

Work as a veterinary pharmacist

From James Herriot and aerial crop spraying to health planning and "mind mapping", veterinary pharmacy is never dull, says David Keith

Everyone who works with nature will tell you that their year begins with the first flush of growth. The veterinary pharmacist is no stranger to this pattern: our work follows the seasons and the shifts in weather patterns. Now, 25 years after embarking on my career, each year still brings surprises.

The annual growth spurt indicates that it is time to send off a sample of grass for testing. The analysis will provide feed values, nutritional and parasitic levels. Later in the year a series of worm egg count tests will be taken and blood analysis reviewed.

These activities illustrate the changing scene of large-animal disease control. One of the aims of the veterinary pharmacist is to prepare a farm health plan and help design control strategies for parasites, nutritional deficiencies and immunisation routines. Like human medicines management, the control of disease rests with an approach that matches the available products with nature's ability to adapt and resist.

My interest in farming began at an early age, when I worked on at farms during vacations and weekends. My original plan was to start a career in pharmacy, then switch to agriculture later in life, so I was delighted to encounter veterinary pharmacy, which blended the two. I began my career in the early 1980s by starting an equine section in the community pharmacy at Goodramgate, York. As a result I joined the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's Veterinary Pharmacists Group.

Inspiring individuals

I met some inspiring individuals through the group, such as Harry Woodhead, from Thirsk, who used helicopters to apply agrochemicals and worked alongside a local vet called James Herriot. He introduced me to his colleagues and other members of the VPG, whose welcome, comradeship and enthusiasm pervaded the air. My future was set.

I then studied for the veterinary pharmacy diploma. This worthwhile course is available in a modular format for companion and large



animals. Later, while providing practical experience for up-and-coming students, I met several like-minded pharmacists, who spent a week with me in the pharmacy. African students talked of regularly dipping cattle, a concept unknown in the UK.

The next 20 years were spent working in veterinary pharmacies with livestock farmers. The knowledge gained from the pharmacy degree and diploma course enabled me to promote the safe use of veterinary medicines. In time the range expanded to include nutrition, neonatal, identification, pet care and equestrian products as well as grass seed, fodder preservatives and equipment. Knowledge about such a variety of products develops over time. However pharmacy-based education equips you with everything you need. The impartial advice offered is appreciated by the customer and the profession is viewed with high regard.

Another element of my work at this time was involvement with a national marketing company that offered a franchised range of animal health products. The time spent with Downland Marketing Ltd broadened my experience in communicating, negotiating, marketing, conferences and promotions. It was a great experience to meet other groups in the industry and to work at national level.

During the spring and summer months, fields of grass produce thick swards to cut and preserve for winter feed or are grazed by livestock. It is important that the lifecycles of parasites are understood so that we can anticipate and advise on treatment. Recently, there have been important changes in our approach to controlling parasites to take account of rising levels of resistance. One example is to follow the SCOPS (sustainable control of parasites in sheep) protocol and another is to follow a sheep scab initiative.

Our understanding of the causes of diseases, transmission, mode of action and principles of hygiene help to reinforce the

message. Veterinary pharmacists work with people who look after animals and communication is important. I find it rewarding it when a client tells me I have made a complex area simpler to understand.

Our job is to give advice based on protocols and to use tests as appropriate to measure disease status. Alternatively, a fodder analysis is produced that will give a breakdown of macro and micro elements. My role is to recognise the limitations of the test results and develop a remedial strategy. I make treatment, vaccination and management recommendations, and plan a periodic review of results. Finally, we have to consider contraindications, meat and milk withdrawal periods, interactions and user safety issues.

The three-step process of measuring, managing and monitoring is the basis for preparing a health plan.

Opportunity

The introduction of the Veterinary Medicines Regulations in 2005 has changed the way veterinary medicines are regulated for both livestock and companion animals. A pharmacist is included as a registered qualified person along with a veterinary surgeon and a suitably qualified person. Community pharmacists are at the coalface. The market is being opened up partly because of reclassification and there is an opportunity for community pharmacists to be more involved in pet care. An animal medicines resource pack can be sourced through the National Pharmacy Association and several articles have been published in the Society's *Veterinary Pharmacist* newsletter.

I now work as a freelance consultant, using my years of experience to help others develop themselves or their business. Over the past year I have been working with animal health organisations and professions and have used "mind mapping" as an organisational aid.

I enjoy being a veterinary pharmacist, working with large or small animals. With the UK's 17 million sheep, nearly four million cows, seven million dogs and eight million cats, there are many career opportunities for veterinary pharmacist.

David Keith

2007–present Locum pharmacist and freelance veterinary pharmacist

2001–06 Borthwicks Veterinary Pharmacy

1997–2001 Murray Farmcare Veterinary Pharmacy

1994–2000 Downland Marketing — director

1989–97 Farmcare Veterinary Pharmacy

1983 Diploma Veterinary Pharmacy

1981–89 H Jobson Ltd, Longtown

1979–81 Pharmacist/manager, York

My career

Thinking of changing your career? This series profiles different careers in pharmacy. It is designed to provide a taster of work in different specialities. Any pharmacist who would like to contribute to the series should contact the editorial office on 020 7572 2429 or e-mail editor@pharmj.org.uk in the first instance.