “Campaigns Veterinary Nurse for the North West” with Dogs Trust. Having heard lots of recommendations about Dogs Trust, supporting them myself through donations and having previously adopted a dog from them, I went for the position and got it!

What does this job entail you ask? Well, I travel all over the North West of England, doing events three days a week in places like community centres, village halls, local parks, etc., promoting responsible dog ownership through microchipping, health checks and advice in areas of social deprivation. Two days are then dedicated to administrative tasks (Figure 3).

Yes, I know what you are all thinking right now and I won’t lie – it is an absolute eye opener and is at the complete opposite end of the spectrum of working in practice. In practice we (mostly) see

clients who bring their animals in for regular annual vaccinations, flea and worm treatments, neutering, surgical procedures and who are willing to spend money on medication if needed. Come to these events and rarely is this the case (Figures 4 and 5).

I have had to change the questions I ask people, such as “do you vaccinate your dog every year?” as most people believe they only need to do this for their first initial course (although many don’t even get these done). “Do you flea and worm your dog? Which product and where did you get it from?” (I bet you can guess which product I hear of most!) Are you registered at a veterinary practice? (Mostly they are not so I provide details of local veterinary practices to them.) “Are you going to neuter your dog? No? Why not? Tell me your reasons.” I have become tougher on owners and more passionate about their dogs’ basic needs, and after visiting many stray kennels at the beginning of the year and seeing how many distressed, lonely dogs there are, educating owners on why not to breed has become a regular struggle.

It can be challenging seeing dogs who may not be getting the best lifestyle, or have problems that may not be addressed by the owner due to their personal circumstances. Yes, it can be upsetting. It’s a different world out there, and if people are not going to the vets and may not know about what’s best for their animals, how can they make a decision? Many are not aware of the health benefits of neutering, do not recognise or know what to do if there are behavioural worries or know what a good diet is.

This is why the job I do, and by all the other campaigns veterinary nurses within Dogs Trust, is so vital; going into deprived areas where people come to you for advice, and will listen to what you have to say. Simply discussing important welfare needs or advising that a dog really needs to see a vet is so helpful to many people who are always so appreciative at the time spent with them. Knowing that a dog’s life may be improved by the education you are providing makes this job so worthwhile.

Again, I know what you are thinking, “Well these people shouldn’t have pets if they can’t afford it!” This may be true, but the point is they do. There are so many lovely, innocent dogs out there; do we just neglect them because of an owner’s circumstance? We are certainly not ones to judge. We don’t know how people are



Figure 3. A Dog Trust event in a local community centre.

affected by the current economic climate; I don't know if an owner has just lost his job and can't afford a lot but wants to help

ultimately the number of unnecessary euthanasias is to be commended, their help with Local Authority stray kennels



Figure 4. © Richard Murgatroyd Photography

his dog by bringing him to be checked. We don't know that someone might be all alone in the world and has no one but this dog in their lives, keeping them going. We don't know if an owner has just died or gone into care and an unsuspecting neighbour or family member has been asked to care for this dog. We don't know anyone's circumstances and we shouldn't judge, all we can do is help and educate, because then that dog has a better chance of getting what they need to live a healthy, happy life.

Dogs Trust promotes responsible dog ownership; their goals and objectives to reduce the number of strays and

within the campaign regions throughout the UK is fantastic and helping with the expense of neutering dogs in numerous other stray kennels before they go to a new home is vital (Figure 6).

There are of course "cons" working in this role. Every now and then I wonder, have I ultimately made the right choice? Do I miss practice? And of course the answer is yes to both. I do miss working in practice – I miss the team camaraderie, I miss doing clinical work – taking blood samples, putting animals on drips, monitoring anaesthetics, doing lovely disgusting things that I love like emptying anal glands and cleaning dirty ears or seeing

a patient through a treatment and come out the other side to a very relieved owner. This is something that you as VNs need to take into consideration when contemplating a move from this career. The job of a VN is not a glamorous one, neither is the role of the community nurse who is far more restricted in their nursing abilities.

Travel is a massive part of this job too with an average of 2–6 hours per day on the road. It can also feel a little lonely not being in practice, not working with other great nurses, seeing CPD that is just no longer relevant, or reading articles in magazines that promote the brilliance of practice VNs but little being said about those who have gone down a slightly different route. It's strange but you can feel "out of the loop".

But ultimately I enjoy how worthwhile this job is, seeing just one owner who is incredibly grateful for that piece of advice given, or those people queuing for two hours just to be seen as they can't afford that consultation fee at the vets and are desperate for guidance, or checking a dog that has a possible mammary tumour (I can't tell you how many I have felt!) and insisting (without diagnosing of course) that they really need a check with their local vet, makes this job matter. Giving out neutering vouchers to bitches who have had several litters and live with entire males is common and hopefully many have been helped. If I can help just one dog, then the day has been a success.

I also love the combination of different tasks within this role. I was asked to write



Figure 5. © Richard Murgatroyd Photography



Figure 6. Outside in the gazebo at an event

a 20-page booklet on obesity in dogs for one of our campaigns and hope that it will be published later this year, originally with

the view to hand out to owners on our events in the north of England, but I have now been told it may be published nationwide. I am also currently doing my own research and statistics out on the road to write another article on this topic.

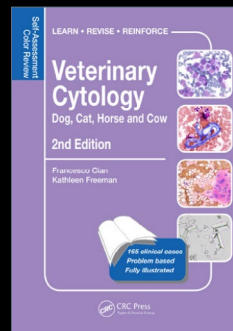
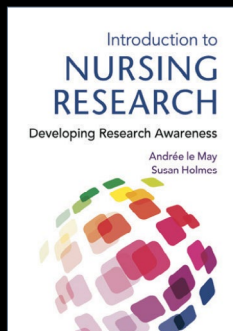
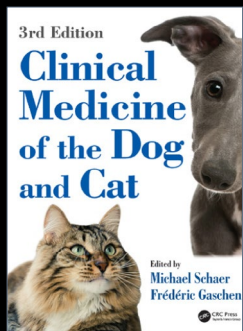
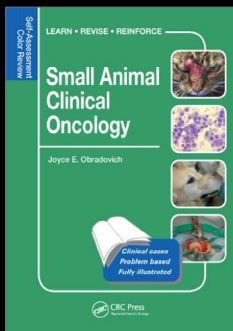
A 9–5 job is definitely a perk (or maybe it's just because I'm starting to feel my age after 10–12 hours shifts on my feet all day!), and with my low (but average) VN wage over the last few years, the pay has been a welcome change and a better reflection of the role I have taken.

I work with a great team (although we aren't all in one area) and my manager is fantastic. I personally value the ethos of this company, and feel they do such amazing work for dogs that I feel privileged working for such a great non-government funded charity. It has been widely reported that feeling valued and part of a good team also has a major impact on your role in work and this is important with regards to feelings of self-worth and the reduction of mental health issues that are commonly seen within the veterinary industry (Vet Nurse, 2016).

A change of role is not for everyone, and I'm glad about that because we need strong teams of VNs in practice, dedicating themselves to their patients and their job (I'm trusting you now with my dogs and have become the overbearing client!). However, I am seeing more often on social media, forums, as well as with my own friends in the profession, that many are starting to consider a change of career path or feel unhappy in their job for various reasons. Changing your profession or going down a different route is never an easy choice to make, especially when you have worked so hard for what you have achieved, but remember, you will always have those skills that you have been trained to use. I would never say that I wouldn't consider going back into practice, as you never know what the future holds, but it's nice to have the option!

Ultimately, you need to decide what makes you happy, what challenges you want within your career, and what can fund the lifestyle you choose to lead. Good luck VNs, and remember – you're all fantastic!

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