

Best supporting actress award goes to...

FAVOURITE films are memorable due to plots, locations and leading ladies and men. But imagine your favoured blockbuster with no support cast: Harry Potter without Hermione and Ron; Bond without Q; Sherlock without Watson.

Your first weeks in practice are some of the most daunting of your career. Irrespective of the type of practice, you don't know anyone (clients or otherwise), where anything is kept and lack clinical confidence. The team back at HQ is priceless.

Some calls are memorable for the wrong reasons. We have an eclectic range of breeds in the practice, and several breeders of pedigree horned animals. Meat produced by some of our traditional breeds is favoured by some for leanness and depth of flavour.

Drawing on experience

My penultimate call on a Friday afternoon, at the end of a long week and busy nights on call, was a last-minute book in. "Base to Red Squirrel," I heard over the CB radio. "Receiving Base." "Mr Jones has a Longhorn steer that has broken its horn. It's



bleeding profusely and they would like a visit ASAP." I headed straight there. The farmer finished traditional breeds for a specialist market.

On arrival, I found a two-year-old steer with two broken horns. Fortunately, the farmer had a crush designed for horned animals. The panicked steer crashed and banged into the crush to be restrained for local anaesthetic administration, degloving the right horn casing. The left remained loosely attached at the base, but the right was now bleeding profusely. A colleague's experience had taught me to take dehorning irons to any call involving horns and horn removal.

I promptly administered local anaesthesia, provided NSAIDs and fired up my irons. I placed my embryotomy wire in place and began to saw. Despite a cornual block (including block-

ing the horn base) and sedation, the steer was not happy about the procedure. I had hoped my technique would provide some form of cautery, but, ultimately, I had to reach for the irons. Despite them glowing exothermically, they were being soaked by blood from the horn buds.

"Back in the day, Emily, we used baling twine to stop the bleeding and didn't bother with heat. We could give it a go," suggested the client. He was also beginning to worry about the bleeding. With a figure of eight ligature and the use of matches and artery forceps, we eventually got the bleeding stopped.

I was exhausted and relieved. It had been a nervous procedure and not fun for the steer, client or me. The farmer had picked up on my concern.

After giving postoperative care instructions, the client

continued: "Thanks for your help Emily. These guys are always knocking off their horns. We've got some castrates booked in for next week if you're unlucky enough to have to come back." I shuddered. I felt the whole thing had been a disaster – blood everywhere, a stressed animal (despite my best attempts) and a blood-soaked owner.

A reassuring word

I was now late for the small TB test I had to read before my weekend began. I rang the office and asked to speak to the practice manager, anticipating a complaint or at least a "we'd rather have a different vet". I was consoled and told not to worry; that horn removal of an animal of that age was always going to be tricky and the client was usually very reasonable. Despite the advice, I was not convinced and spent the rest of my weekend worrying.

I was greeted by the same member of staff on Monday morning, who still sensed my anxiety. "Emily, please don't worry. Mr Jones rang in on Saturday morning and left you a message. The steer is doing perfectly well. He said you did marvellously and he tried to book you for the castrates this week." The reassurance from both a member of the team and the client was invaluable. Sometimes, as a young vet, all you need is the reaffirmation you did the best job you could in the circumstances you had – and that the client agrees. Another team member helped me in the above scenario with my lateness to the final TB test.

The most common example of the support staff helping out is when I am late. Despite my best efforts, it happens, because a call runs over and another has been booked sequentially, due to traffic, or through my navigational incompetence. Inevitably, the office team has to deal with this and take the brunt. For this, I am eternally grateful.

The veterinary vehicle

I am very fortunate to work in a practice with an in-house laboratory, complete with in-house technicians affectionately known as the "lab rats". As a result of their skills, I can run in-house biochemistry, parasitology and milk culture with prompt recording. While this contributes invaluable to the service I can consequently offer clients, they help me simply, but significantly, in other ways.

In my first weeks, they would frequently receive calls about what colour tube I needed for each sample and how much poo I actually needed for the parasitology I wanted to perform. I try to reiterate



Having a supportive team of fellow vets, nurses, office staff, technicians and "lab rats" is highly beneficial for vets.

my appreciation regularly and practically by completing my submission forms as comprehensively as possible. Like many of my colleagues, I occasionally let myself down on this front and, rightly so, have my wrists slapped. Sorry guys.

I began my time in practice with high aspirations about my frequency of docket submission – I would submit them daily. I know I am not the worst offender, but I do occasionally fall short. Our financial team is brilliant, not least for being able to read veterinary handwriting (poor handwriting style being a prerequisite for most veterinary applicants).

I receive a regular docket writing appraisal and despite my best efforts, legibility can be a challenge on farm. Despite feeling like a scorned infant when I receive critiques, the team frees up my time, enabling me to speak to clients, follow up clinical cases, read current literature or discuss cases with colleagues.

Working for a large and busy practice certainly has its perks, but one downside is that busy days away from HQ can be isolating. Despite regular CB and telephone contact, one can go days without seeing a colleague and, initially, I found some days in practice quite lonely. For the gregarious vet, this can be a challenge, thus, telephone contact with support staff can be an invaluable morale booster. Wittering to a colleague about the happenings at HQ can be highly cathartic.

Finally, irrespective of practice size, I am a firm believer most practices run on biscuits and cakes. Synergy Farm Health is no different and there is usually a regular supply in the vets' room (we do try to share). As a vet, I have the reputation of running on cake, and the fact my colleagues perceived this was highlighted when one team member saved me some chocolate cake as the other "practice gannets" were already

swarming – a touching sentiment and one I was thankful for after a long morning TB-testing in the snow.

I try to top up the practice biscuit box regularly – certainly as regularly as my cocker spaniel will allow (she has an uncanny knack of finding them stashed in my van).

Support in more ways than one

As a veterinary "wannabe" seeing work experience, support staff and vet nurses are your primary source of support, advice and often, practical experience. As an undergraduate, they guide you with nursing protocols, provide moral support during your first practice surgery runs and, in large animal practice, advise which farm/equine vet to go out with.

Finally, as a new graduate, they are an integral part of your support team. I anticipate this won't change throughout my career (but, hopefully, my questions will become less basic).

Support staff and nurses are the engine parts enabling the veterinary vehicle to drive. Without them, the wheels would come off. Famous films would be hollow monologues without the support cast, and the same applies to vet practice.

My year in practice has taught me there are lots of things I don't know, should know and hopefully will know. In my first weeks, I asked many questions (some sensible; some irrational, but all things I was worried about) and without the support of vets, nurses, office staff and technicians, I would probably be bumping along even now. ■

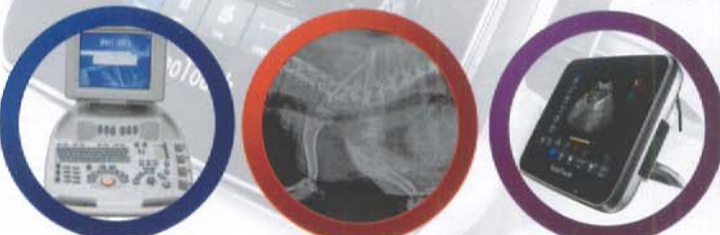
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