

Editorial Board

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Mark runs Re-Fur-All Referrals, a veterinary dermatology referral service in the south of England and the Midlands.

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Val is a specialist in small animal internal medicine working at Southern Counties Veterinary Specialists in Hampshire.

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Graduate confidence

The COVID-19 pandemic has had many effects on society, our way of life, relationships and business. Veterinary practice has been no exception. In their own way, veterinary staff have been heroic in continuing to provide a service. After an initial drastic reduction in cases seen, most clinics are now struggling to cope with the backlog of routine work on top of the normal list of summer injuries and ailments. With attempts to maintain social distancing in busy small buildings, and the extra time and work involved when clients cannot enter practices, or only in controlled circumstances, all staff are stretched.

One consequence is the difficulty that practices face in offering EMS places to veterinary students. Even more importantly, the in-practice tuition, which is such a vital part of the Nottingham and Surrey clinical years, has been hit hard. The schools have worked wonders in delivering teaching online, but there is no substitute for practical experience. The 2020 graduates have been affected, missing a good chunk of practical experience, but it may be that the years following are affected even more drastically. Many clinics have not been permitted to accept students. Even if that is now becoming technically possible in some clinics, many vets are so overwhelmed with work that they will have limited time or opportunity to teach students.

A recent letter to the profession from the RCVS, VSC, BVA, SPVS and AVS addressed this point. While recognising the great difficulties practices face, it stressed the importance of EMS and asked practices to start considering when they might be able to offer placements again. The RCVS have temporarily reduced the required number of weeks of EMS that students have to complete before being able to graduate. Various associations, including student bodies, have made resources available online to help with delivery of the missing tuition. These include some guidance for pre-clinical EMS in the form of animal handling and husbandry webinars and guides.

This is only one aspect of the effects that the pandemic has had, but the timing is unfortunate. Just as British vet schools are increasing in number, and preparing to produce larger numbers of graduates, the opportunities for those graduates to have had good practical experience has dwindled. There have been concerns about the level of confidence of new graduates and young vets for some time. This is reflected in the fact that practices are likely to be required to provide a mentor for any new graduates that they employ. Although many practices do this anyway, it has not been compulsory. The graduates entering employment now and in the near future are likely to need continued tuition to reach the levels of competence and confidence that would previously have been taken for granted.

The increased availability of referral centres has impacted on young vets' willingness to tackle the unfamiliar. The increased centralisation of practice structure, where 'feeder' practices send all but the routine surgery in to central hubs, has the same effect. We are approaching an era where the only way for young vets to gain experience and competence in non-routine surgery or medical cases is for them to undertake internships. The COVID-19 pandemic, much as happens in wartime, has accelerated many changes. Online shopping. Telemedicine, both human and veterinary. Virtual conferences. It would be sad if it also accelerated the demise of the omniscient vet.



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