

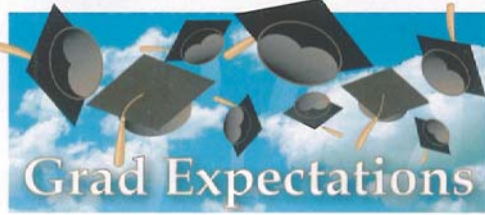
# Red Squirrel in captivity – held back by spiral fracture of metacarpal two

LIFE as the Synergy Farm Health intern has been going well. I have had the opportunity to carry out some large routine calls, visit clients on my own and get used to the workings of the practice. The support team is being incredibly understanding and directing me on calls that I am comfortable with while at the same time encouraging me.

My penchant for surgery has been acknowledged and in month one a whole day of surgery had been booked for me – with the assistance of a more experienced vet, of course.

With a left displaced abomasum (LDA) op for breakfast and a lumpectomy for elevenses, I was raring to go. The “DA” op went without incident and my para-vertebral worked a treat. Having seen local infiltration used as a preference in other practices it was a nice opportunity to learn a new skill and the results were very effective.

Cow number two with its flank lump was not quite as tolerant. Having been persuaded to enter the crush and been given a “hint of sedation”, it appeared most amiable. The



lump was at right flank “DA” incision site and was being traumatised during the working day of the cow.

Given the superficial nature and mobility of the lump, local infiltration was opted for. The inverted L block was well tolerated and she was unresponsive to needle sticks. The incision was made. My elliptical incision went without drama. However, critiquing the incision, my margins could have been narrower considering the potential tension at the site. I then proceeded with blunt incision to break down the connective tissues involved. There were no major blood vessels attached to the lump and dissection was relatively easy. The patient was being incredibly well behaved and under the watchful eye of my colleague, I relaxed and continued to dissect.

The saying don’t count your chickens until they’ve hatched springs to mind. As I made the final dissection through the last centimetre of connective tissue – boom – the cow got me.

Reaching forward, she kicked the instruments from my left hand and sent me flying backwards. Having recovered my balance I became aware that my left hand felt funny. It wasn’t painful or bleeding – just funny. I could flex and extend all the joints and nothing was sticking out at unusual angles.

To my great mortification, I had to ask my colleague to continue. The last attachment of the lump pulled away easily. I was mostly embarrassed at

having given up, not something I am comfortable with and so early on in my internship. What would the practice think? Would my surgery days end here?

The surgery was completed rapidly in expert hands and my hand quickly felt much more comfortable. Having reassured my colleague I was fine I radioed base.

“Red Squirrel to base.”

“Receiving.”

“I’ve finished my surgery and will head to my next call. Over.”

My call was completed without incident. I felt an occasional twinge when performing two-handed tasks, but I am luckily very right-handed. I returned to the practice to get on top of my paperwork and re-read about local blocks in cattle. A debrief of my day with a trusted colleague ended with their suggestion that I get my hand checked out. The local hospital was on my route home and I didn’t fancy spending the weekend worrying about my hand.

## Visiting A and E

My accident and emergency experience was actually very positive. I had never visited A and E previously, but I knew of the horrors of the waiting room. I was dealt with very quickly, but sent away again having been told it was probably a tendon injury and a radiograph was unnecessary, especially given that my hand wasn’t painful. What a relief. However sad it sounds, my main concern was my internship experience.



The author discussing dairy cow nutrition with an RVC student.

My aim for the year is to take every opportunity for clinical work I can, and the mere thought of being office-bound horrified me. A weekend taking anti-inflammatories ensued and, as predicted, I developed a nice black and blue shiner.

Back to work on Monday with a large routine call. I am trying to develop my left-handed pregnancy diagnostic skills as this is most compatible with some of the practice’s larger farms, but on this day I had to stick to my right hand. Passing through the squeeze of the cow’s anal sphincter was painful, but once inside I could concentrate on honing my skills. After a few cows, I had to swap to my right hand – another defeat.

My learning accelerated over the next two weeks. From blood-sampling large flocks of ewes, my first calving, routines, digit amputation surgeries, down cows, the recovery of a ketotic cow from her position and eating soil in a ditch – I was loving it. Although it can be frustrating that everything is so new, you can feel yourself learning and going home every day knowing you can do something you probably couldn’t do alone the day before, it is actually quite exciting.

At the end of week two post-flying through the air lesson, I decided a trip to the doctor was probably necessary. Although my hand wasn’t painful, I could feel a lump on the bone and even my limited orthopaedic expertise told me that crepitus mid-metacarpal was not normal. Still no pain.

Re-examination and an x-ray resulted in a diagnosis. A complete spiral fracture of metacarpal two. Activity: some obvious. Alignment: reasonable. Apparatus: an unattractive splint. All a hindrance to my clinical work and uncondusive for the “cute new vet” look.

In short, I am office-bound until the six-week mark and getting stuck into some paper-based tasks. I try to sneak a look at as many animals as I can when they visit the practice and when the boss isn’t looking. Although my practical skill advancement has slowed, I am getting stuck into some great projects at the practice, including flock health plans for small-holder clients, data collation and telephone duty. I am also taking the opportunity to get to know the support team and my misdemeanours provide light relief.

The distraction of the Young Farmers is very useful. My highlight of the month was see-

ing the Wurzels play classic hits including *Combine Harvester* and *Drink Up Thy Zider*. A red leopard print thong also featured in their display. Perhaps enough said.

The reality of this month has been that Red Squirrel has been in captivity. Although frustrated that my practical learning has paused, my clinical knowledge continues to improve. I have had the opportunity to work within the synergy laboratory. This facility means we can run bloods the same day and do in-house parasitology, which is incredibly useful as a new graduate.

The experience has been a useful reminder that cattle are dangerous and, as vets, we often perform daily tasks that would keep health and safety monitors very busy in other professions. We must aim to mitigate risk as much as possible and ensure the people and animals we work with are safe and that welfare is not compromised. Beyond that it is personal choice. For me, the choice is work with animals I love and in an industry that inspires me, or allow the risk to overrule and work in another area of the profession.

Even with a broken hand, I still choose farm. ■



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