

# RED SQUIRREL – ONE YEAR LATER

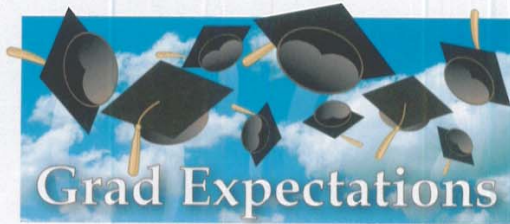
AS I sit down one year on from writing my first article as "Red Squirrel", I am taking the opportunity to see how far I have come and what advice I can offer new graduates fresh from vet school.

I have completed my internship with Synergy Farm Health and become a permanent member of the team. My practice has been participating in the XLVets VetSkills training scheme for new graduates, and I was asked to assist with the surgical section of the course.

Surgery – despite my ambitions at the start of my internship – has not turned out to be one of my great loves. I am not a natural scalpel welder, and it was felt this would make me the most appropriate person to talk to new graduates about what they could expect from year one.

On my first day in practice,

**"One of the main perks of my internship position has been the out-of-hours back-up support I have had."**



I had been asked to stock my van and make up my ideal surgery kit. My small animal surgery lectures came in handy; I knew what some of the pieces were. But my preferences? I eventually created a jumbo kit (everyone needs at least two of everything, right?).

A year down the line, I have a much more streamlined version and use some pieces of equipment that I hadn't seen in practice as a student.

## Reassurance and understanding

I wanted to use my session with the new graduates to reassure them of some of the concerns I had 12 months ago when sitting in their seats, and what I wish someone had told me about surgery.

I always assumed that, as a newbie, my surgeries would be

akin to butchery and that holding a scalpel would automatically result in nicked arteries and dead cows, breakdowns, peritonitis from long surgery times and an overall disaster zone, not to mention the risks to human health associated with surgery – I learned this lesson the hard way at the end of my first week, resulting in a broken hand from a grumpy cow. I also confessed how I secretly shudder when Belgian blue calvings arrive on the books.

I was really refreshed to hear it wasn't only me who had these concerns, and that some of the other new graduates worried about the same things.

I tried to reassure the group with tips I had picked up along the way, the importance of relaxing during surgery and the crucial point of knowing and accessing the support they have

available. They were a brilliant group to work with and I hope my nuggets of experience help them along their way.

One of the main perks of my internship position has been the out-of-hours back-up support I have had. I always had a senior clinician on call with me, who would be on hand if I needed telephone advice or support in the field.

At the beginning of my internship, I was frequently thankful for this support, and am eternally grateful for what I received. Nonetheless, the day arrived when I was sat down for "the talk".

## Flying solo

"Emily, you are coming to the end of your internship and have been coping with the on call caseload. We are about to take on the new interns and feel you are ready to start flying solo."

I raised my concerns about being cut loose from the apron strings of support, and was reassured that "if needed, help would come."

My first completely solo weekend arrived. I filled the house with highly nutritious meals (radiation-deficient ones that I could correct in the "popcity ping"), had my young farmer friends on back-up for movie-related support and nestled in with a pile of paperwork for the weekend ahead.

The start to the weekend was thankfully slow, with a case of summer mastitis in a Belgian blue heifer. I was concerned about the longer term udder health of the affected heifer and a suitable treatment protocol was put in place.

My second call was a calving on one of my favourite farms, complete with its herd of Jersey cows. The young heifer was in calf to the stock Hereford bull and was unfortunately struggling with a backwards calving. A prompt epidural and rearrangement of the long legs resulted in delivery of the heifer calf. A quick cup of tea later and I was back on the road.

My weekend went quickly, with sick cows and two more calvings. I was getting ready for the weekly instalment of *Downton Abbey*, and then the telephone rang. "Emily, it's the answering service. We have a call for you – Mr Grey has a calving. He has tried with the calving aid, but thinks it is going to need a caesarean." I knew the farm and they had big Belgian blues – the worst possible disruption to *Downton Abbey*.

I arrived at the farm and huge



Red Squirrel with the new interns Rob Goss (left) and Pete Silvester (right).

was the key word – the cow was huge and the calf was huge. The cow was also grumpy and this was not one I fancied tackling alone; call it intuition.

A senior colleague on call nearby arrived and we started to tackle the caesarean. "Diva" doesn't sufficiently describe this Belgian blue. Its tantrum began at skin preparation and ended with sedation. Having had one broken hand this year, I didn't fancy a second, or worse – having a squashed colleague.

We battled through the cow's aggressive lack of cooperation – admittedly with some compromises on surgical sterility and a certain amount of bad language – but eventually completed the operation unscathed.

My first solo weekend hadn't been the success I had hoped for. I had had to call for help and my fear of Belgian blues had not been corrected. Yet again, the help and support of my team had saved the day and we all made it out alive.

## Final thoughts

At Synergy Farm Health, we have taken on two new interns – Rob and Pete. Having them running around has made it the perfect opportunity to reflect on my first year in practice.

My first week – complete with broken hand and my first visit to a retained cleansing – feels a long time ago. My numerous traffic-related incidents still haunt me, and I hope the run of flat tyres Pete has had are the complete extent of him following in my driving footsteps.

The heifer I calved at my first solo calving is now long weaned and my first solo displaced abomasum surgery is back in calf and set to complete its first lactation without further problem. I am about due to revisit my haunted cows for a pre-movement test (you had

to be there) and I recently had an update from my road traffic accident bull – it made it home in one piece and its wound healed up beautifully.

My greatest triumphs in the year, however, probably include my active membership with the Young Farmers Club, becoming a permanent part of the Synergy Farm Health team and, hopefully, becoming a valued vet with the clients.

My first year didn't run completely smoothly, and it wasn't without the "why don't I have an office job?" days. However, my final thought for Rob and Pete – and for all new graduates entering a career in farm practice – would be that the success of a team is only as great as the sum of all the individuals. If in doubt, you should always ask for help and if you are valued, it will be provided.

Being a farm vet isn't an easy job, often with poor handling facilities, climactic extremes, uncooperative patients, stressful clinical scenarios and economic constraints. Some calls can be unrewarding. But don't underestimate the feeling you will have with every live calf, every emergency call rectified and every time a farmer extends his or her gratitude to you for getting there quickly, or simply showing him or her and their animals compassion.

Red Squirrel: over and out. ■



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