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International Veterinary Recruitment

The UK Vet Profession

The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons

The Veterinary Surgeons Act (1966) states that only persons listed in the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Register are allowed to practise as veterinarians in the United Kingdom. According to this Act, 'veterinary surgery' means the art and science of veterinary surgery and medicine, including the diagnosis of diseases in, and injuries to, animals including tests performed on animals for diagnostic purposes; the giving of advice based upon such diagnosis; the medical or surgical treatment of animals and the performance of surgical operations on animals.

The Royal College is legally responsible for ensuring its members conduct themselves in a professional manner and strives to maintain the reputation of the veterinary profession in the UK. To this end, the College requires all its members to abide by the rules laid down in the RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct. It is essential that all members have read this Guide and refer to it as necessary.

As of 31 March 2006 there were 21,619 names registered with the RCVS. Of these, approximately 73% trained at a veterinary school in the UK, 13% at an EU institution, 12% at a Commonwealth institution and around 3% at other overseas institutions.

There are seven UK veterinary schools: five in England (the Royal Veterinary College (London), Bristol, Cambridge, Liverpool and Nottingham) and two in Scotland (Edinburgh and Glasgow). Once UK graduates receive their veterinary degree, they then apply to the RCVS to be admitted as members. This allows them to use the post-nominals 'MRCVS'. In a similar manner, veterinarians who have trained abroad must be admitted as members of the RCVS before they can practise as vets. The process of admission varies depending on whether or not the RCVS recognises the qualification held by the applicant and the institution which granted that qualification. If the RCVS recognises the qualification and the training institution, applicants may be admitted to the RCVS without further evidence of their education. If not, the RCVS requires applicants to undertake a written examination to confirm that the applicant meets the College's standard. For information on which EU institutions/qualifications are accepted by the RCVS see the VetRecruit Guide on 'EU Veterinary Qualifications'.

The Structure of UK Practice

There are currently around 15,000 vets practising in the UK. Of these, approximately 87% are working in private veterinary practices, 5% for the Government, 5% in research institutes and universities, 2% in commerce/industry. Currently, around 22% of vets practising in the UK trained abroad (2006 Survey of the Veterinary Profession).

General practice in the UK can be broadly divided into small animal, farm animal, equine or mixed (i.e. providing veterinary care for more than one of the three former categories). Currently, 51% of UK practices treat small animals only (dogs, cats and 'exotics'). 45% of practices are mixed (though many practices classed as mixed in fact work largely in only one category), 3% equine only and 1% farm animals only.

Up until November 1997, the RCVS required that UK veterinary practices be owned by vets. In 1997 it was acknowledged by the Royal College that this requirement had become untenable and conceded that it could not prevent an incorporated business owning a veterinary practice. Since then the picture of practice ownership has been changing. In particular, there has been a large increase in the number of 'corporate-owned' practices, with management/investment companies purchasing premises and employing vets to run them. This change has been met with mixed emotions by UK veterinarians. Some feel this frees them from much of the paperwork and management tasks associated with owning a business and allows them to concentrate on their clinical skills and improve their work-life balance. Others fear that corporate ownership moves the focus from animal welfare to profit and that money which was previously available for medical equipment and staff is now tied up at a management level. For the assistant vet, working for a corporate can mean better hours and better structured career opportunities. The law change has also brought practices owned by veterinary nurses and joint venture partnerships, where a corporation enters into a partnership with an individual (usually a vet or vet nurse) to set up franchised chains of practices.

Despite these changes, the basic staff hierarchy within practices has remained largely unchanged. There is usually a senior veterinary surgeon (sometimes appointed 'clinical director') or, in a partnership, a small group of senior vets who are responsible for the day-to-day running of the practice. The senior vets in the practice are often specialist certificate holders. Assistant vets usually have less experience and less responsibility, performing clinical work and less (if any) management tasks. For more information, see the VetRecruit Guide on 'Veterinary Job Descriptions'.

In 2005 the RCVS launched its Practice Standards Scheme. The Scheme aims to offer quality assurance and to make information about UK veterinary practices more accessible to the UK public. Practices wishing to become accredited must undergo rigorous inspection and meet exacting standards of veterinary care. For more information, visit the RCVS website at www.rcvs.org.uk.

Specialism & Referral

The ability to see a case right through from first presentation to resolution is often cited as one of the perks of veterinary medicine in comparison to human medicine. This stems from the multi-disciplinary training vets receive for general practice - triage, microbiology, biochemistry, radiography, medicine, surgery. This is still true to a degree, but as veterinary knowledge and technology progress exponentially, there is an increasing tendency towards specialism in the UK, with more practices choosing to deal exclusively with referral work rather than providing a first opinion service to the public. In small animal practice in particular, this trend has been fuelled by the sudden growth

of the UK pet insurance industry; around 17% of the UK pet population is now insured. Dealing with insured animals removes some of the financial constraints of diagnosis and treatment.

The majority of practices still have a wide range of diagnostic equipment, including radiographic facilities, ultrasound scanners, blood biochemistry analysers, microscope and so on, enabling them to carry out much work in-house. There is a large number of commercial laboratories nationwide providing more precise and advanced diagnostic tests to which samples can be sent when necessary.

Where clinical experience or equipment available in a first-opinion practice is limited, then referral to a specialist practice is the preferred option. Many referral practices employ a range of specialists and certificate-holders in different medical fields; other practices provide facilities for one type of referral work only (orthopaedics, oncology, dermatology etc). The university institutions all offer broad referral services.

Providing Emergency Cover

It is a requirement of the RCVS that all veterinary practices should make provision for a 24-hour emergency service to their clients. In the past this usually meant vets in a practice taking turns to be 'on call' outside of practice opening hours. In recent years, however, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of practices who outsource their 'out-of-hours', either teaming up with other local practices to increase the number of vets on the rota and thereby reduce the number of nights each vet has to work, or else by using the services of a dedicated emergency clinic.

This trend has generally been welcomed by vets, giving them much more sociable working hours; there is concern though that this trend reduces service to the client, who often has to travel further afield to an unfamiliar veterinary surgeon who is unaware of their animal's medical history.

Unless stated otherwise, the statistics quoted in this guide are taken, directly or indirectly, from the 2006 RCVS Annual Report.