

HOT TOPIC

THE BURNING QUESTION:

Why are so many VNs leaving the profession?

The reasons why veterinary nurses opt to pursue other careers have been long-debated on nurse forums and at congresses, but little appears to have changed. RVN **Helen Tottey** posed questions to a VN group on facebook and received some honest – if uncomfortable – answers as to what could be done to stop the attrition.



Liz Cox, Chair of VN Council

“More training practices overall, but particularly in areas such as Wales, where there relatively few, would be welcome and help more people enter the profession. However, encouraging people to stay in the profession in the long-term is the real key to tackling the shortage of VNs. From the feedback I have received from fellow members of the profession since becoming Chair of VN Council, some of the main issues cited have been lack of career progression, poor pay, balancing work and family life and veterinary nurses feeling under-valued in clinical practice. The VN Futures project, a companion project to Vet Futures, will be looking at finding solutions to the issues surrounding retention of veterinary nurses.”

In September 2015, the Vet Futures monthly blog asked: “Where are all the veterinary nurses? Is there a need for another training option?” This blog post received one of the highest numbers of comments and voters to the poll, proving this really is a “hot topic”. So where are all the veterinary nurses and why are they leaving the profession they work so hard to become part of?

Thinking back to when I qualified, I remember being both excited to put on my green uniform and feeling uncertain as to what this meant for me over the coming years – and I certainly couldn't have predicted the path my career did take! I couldn't rely only on my experiences, so I asked nurses on the Vet Nurse Wish List, a facebook page, and the results have formed the basis of this article.

To uncover why there is a veterinary nurse shortage I think it is first important to understand who veterinary nurses are. Have you ever thought about the characteristics of a veterinary nurse? We know they are passionate about the patients they care for, work hard, often finishing work later than their scheduled hours to help out colleagues or patients, and are good cleaners(!), but is that all?

Most student nurses come in to veterinary practice from school, but already a key characteristic has shown itself before they work their first shift, and that is determination. With 39 per cent of VNs reporting they applied to 13 or more

practices for a training position, this career has not been entered into lightly. But gaining that placement doesn't mean plain sailing from there onwards, as 30 per cent of respondents told me they subsequently moved training practices. The comments included:

- “Didn't get on with the people in my training practices”
 - “Poor commitment to training from the practice, and difficult working environment”
 - “No support, bully of a clinical coach. Generally unhappy”
- But with perseverance as another personality trait, the student nurses continued to work towards gaining their veterinary nurse qualification.

Role of the training practice

The training of student VNs has changed a lot over the years, with varying degree of responsibility on the training practice (TP) to ensure all areas of the nurse progress log (NPL) are completed in accordance with the RCVS' requirements. Students need a lot of support and help from the veterinary team to learn the skills to enable them to pass the exams and, from a practice owner perspective, this time can be costly. Some practices even state it is a full-time job to train student nurses. However, a vet student will also need time and even patients to practise on, and the same goes for a new graduate. The difference is, the effort put into vets' training seems to

VPMA's comment on VN training

"As practice managers, we need to ensure that our nurses are being developed to their full potential. Some clarity is required at times as to what RVNs can actually do under the current "Schedule 3" legislation, and this should be made clear to the whole veterinary team. I think it is important we, as managers, speak to our nurses and ensure we have a robust review and development programme in place so that a clear career path is available. This is essential if we want to retain our nurses. We need to make them fee-earning in their own right, so that they become part of the profit-making area of our balance sheets – not remain as part of the costs!"

be more readily accepted by vets, who seem to find the time to do it, so why is it any different when it comes to training nurses? Is it, as the VNs on facebook report, because they feel less valued so less time and effort is afforded them in their training and development compared to a veterinary surgeon? Is it because, in the mind of the practice owner, a vet will earn the business thousands, but a nurse...?

I believe the way practices think about training students and the benefits they bring needs to be re-thought if the profession is going to find a solution to the shortage of veterinary nurses. It doesn't stop there, though – it is not just a change in the way of thinking about nurse training that is needed, what about those who are already qualified? The VN qualification enables the holder to perform a range of clinical and non-clinical aspects of patient care, and it is this variation that nurses value.

This comment sums it up: "I absolutely love my job; not necessarily because of where I work, but because of the type of work an RVN can do."

But VNs' experiences differ according to the type of practice they're in. Referring to the question: "As an RVN, has the job role met your expectations?" one nurse commented "It is practice dependent; some vets have and do utilise my skill set as an RVN, some use me as a glorified cleaner". The type of work undertaken by a VN can impact job satisfaction and contribute to the reason why he or she will leave a job or even the profession altogether.

Most nurses train in one practice so only ever experience one work environment and type of work. For example, a student training in a one-vet or small branch practice will not learn the same as one who has a placement in a large hospital. Broadening VNs' training experiences may help give a clearer picture of what type of work appeals to an individual. This might help the 20 per cent of respondents who answered that the VN job had not met their expectations.

The biggest question, however, still remains. When the facebook VNs were asked: "are you, or have you ever, considered leaving veterinary nursing?" shockingly, 54 per cent answered yes. The reasons given included: "I thought RVNs would be more respected;" and "[leaving for] better pay, more chances of responsibility, extended scope of role and career progression – nursing's pretty much a dead-end job".

After qualification these ambitious and determined individuals, who want to develop and continue learning and

contributing to their profession, find there is little career progression. For this reason, 52 per cent of participants said they would look for work outside of the veterinary industry. The top three reasons for considering leaving practice were:

- **Pay:** "I get paid less than the receptionists where I work currently."
- **Lack of recognition:** "Increased recognition of RVN capabilities by vets and the public."
- **Weekend working:** "Less on call/weekends."

It may not surprise you to read that pay is a reason for nurses leaving the profession, but it may surprise you that in our responses, it was tied in place with a lack of recognition.

I believe this is further evidence of the positive character traits of veterinary nurses, who do not expect a large salary, rather they are motivated by appreciation and the opportunity to progress their career. One nurse commented: "Appreciation with a small pay rise. The opportunity for promotion."

So what is the answer?

The way to encourage more VNs to stay in the profession is to treat them as the professionals they have become or are aspiring to be. The shortage of veterinary nurses cannot be changed overnight, but I believe there is something that you can do to start to make a change.

Find time to take a look at those hardworking students and VNs and ask yourself what it is about that individual character and colleague of yours that is contributing to your business. Then go and ask them what they think; what their ideas are and let them know they are valued. Ensure they know they are an important part of the team while at the same time making sure all the other colleagues know that you feel this way about your team.

Promoting a culture of value and support won't cost anything, but it will mean a lot to those working with you. And together, over time, your practice can inspire new students who will go on to train future generations of nurses in the way they were trained. A happy VN is a productive VN and is worth a lot, not only to patient welfare and care, but also to a veterinary business. Without them, the future of the veterinary profession would look like a much poorer place.

SPVS' view on VN training

SPVS would encourage its members to offer VN training in their practices. Some practice owners are put off by the financial implications, but there are several options that help to keep costs down. Nurse retention is likely to be better in well-run, happy practices with good profitability, where morale is good, salaries are fair, career development is encouraged and funded, and where there is a sensible approach to staff members' work-life balance. RVNs are an asset to veterinary practices and without the support of vets their numbers won't increase to the level required for all practices in the UK to be able to employ at least one!

Helen Tottey, RVN, worked as a consulting nurse before owning her own practice and now works for Mojo Consultancy and Onswitch.

CASE STUDY: WHERE HAVE ALL THE VNS GONE, ASKS TRUDY LANGDALE

Trudy Langdale, a vet at Porchester Vets in Hampshire, discusses how her practice tackled the issue of a shortage of veterinary nurses by liaising with their local training college and becoming a TP.



“We opened our practice in January 2014 with three staff – a vet, a vet nurse and a practice manager/receptionist. After a few months we advertised for another part-time VN but to no avail. Other local vets were reportedly having the same issue of not being able to find a VN. It appears that

many nurses in our area have turned to locum and night work as these fit better around family life. Some have been absorbed by referral hospitals and others have taken the company rep route. Some have sadly given up completely. It seems we now have a situation where fewer nurses are being trained, even though the actual need for VNs has not reduced at all. Our supplies are drying up!

We thought one solution to our problem might be to become a training practice, but when we looked into it, we found the costs of becoming a TP were very high, especially for a new practice with obvious financial constraints. We had enough cases coming through our doors to be able to train a student nurse, lovely new premises and plenty of equipment (our practice is RCVS-accredited), but were not in a position to easily increase our outgoings to cover the full-time salary and training fees. We have gradually increased our staff numbers over time, but slowly and not in the strategic way we had planned for our business: a year on, we have one full-time VN, a part-time VN, a part-time ACA and a new vet starting soon.

Very happily for us, Sparsholt College has now waived the fees that a practice would pay for placement of a degree student, so we are becoming a TP and have a student nurse lined up to join us in January for her first two-month stint. She approached us directly last summer when she could not find one practice local to her who could give her a two-week work experience placement before she started college. We are looking forward to having her back with us; it will be good for us and will help us stay current with our practices and CPD. This kind of gesture by Sparsholt may help relieve the general situation over time, but for the effect to spread, other colleges will need to follow suit. They have been really helpful regarding our clinical coaching, doing as much as

What the BVNA says



“BVNA agrees that retention in the VN profession is an issue that needs to be looked into and addressed.

There are a number of reasons stated in the *RCVS 2014 Survey of the Veterinary Nurse Profession*, including:

- 71 per cent cited that poor pay led to difficulties making ends meet
- 54 per cent said that they did not feel valued or rewarded in non-financial terms.
- 48 per cent were dissatisfied with veterinary work (eg, hours/stress).
- 46 per cent had thought about a career change
- 40 per cent said there was a lack of career opportunities

However, it is not as simple as just paying more. While salary is always cited as a big factor, nurses really want an opportunity for progression and recognition of their abilities. This recognition may be in terms of advanced qualification, more responsibility within the practice, or defined areas of interest, such as clinical coach training, consultation skills and community work.

There needs to be a clear pathway within the profession that allows progression not only in practice, but also to other roles across the wider profession for those RVNs who want more after qualifying. Encouraging a more diverse range of skills within practice and a recognised and structured educational framework for nursing to work within will open up clear routes of opportunity. There could also be scope for RVNs to develop teaching careers alongside practice hours.

There is of course the allowance of being more family friendly with working hours and allowing flexible working arrangements for young families that will encourage mothers and fathers to come back in to the profession after maternity or paternity leave.

BVNA will continue to work alongside other representative organisations, such as SPVS and VPMA, to encourage these changes within the owners of practices and the regulatory and educational institutions to develop opportunities for RVNs post-qualification.”

possible in the practice. We have heard from our student that a good percentage of her year group did not have a placement arranged by the October deadline, which is crazy – we want VNs, we need VNs, but the cost of training them, both financially and in time spent teaching, has been so onerous that we aren't training them or making student placements available. I am concerned for the future of the profession and the safety of our patients if this lack of VNs continues. I will be watching with interest what happens over the next few years.”