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Working as an RSPCA nurse: benefits and opportunities

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Introduction

RVNs, and those planning to join their esteemed ranks, have a variety of career options. Here, to help those making career choices, we present some of the benefits of working for charity practice. This paper is by no means a robust scientific study, but a way of collating and presenting the views of those who are working on the front line and experiencing the job first-hand.

The RSPCA cares for those animals most in need and provides a number of different opportunities for nurses, including RVNs, student nurses and Hospital Assistant roles. Many work in the four large national RSPCA clinics in London and Birmingham, the flagship Harmsworth Memorial and Putney sites (as seen on BBC's *Animal Hospital*), the Greater Manchester site in Salford and Newbrook Farm in Birmingham (as seen on ITV's *Give a Pet a Home* and Channel 5's *The Dog Rescuers*). In addition, there are the smaller clinics in Merthyr and London, and the forty (approximately) branch clinics across England and Wales.

Nurses in the clinics help care for both owned animals and animals rescued by the inspectorate, through each animal's journey from their rescue to their rehabilitation and rehoming. Others work within animal centres or specialist wildlife centres, providing expert advice and care to animals being rehabilitated. RSPCA nurses therefore also see aspects of veterinary work not seen in private practice such as wildlife nursing, cruelty cases, shelter medicine and dealing with populations of animals not just individuals (disease control and biosecurity). In addition, as well as such work helping individual animals, the RSPCA also tackles wider animal issues such as cat overpopulation and educating the pet-owning public.

We asked our RVN colleagues what they thought of working for the RSPCA, using a short, informal survey of employed RVNs, student nurses and Hospital Assistants (who support the nursing staff). Respondents were asked to give written opinions through an open question about working for the RSPCA. Responses were anonymised (to individual and location), amended for grammar and spelling and divided into statements. These were codified into common themes.

Responses were received from nine staff members, including one Hospital Assistant (designated 'H1'); two student nurses (designated 'S1' and 'S2') and six RVNs (designated 'R'). The responses fitted into eight themes (in addition to a miscellaneous category).

Variety of species and work

The RSPCA provides a wide variety of work. One student nurse described how 'Our daily work life is never the same. Every day is different including the animals' (S1). One of our nurses said that 'I really love my job as no day is the same and each day brings something rewarding' (R2).

This is partly a matter of the range of animals our nurses get to see. The RSPCA 'really is a fantastic place to work with such variety and the chance to experience working with all types of animals' (R2). 'Here [at the RSPCA] we see a large variety of medical cases and a variety of animals both domestic and wildlife' (R1) and 'The variety and quantity of animals we nurse here is amazing, from dogs, cats and exotics to all sorts of wildlife and birds, even the odd farm animal' (S1). This is a source of enjoyment, with



▣ **Figures 1–3.** Veterinary nursing for the RSPCA is full of variety; 'the variety and quantity of animals we nurse here is amazing, from dogs, cats and exotics to all sorts of wildlife and birds, even the odd farm animal!' Images courtesy of Joe Murphy/RSPCA.

one nurse saying 'I really enjoy nursing different species including wildlife and exotics' (R1).

We also see a wide variety in the type of veterinary work that our nurses get to do. 'We get to work in eight different wards, theatres, clinics, dispensary and reception' (S1). A Hospital Assistant specifically enjoyed the fact that 'I get to do a variety of things and use lots of different skills, from helping the vets during surgery, to talking to clients and giving health and welfare advice, to looking after all the stray animals that come into the hospital' (H1). The caseload is similarly varied, for example: 'Working as an RVN [in the RSPCA] I have gained loads of experience nursing different patients with various medical conditions' (R1).

Gaining skills and confidence

Indeed, the RSPCA can give nurses and students a range of opportunities for personal development, gaining more advanced nursing skills, and putting into practice the skills for which they are trained.

This appears particularly important for student nurses. One said that 'I have gained an incredible amount of experience and knowledge over the years, not just as a Hospital Assistant but now as a student veterinary nurse and I continue to do so on a daily basis' (S1) and that 'The help, support and knowledge I have

received from the vets and nurses has been fantastic and I wouldn't be the nurse I am today without them or this hospital' (S1). Another said that '[The RSPCA] has enabled me to train to become a veterinary nurse, whilst gaining vast experience I would not be able to get anywhere else. We see a huge number of cases throughout the year' (S2).

The same thing applies to qualified nurses: 'I came [to the RSPCA] straight from college with little experience and in the short time I've been here I feel I have gained invaluable experience that I will have throughout my nursing career' (R3). '[The] team here...has helped me gain skills and confidence as a nurse during my time here' (R1). 'Working at [the RSPCA] has given me so much confidence as a veterinary nurse. There are so many opportunities to learn new things and to improve on the nursing skills that we already have.' (R3) and 'I have gained so much experience working at [the RSPCA] and feel that this has really contributed towards my nursing skills' (R2).

This experience is linked to the caseload: 'We see a huge range of cases that, over the years, have increased my nursing skills and confidence. As a nurse at the hospital we are encouraged to use our skills in a variety of ways, [including] triaging new patients out of hours, caring for multiple inpatients and theatre procedures such as X-rays, wound management and minor stitch ups' (R5). 'I feel as if I can never stop learning here and

never stop improving. I have learned so much already in the [months] I have been here. Although at times it can be hard, you cannot plan for stray, sick or injured emergencies and at times there can be many but that's what we do here and we are a team and pull together every time' (R6).

Busy

The work can be challenging. The RSPCA is very busy, especially when a large number of animals urgently need nursing or other veterinary care. This does mean 'there is never a dull moment' (H1 and R5), but also means the work is likely to be attractive only to those who are happy to work hard – for a good cause. '[As] much as it can be difficult sometimes, everyone...works really hard to achieve the best outcome for the animals that come into us' (H1).

Standard of care

Despite this busyness, several colleagues commented on the high standard of care. 'Having worked for many years as a veterinary nurse, I have found here at [the RSPCA], the greatest care and love is given to our patients, from wildlife all the way through to the neonate patients we receive daily' (R4). 'We work together to provide the best possible care for our patients and that's what I love about working at [the RSPCA]' (R3). 'We have some great facilities and we constantly strive for the best standards in practice. If you don't believe me...come and see!' (R4).

While there may be an expectation that charity work will be limited by resources, this does not, in fact, have an impact on the standard of care for the work undertaken, and perhaps the reverse may be true. While some aspects of veterinary work are not covered (e.g. chemotherapy), the work that is done is done to the highest standards possible.

Team

Another positive aspect commonly cited by colleagues is the excellent 'team spirit' between colleagues. 'We...have an amazing team here' (R1). 'Everyone that works at [the RSPCA] shares the same sense of passion and enthusiasm towards animals and we all work so well as a team' (R2). 'With so many different roles here I feel as if I am part of something bigger than "a vets". I am part of a massive group of people, all with the



▣ **Figures 4–7.** 'As a nurse at the hospital we are encouraged to use our skills in a variety of ways, [including] triaging new patients out of hours, caring for multiple inpatients and theatre procedures such as X-rays, wound management and minor stitch ups'. Images courtesy of Joe Murphy/RSPCA.

same goal and that is to prevent cruelty and promote animal welfare and all in between, such as stray work and wildlife' (R6). One newer member of the team said 'I immediately felt welcomed and part of a large but very close team. The team are fantastic and the emotional support they provide for each other goes above and beyond' (R4).

Both student VNs said that 'the whole team is extremely supportive of each other, making each day not only interesting but also enjoyable' (S2) and 'We really do have the best definition of "team work" here at [our RSPCA hospital]. Not only do all the vets and nurses support each other physically at work but emotionally too and we certainly know how to "have a laugh"! We call ourselves a Family because that's what we are' (S1).

Rewarding work

As expected, one popular point was that the work involves making a real difference, particularly to animals. 'Working at [the RSPCA] is incredibly rewarding and I think the work we do contributes greatly to increasing animal welfare standards in [our area]. Being able to provide veterinary treatment and care for animals that may otherwise go untreated is a large factor in this, whether these are pets where financial constraints prevent the owners providing private veterinary care, or unowned animals such as strays and wildlife' (S2).

This was echoed by most of the staff. For example: 'One of my favourite parts of the job is working closely with, and nursing, stray animals and helping them on their road to recovery and then finding their forever home' (R1). 'The main reason I enjoy working here is that we get to work closely with stray animals. It is so rewarding seeing an injured or sick animal come in then leave fit and healthy ready for their new home' (R5). 'What I enjoy most about working here is the animals, in the hospital atmosphere you really get to know them and watch them mend and their characters begin to shine and it's beautiful. All of the staff enjoy this and talk about favourite individuals often' (R6).

This altruism is not just directed at animals. For example, the Hospital Assistant notes that 'The main reason is I love helping the animals and people that need it the most in society. A lot of the time we are their last resort' (H1).



▣ **Figures 8–10.** Patient care is always a priority, 'we work together to provide the best possible care for our patients and that's what I love about working at [the RSPCA]'. Images courtesy of Joe Murphy/ RSPCA.

Concern for animal welfare

The final theme is that our nurses are particularly concerned about animal welfare. Many of our nurses had specifically chosen the RSPCA *because* of their desire to help animals. 'I became a veterinary nurse because I wanted to help animals who have nobody (or nobody responsible enough) to care for them. So working for the RSPCA was my main goal as soon as I became qualified' (R6). One recalled that working at the RSPCA 'was a dream job of mine as a youngster, which has not only lived up to my expectations but has exceeded it in many ways' (S1); another said 'I

now feel very privileged to work for the organisation I once sat in awe of in a lecture room, listening to the difference the charity has made to the welfare of our society's animals, large and small' (R4). As a result, one of our nurses reckons that 'I honestly believe I will retire here, because the RSPCA's goals are my goals too, and that's what's important to me' (R6). The job clearly appeals to the compassion for animals that appears to be common amongst veterinary nurses.

Discussion

The RSPCA is the oldest and largest animal welfare charity in the world,

and animal welfare is at the heart of everything its staff does. This is reflected in the responses of our nurses: the work is compelling and hard, caring for large numbers of needy animals, while maintaining the highest possible standards of care. Achieving this is helped by the strong relationships between colleagues, the ability to use one's skills and the clear compassion of our nurses for animals.

It is interesting to note that none of the respondents commented on the personal benefits, such as:

- contributory pension scheme
- healthcare contributions
- life insurance
- childcare vouchers
- holiday entitlement
- RCVS membership fees
- CPD
- Employee Assistance Programme

Working for a large organisation allows benefits that cannot be replicated in smaller practices. The RSPCA also recognise a staff union, which represents employees. The fact that none of the staff mentioned any of the pecuniary or other benefits suggests that the role is more of a vocation – helping animals – than a self-interested choice, although the learning and development opportunities could also be a motivating factor for other staff who intend to then progress to other jobs (even if they subsequently decide to stay).

For some nurses, working for the RSPCA is a specific dream. Others are drawn to the RSPCA because they recognise that they care passionately for animal welfare and want to help as much as they can. Clearly, nurses in other areas of veterinary work also care about animals and can enjoy helping them: in particular, there are many ways in which compassionate nurses can help patients in private practice. Nevertheless, for those nurses and students for whom animal welfare is the highest vocational driving force, charity work gives additional opportunities. If you care about animal welfare, you should consider working for animal welfare charities. And if you particularly want to help the neediest animals, whom nobody else helps, you would be well advised to consider working for the RSPCA.