

THE EARLY YEARS

Guidance Notes

For

Practices

&

New Graduates

Introduction

The Importance of New Graduates.

New graduates are the future of our profession, and self evidently are the senior graduates and partners of the next generation. As a profession we must take a responsible approach to mentoring them in the early months and years of their new career, to ensure that both the practice and the new graduate achieve maximum potential.

In the majority of instances the outcomes both for new graduates and the practice employing them are very positive. However, in a significant minority of instances serious problems will arise.

- It is a fact that a high percentage of new graduates stay in their first job for less than 12 months
- It is a fact that some practices appear unable to retain any assistant for more than a year, including new graduates.

Both the new graduate and the practice have responsibilities to each other and these should be recognised and addressed.

Both parties have, in some instances, complained about each other. The concerns that are sometimes expressed by the graduate include: -

- The practice doesn't support me
- The practice takes advantage of me
- I'm used as cheap labour
- I don't get given any responsible jobs to do
- The partners choose all the best jobs

and by the partners :-

- The new graduate doesn't earn enough for the practice
- The new graduate is not capable of doing what I want them to do
- The new graduate tries to avoid the unpleasant jobs
- The clients are difficult if I send a new graduate

Even allowing that there will always be instances of personal incompatibilities and similar unfortunate events, it is clear that a lack of awareness of what is required from one or both parties is often at the root of this problem. Both sides need to reconsider their attitudes, responsibilities and expectations. The waste of money, effort and time that this high changeover rate incurs, can all be reduced if not eliminated completely.

The aims of these guidelines are

- ✓ to help practices to assess their mentoring of new and recent graduates, and
- ✓ to help new and recent graduates assess their responsibilities and commitment to their new practice.

HOW CAN THE PRACTICE CAN IMPROVE ITS MENTORING?

A simple formula setting out how new graduates should behave and how they should be handled in their first practice, would be nice, but it's not available. However, there are a number of protocols that will enhance the early months of a new graduate's career. As with anything that is worthwhile, some effort is required, but the outcome will certainly justify the effort.

LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

Unfortunately, a number of practices do not have the minimum legal requirements in place for their employees. The first step must be to ensure that the legal responsibilities are met.

Contract of employment.

A solicitor, the BVA, SPVS or VPMA, can provide full details of the required contents of a contract. The same people have proformas that can be adapted to an individual's practice.

An employer must provide a contract of employment within eight weeks of the commencement of employment.

Health and Safety Regulations.

These regulations apply to all employers with one or more employees. Information is widely available from HSE or BVA etc.

Risk Assessments are part of the HSE regulations

COSHH

Another legal requirement for the employer.

Fire Regulations

Ionising Radiation Regulations

Medicines Legislation

Failure to comply with any of the above can result in the practice being fined substantial amounts. Furthermore, any practice not making any effort to comply, gives the impression that it cares little for the welfare of its employees. New graduates consistently report that many employers fail to meet some, or occasionally all, of these requirements.

It is also incumbent on the practice to ensure that all employees are made aware of that the practice complies with the regulations. Notice boards, newsletters, e-mail, memos or similar written information is one method of disseminating the information. Best of all, a practice manual provided for each member of staff can contain a wealth of useful information.

MANAGEMENT ISSUES

An induction programme for new employees and in particular for new graduates.

Anyone new to a practice will have considerable difficulty in discovering all the practice systems that everyone else takes for granted. The details of each practice's induction programme will be specific to that practice, but several broad principles will apply.

- Time keeping / logging in / logging out
- Housekeeping matters
- Telephone protocols
- Message taking
- Dispensing protocols
- Booking up procedure (for invoicing requirements)
- Backing up computer data
- Record keeping / clinical records etc

Standard Operating Procedures

SOPs are a very useful method of disseminating information throughout a practice. They are not difficult to create; those people who perform the function most frequently can create them in a few minutes. SOPs give a new employee written instructions on how your practice deals with specific issues. A non-exhaustive list might include

- Waste disposal: clinical; sharps; pharmaceuticals; etc
- Medicine storage
- Replenishing car boot supplies
- Ordering, receiving and checking goods, including medicines
- Standard treatments e.g. vaccination protocols, milk fever, ages for neutering
- Sick notes
- Reporting car accidents
- Controlled drugs protocols
- Out of hours house visits
- Booking up work done procedures

Practice Information.

When joining a new practice, the overload of information can be awesome, even for experienced graduates. An 'in house' contacts phone book is a very useful piece of equipment that is not difficult to prepare.

A wide range of contacts should be included, vets, nurses, laboratories, local GP, local hospital, Poisons Unit(s), car breakdown service, insurance contact (for RTA) and so on. In farm animal practices this is often combined with a client telephone list.

Equipment

It should be made clear whether basic equipment for the new graduate's own exclusive use, such as stethoscope, ophthalmoscope and thermometers are to be provided by the practice or by the employee. Normal practise is for the practice to provide these items together with outer protective work wear.

Equipment provided by the practice should be appropriate and suitable for the tasks to be undertaken.

Accommodation.

The subject of accommodation should have been resolved at the interview stage, or before employment began. If the practice is providing accommodation, it should be clear who pays for which utilities, council tax etc. The accommodation should be appropriate and suitable.

Transport

Similarly, transport issues should have been resolved at the interview stage or before employment began. Whoever provides the vehicle, it should be roadworthy, legal, suitably insured and kept in running order. Matters of private and holiday use should be agreed before they cause conflict, and to establish tax implications.

Subscriptions and Memberships

The practice may be able to pay some subscriptions and memberships for the assistant and secure a legitimate tax advantage in so doing. It shows a commitment to the new graduate and will ensure that they are involved with professional bodies at the beginning of their career.

Appraisals

Modern management requires regular appraisals for all members of a business. It is not an excuse for whinging, but an opportunity to assess each individual's performance during the time period, against benchmarks required by the business.

Some training for employers who have never carried out an appraisal may be required, and the initial attempts may be difficult, but appraisals have been shown to benefit many businesses.

New graduates in particular, benefit from early appraisal – often at three and six months. This gives both sides, employer and employee, an opportunity to review progress on both sides in a set formal environment. New graduates will increasingly expect to have several appraisals done during their first year and at least annually thereafter.

CLINICAL ISSUES

Clinical Support

It must be remembered that although the new graduate will have a wealth of theoretical knowledge, they may lack in integration of that knowledge and its practical application. It is vitally important that new graduates have someone to whom they can turn for support. They must be encouraged to do so by frequent and friendly enquiries as to how they are getting on, how they managed this or that case, and how their cases are progressing. In the early days this will be a frequent need, but should reduce with increasing confidence and experience.

Make time available on a regular basis for discussion of clinical cases in the surgery involving as many members of the professional staff as possible. This must be very much a two way process.

The experienced members of the practice can discuss their own cases to demonstrate that everyone has cases that do not follow the textbook.

It is important to avoid undermining the vet in front of support staff who may not appreciate the pressures involved.

Encourage new members to run a lunch time discussion group using a wide range of input – for example drug firm reps and vets to discuss new products, vaccine protocols etc.

It is wise, particularly in the early days, that a senior member of the partnership filters the calls or cases new graduates are given to deal with to avoid any potential pitfalls. A senior assistant or partner accompanying a new graduate on their first visit to key or large farm clients can help to smooth the process of introducing a new face to their business, and help reduce resistance from the client.

Teaching

Some practices may find that they can develop a formal teaching process appropriate to the new graduate needs. If not, then informal sessions can be arranged to address a variety of topics. Senior or junior members of staff, professional or experienced field workers from drug manufacturers and others can introduce and manage an informal discussion on these topics and a friendly, barrier free learning process can be established. These sorts of interchanges can be used to foster good relationships between all the staff in a practice.

CPD.

It is in the practice's best interest to promote CPD for its entire staff. Ideally, days for CPD, in addition to holidays, Bank Holidays and weekends should be specified in the contract of employment.

The practice should be prepared to finance appropriate CPD, if necessary up to a set amount annually. Those attending CPD should present a digest of the information gained at one of the lunch (or evening) meetings referred to above.

Part of the appraisal process should investigate the benefits of any CPD undertaken and planning future CPD.

SOCIAL TOPICS

Some take the view that their responsibility starts at the beginning of each day and ends when the surgery closes. Others wishing to promote a happy and productive team will address some of the social issues new graduates have to face.

A new job often means moving away from a longstanding group of friends, and a well-established support network. There is often difficulty in making new relationships in a new locality. Loneliness is often quoted as a major problem in

the first months of a new job. A job as a veterinary assistant has unusual demands with night and weekend duties impinging on any regularised social life.

There are a number of ways that a practice can ameliorate some of the difficulties. These might include :-

Rota Management.

A flexible attitude setting the rota, or accommodating 'swops' can solve such things as the ability to join a (sports) club, permitting participation in such things as squash or badminton competitions. Facilitating such involvement in the local scene can often enhance the practice profile, for example a member of the practice in a Young Farmers Club can often promote the practice in an area.

There are many similar concepts that only require a little flexibility to improve the lot of a new graduate.

Functions

The practice can legitimately claim costs of staff functions as a business expense, particularly if the accountant is asked how to arrange things first. Any number of ideas can be used to promote a practice team spirit and involve the new graduate. The new graduate may well be the best one to be given the task of organising an event – to a budget – helped by other practice members.

All this may seem to be the practice 'giving away' things to the new graduate. The new graduate will indeed cost the practice in the initial period. If they leave as soon as they have learnt the ropes, as many do, then that cost is "money down the drain" instead of a worthwhile investment in the practice that will be amply repaid. Furthermore, the practice is then faced with another trainee to introduce.

It is far better to invest a little more in the early stages and retain the new graduate into the second or third year, by which time they will be contributing to the practice.

Now read the section on the Responsibilities of the New Graduate

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE NEW GRADUATE

Whenever anyone starts in a new employment, both sides will be commencing a period of increased stress, when both parties are developing a mutual respect and understanding of each other. This is particularly important in the instance of a new graduate, who will have additional stresses as they start the development of a career without the benefits of experience to fall back on.

A new graduate should be aware that the practice is committing itself to a period of support, during which time the income generated by the employee is unlikely to meet the expenditure of having that employee on its pay roll. With sympathetic management, however, it can be a symbiotic relationship with both parties ultimately gaining mutual benefit from the relationship.

Tolerance and understanding on the part of all involved will ensure a successful outcome.

The following list of points should be addressed before the start of a new post and remembered during the early months of employment, particularly by new graduates.

LEGAL ISSUES

Job Description

You should certainly have discussed your job description with your employers. A written copy will avoid any dispute later as to what may have been agreed between you. Your job description cannot be expected to cover every minute detail of the tasks you may be required to carry out as a veterinary surgeon, but should define in broad terms

- The principle purpose of your job
- The type of work normally carried out
- The place of work
- Any special responsibilities
- A job title
- To whom you are responsible
- For whom you are responsible

Terms & Conditions of the post

It is a legal requirement on the employer to provide a written Contract of Employment (or Terms and Condition of Employment) by the time you have completed eight weeks of employment.

Failure to provide written Terms and Conditions means the law is being broken and there are penalties for the employer, including compensation payable to the employee.

Employee's rights may be dependant on the Terms and Conditions and it is advisable to take independent legal advice before agreeing to them. The various associations referred to earlier will be able to provide some advice and direct you to the appropriate sources of information.

In an ideal world the Terms and Conditions (or Contract of Employment) will be in place before employment commences.

A non-exhaustive list of headings to be included in the Terms and Conditions document might include

- Period of employment
- Job description
- Time off / Duty rota
- Employee's obligations
- Accommodation
- Transport
- Insurance
- Sickness
- Salary
- Benefits
- CPD
- Pension
- Pregnancy
- Health & Safety
- Dress code
- Appraisals
- Practice / Staff meetings
- Practice Policies & Protocols
- Practice facilities
- Termination
- Client Solicitation
- Exclusion
- Prospects
- "Binding Out" agreement (restriction on practicing in the area should employment cease)
- Professional Indemnity Insurance arrangements
- Grievance / Disciplinary process

Key Practice Policies

It is sensible to establish what the practice attitudes are to some of the major issues. At least ask about

- Training policy
- Professional Development programme
- Equal Opportunities policy
- Health and Safety policies
- Career Opportunities in the practice, and similar matters

Practice Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures

As with insurance, you only need it when you need it. The same applies to Grievance and Disciplinary Procedures. They are rarely required but when they are, they are essential. Having them in place does not mean either party intends to use them; it merely sets out the detailed procedure to be followed ***IF*** they are needed.

Make sure they are in place.

With all the four items listed above it is wise for both parties to have written, signed copies of the documents. This may seem pessimistic in the enthusiasm that accompanies a new job, but it provides both parties with the legal framework to deal with any unforeseen glitches that may arise later.

ISSUES OF PERSONAL CONSCIENCE

Commitment

“Why the commitment? This is only my first job and I will be moving on pretty soon.”

This kind of attitude does nothing to persuade an employer to commit anything to the development of any employee, including new graduates. Endeavour to see yourself in your first job for at least twelve months, or longer. This length of time is needed to gain the confidence and respect of the practice team and of clients that have committed their animals to your care. You will gain far more from your first job if you put in the effort to becoming a valued member of the team. Be prepared to accept responsibilities given to you, it is a compliment that your employers trust you to carry out those tasks better than satisfactorily.

In those instances where it is obvious that ‘things are never going to work out’, be forthright in explaining why you have to leave before you originally intended. Don’t be rude or aggressive. No one wins in those circumstances.

Be realistic

When you are assessing your future career, be realistic in your assessment. Accepting a position that you know before you start, is not going to be the right choice for you, can be damaging to your own professional career. Job satisfaction in these circumstances will be non-existent, and this will inevitably leads to you underperforming and consequently losing confidence in yourself and your career choice.

Understand the practice

First of all, find out about the practice policies. This may be booking up procedures, bad debt management, wildlife treatment, unowned animals, out of hours policy, home visits and a host of other topics.

Try to understand why these policies have been developed and don’t ignore them or work against them. If you perceive there may be a better way, request a meeting with the owners / managers and put forward your suggestion. If they choose to reject your suggestion, remember it is their business you are working for.

Interpersonal Relationships.

It is undeniable that at times the relationship between individual members of veterinary practices move from that of professional colleagues to a more

intimate personal relationship. The huge majority of these end in tears and often result in one or more parties leaving the practice when their first choice would have been otherwise. At the least, working relationships can become strained to a point of being intolerable.

Think very carefully before allowing a relationship to change from that of a professional working arrangement to something from which it can be difficult to step back.

Respect the Lay Staff

There are some practice partners who believe that the nursing and support staff are the key members of their practice. New graduates will eventually discover that the support staff have it within their power to make life pleasant or intolerable for all the veterinary surgeons in a practice, particularly new graduates. The support staff has a breadth and depth of knowledge of the practice and how it functions, which can be very useful for everyone, particularly new graduates.

Treat the support staff appropriately. They have their own areas of responsibility that you must respect.

Make your own clinical judgement of every case, but do not be afraid to ask their opinion if appropriate.

Say 'Thank you' – regularly, and forever.

Buy chocolates at Christmas at the very least.

Practice Profits

Accept the fact that in the initial period of your employment as a new graduate you will reduce the profitability of the practice. Although it varies between individuals, on average it is six months minimum before a new graduate is earning enough to recompense the practice for the additional costs. At the end of twelve months the practice should be back to its starting position financially.

A forward looking practice will, however, view this as an investment in its future, and hope to retain the new graduate beyond the first twelve months and benefit from the positive aspects of having new blood in its team.

CLINICAL ISSUES

Ask questions

Two types of new graduate cause an employer to begin to have doubts:

- those who ask no questions at all, and
- those who never stop asking questions.

An ideal new graduate is the one who seeks help from time to time, but has enough confidence to cope with the majority of situations that present themselves. On the topic of confidence, there is a fine dividing line

between sufficient confidence and arrogance. If this sounds problematic for the employee, consider the employer who must judge his/her input between not caring and over-mothering. A good communication between both parties will avoid all these problems.

Ask for help

It is necessary to distinguish between asking questions and asking for help. Every new graduate has had occasion to request help in the early stages of their career. No one likes to do it, the perception being one of failure or inability to cope. This is wrong – every new graduate needs help at some point. If they think otherwise, they are deluding themselves. Don't delay asking for help until the 'helper' is left with no options when they arrive to assist. All new graduate friendly practices will expect to have to turn out and help the new employee. All that is needed is to establish how to ask for the help, and what are the routes of communication. If your practice refuses or fails to provide the help requested, this could be a reason for considering seeking alternative employment.

Use the opportunity

The first few months of your new career are full of opportunities to develop your professionalism and start shaping your future. Grasp the opportunity and make the most of it. CPD provision and entitlement will have been part of the negotiations that preceded your employment, and now is the time to select those opportunities that fit your career.

Appraisals

All well managed organisations use a system of appraisals to give the management and employee some guidance on the performance of each against some benchmark. Appraisals should not be an opportunity for either side to whinge about the other, but an open forum to discuss goal setting, performance and future development planning for each individual. It should not be anything to be frightened or concerned about, but should be a friendly and positive experience for both parties. Remember that everyone is, or should be, on the same side – that is committed to ensuring your professional development.

Appraisals should be done at least annually, but for new graduates it is important to include a three-month and six-month appraisal in the first year.

If your practice does not carry out appraisals as routine, ask at least for a formal meeting at three and six months to permit you to assess whether you are meeting the requirements of the practice. You should also be able to state your needs or wishes with regard to CPD and particular courses or training which you feel would be appropriate.

SOCIAL ISSUES

Off duty

Treasure your off duty for yourself. That doesn't mean you should never 'help' with a particularly interesting or rare case in the practice, even if you encroach on your off duty.

You will have left a very busy social life at university with friends all around you, working in groups and with supervision. In the real world of veterinary practice you will often be working alone and unsupervised. You may live in a remote or rural location and have few friends nearby. Join local groups according to your own needs, or involve yourself in the local community in some way. Sports, amateur dramatics, and many other special interest groups will be very glad to welcome new members.

The support staff you have befriended in the practice, or the local newspapers can provide a starting point for making the contacts.

You will be physically tired at the end of every day, especially in the early weeks of your new job; probably so for several months, if not for the rest of your career! Don't get so overtired that it influences your work performance. If it becomes a problem, discuss it with your employer.

The veterinary profession can be extraordinarily hard work, but few professions can provide the rewards that being a vet can.

PROFESSIONAL ISSUES

Professional associations

Keeping contact with colleagues has many advantages. You don't have to be politically motivated to join local veterinary associations. Clinical topics feature regularly in many evening meetings. Most are held locally and your employer should be glad to accede to your request to get away in time to attend local meetings. Even if you only go to meet others in the same profession, it will give you chance to share some time and experiences with colleagues.

The profession

Veterinary science is a profession, not a 9 to 5 office job. It requires a commitment that is not part of many other jobs. With that commitment goes a wide range of responsibilities, particularly that you behave in a professional manner in all aspects of your career. Failure to do so may bring you the attention of the regulatory arm of the professional body. However, the veterinary profession has a low incidence of complaints against its members when compared to other professions.

Making a mistake

There is no member of our, or any other profession, that has not made a mistake in his or her professional career. All of us will make a mistake at some point, maybe a serious one. We must all learn from our mistakes and resolve not to make the same error twice. Making and recognising a mistake can be extremely stressful, especially when you are

wholeheartedly committed to the goal of caring for the animals in your care. However, do not dwell on your mistake, try to learn and move forward.

One difficult issue is whether or not to admit the mistake. On no account should you attempt to cover up or lie to anyone about it. On the other hand you do not have to volunteer to the client every scrap of information you have about your failure to meet your own high standards of care and case management. Most importantly, you must not admit liability at any point, whatever you feel about the case in question. This is different to admitting to an error. Admitting liability could affect your professional indemnity insurance.

Discuss the matter with others in the practice, particularly the partners. If it is a serious error and might lead to a claim against the practice, it is important to inform the practice insurers as early as possible.

So, the error does lead to a complaint against you and the RCVS writes to you in due course. **DO NOT PANIC !** Approximately 90% of complaints against veterinary surgeons received by RCVS are without foundation and the RCVS will be very supportive in such circumstances. Please respond to any enquiry from RCVS *promptly* and of course completely truthfully. High ethical standards are expected of all of us in our professional behaviour and in any dealings with our regulator.

Finally -

- ✓ Enjoy your career in this most rewarding of professions
- ✓ Remember you will get out as much as you put into the profession
- ✓ Every other member of the profession wishes you luck in your career
- ✓ Be proud of your MRCVS
- ✓ Be proud that you have achieved your goal of gaining entry to this profession.

Now read the section dealing with how a practice can mentor new graduates more effectively.

Other publications dealing with similar topics

1. Matching Expectations SPVS and VPMA
2. Guide for New Members RCVS
3. Guided Internship for the
Pet Practitioner Banfields USA
4. New Graduate Friendly
Practices Australian Veterinary Association

Every attempt has been made to ensure the accuracy of any advice given in this document at the time of going to press.

No responsibility can be accepted for any inadvertent mis-statement or misrepresentation of the legal provisions quoted, the requirements of the statutory bodies referred to, or any other associated matters.

Specific advice should be sought from appropriated qualified advisors for all financial and legal matters.