

# Ten-minute chat

**Tim Hutchinson is a managing partner at Larkmead Veterinary Group in Oxfordshire. He is also the Small Animal Director of XLVets, which last year celebrated its 10th anniversary.**

## Tell us a bit about yourself.

I have always had a keen interest in surgery (especially orthopaedics) and spent four years in a busy city-centre small animal practice in West Yorkshire before moving to Larkmead in 1998.

## Isn't XLVets a large animal group?

XLVets began as a farm/mixed practice initiative but, as the value of the concept has grown, it has developed two specialist divisions: XLEquine and XLVets Small Animal (which was launched at the London Vet Show in 2014).

XLVets is a collaborative group of independent practices, which cooperate across a wide range of initiatives. The concept of the group is to help members generate sustainable competitive advantages to thrive in an ever more challenging industry. Our core objective is always to help practices achieve 'excellence in practice', from clinical delivery to providing the best environments for staff to work in.

## How did you get involved?

The majority of our member practices have small animal departments and it was a natural progression for us to learn from our farm colleagues. I have represented Larkmead within the Small Animal (SA) Group since we joined. Having seen the value of what could be delivered I was keen to get more involved, and became a director in 2010.

While we have been meeting regularly as a group for several years, it was only in 2014 that we launched our dedicated SA strapline: 'XL Excellence in Veterinary Care'.

## What are the benefits?

The benefits are numerous, ranging from simple returns, such as high-quality CPD for my staff, marketing support and initiative sharing, and specialist

skills exchange, through to the acquired business skills that come from being part of a high-functioning management team. The time that I have personally invested in XLVets has been invaluable CPD that has certainly lifted the business functionality of Larkmead.

## What about your own career development?

As a result of some unforeseen and unfortunate partnership changes some years ago, I had to learn the hard way how to manage the practice. As a business owner and leader I can now call on the support of the owners of 52 other practices, who are willing to share what has worked for them. As a clinician, and especially as an orthopaedic surgeon, I am now part of a community where we are keen to share advice and experience, and I have recently begun to add training skills to my portfolio.

## What kind of training do you do?

The training arm of XLVets is XLVets Training Services. Its ethos is that the best people to deliver training are our members on the ground. Through skills acquired in the 'train the trainer' arena, I have been able to provide CPD to the group on orthopaedic topics as well as non-clinical survival skills (as part of our new graduate programme). Many of my staff (clinical and support) have benefited from our VetSkills courses, all of which are highly practical.

## How did the group celebrate its 10-year anniversary?

At its inception, the founders of XLVets were told that the concept of veterinary practices collaborating was doomed to failure. For it not only to survive, but to thrive and grow year-on-year, made the 10th anniversary a special landmark. Our 52 member practices took part in a series of diverse sponsored activities in which we aimed, collectively, to travel a distance equivalent to circumnavigating the world, without using an engine. In the end we exceeded this target and raised over £35,000, which was split between the Send a Cow charity and organisations local to our members.



## What do you consider its most significant achievement to date?

It is difficult to single one out. However, faced with corporatisation of the profession, it is significant that XLVets has grown to provide a viable alternative and has shown that good-quality independent practices can collaborate to achieve so much. As a company, most of the activity is delivered by its members for its members. This is testament to the calibre of our member practices and the fact that they share the vision of what collaborative working can deliver.

## What challenges do independent practices face?

Probably the biggest challenge is self-belief. With the powerful branding and marketing of large corporate groups it is easy to feel dwarfed and threatened. Yet, as independent practices we have the ability to deliver a hugely valuable service to our clients and we must never be afraid to shout about it. Within the group we often use the concept of a shoal of fish – working together, going in the same direction and yet with the individual responsiveness to be able to react at a moment's notice.

## What developments are planned for the next 10 years?

Building on the successes of the first 10 to work together to deliver even more value back into our member practices.

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