

Broadening horizons, forging links: working as a volunteer overseas

TAKING time out of day-to-day practice life and working overseas as a volunteer veterinary surgeon offers opportunities for broadening horizons, gaining experience with unfamiliar species, making new friends and, perhaps, reflecting on one's career to date. Here, Jack Reece explains how he became involved with the Help in Suffering animal welfare charity in India, and describes some of the ins and outs of life as a volunteer.

BY JACK REECE



A pan-Commonwealth team from India, Australia, New Zealand, England and Scotland celebrates the conclusion of a successful village treatment camp

WHY GO?

I would not claim to be particularly brave or bold, nor am I anything other than an ordinary practitioner, but by going to work as a volunteer veterinary surgeon overseas I took what some considered to be a brave (and others considered to be a foolish) step. The experience has proved to be an entirely fulfilling and rewarding one. Volunteering has made me realise how very lucky I am in many ways – not least, how privileged I am to do a job that I am happy to do for nothing.

For me, volunteering to do charitable work overseas was a way of justifying travelling without being expensively self-indulgent. Volunteer work may be the only way to gain experience in certain professional fields such as wildlife work. It can also be a way of escaping

the perceived rut of general practice, and provides an opportunity to take stock of one's career. Organisations such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) emphasise, in their selection procedures, the desire on the part of the volunteer to put something back into the world.

GETTING INVOLVED

Finding a post

Although one may think that the need for veterinary surgeons in exciting places would be high, the reality is that most countries produce their own veterinary professionals and thus the most sought after animal health workers are not highly qualified veterinary surgeons, but technicians and extension workers. Consequently, there are not large numbers of jobs available. Some vol-

untary positions are advertised in *The Veterinary Record*. These may be for individual charities of varying sizes or may come from organisations such as VSO. The veterinary profession is small enough that personal contacts can often provide details of useful people and organisations. Membership of, or contact with, various professional groups which have an interest in international animal health matters may additionally be useful; such groups include the BVA Overseas Group, the World Society for the Protection of Animals, the Brooke Hospital for Animals, the Society for the Protection of Animals Abroad, the Commonwealth Veterinary Association (CVA), the British Veterinary Zoological Society and Vetaid.

I answered an advertisement in *The Veterinary Record* from a small charity in India and was interviewed and accepted during the course of one telephone conversation.

Timescale

VSO usually requires that a volunteer makes a commitment for two years, which many people then extend. For some projects, it is possible to volunteer for just a few weeks, but a commitment of at least six months is often required for posts in countries with very different cultures since it allows the volunteer to settle in and yet still give useful service. I initially volunteered for six months, extended it to a year, then went back for a second year



Jack Reece graduated from York University with a degree in biology before completing his veterinary degree at Liverpool in 1994. After three years in a rural practice in north Devon, he volunteered to work for the Help in Suffering animal welfare charity in Rajasthan, India. He returned to India in 2001 as director of an extension programme for a rabies control project.



Undertaking voluntary work overseas is one way to travel, gain experience and take time away from day-to-day practice life

and am currently in the middle of my third year.

TYPES OF WORK

In my experience, the variety of work overseas will be greater than in the UK and may involve some or all of the following:

- Extension work, education and training;
- Wildlife work, rehabilitation, zoological research;
- Disease control work, such as rabies eradication;
- General veterinary duties;
- Animal welfare work, rescue and rehoming.

In addition to greater variety, one will often have more responsibility than at home over organising one's day, staff and work methods. This is both challenging and rewarding. I have been asked to organise major treatment camps (3500 animals in a day and a half), assist in the provision of facilities for a large horse fair, act as a consultant to a government department, liaise with international charities and even organise participation in a cinema picture, as well as undertaking 'routine' veterinary duties and helping to manage a staff of 15 to 20 men. The box on page 38 describes a 'typical' day.

ORGANISING THE TRIP

Advice and guidance

Taking up overseas voluntary posts involves all the normal difficulties of changing jobs, with a few extra ones thrown in for good measure. Telephone interviews require a greater leap of faith than normal. Many charities have a network of former volunteers who are usually keen to offer

The host organisation's perspective

Taking on a volunteer brings many benefits for the host organisation and there may well be a few drawbacks, too, as Dr Sunil Chawla, the senior veterinary surgeon with Help in Suffering, explains.

Advantages

- **PRACTICAL SKILLS.** Volunteer vets generally have a broader range of experience and knowledge, and can share this knowledge of handling, diagnosis and surgery with the local Indian vets
- **SMALL ANIMAL SKILLS.** Indian vets do not have much experience in small animal practice so volunteers offer a golden opportunity to learn small animal skills
- **DONATIONS.** Volunteers are often a valuable source of new instruments, drugs and books. Veterinary books are very expensive for Indian vets to purchase (Ettinger's Textbook of Veterinary Internal Medicine, for example, costs about one month's salary)
- **TWO-WAY LEARNING.** Volunteers have the chance to learn about tropical diseases and species, while Indian vets learn about Western diseases

Disadvantages

- **WASTE** Volunteer vets tend to be less conscious of the need for thriftiness, and may be wasteful of suture material, cotton wool, drugs, etc
- **RECORD-KEEPING.** Volunteer vets are often not as thorough in their record-keeping as are the Indian vets
- **CLIENT ATTITUDES.** Some small animal owners only want the volunteers to treat their animals. This is not good for Indian vets' confidence

advice and guidance. Hopefully, this network will give a very practical and honest view of the volunteer's life and duties. Support from family, friends and professional colleagues may be much less readily available than at home and it is very important that the new volunteer knows as much about the life, work and ethos of the organisation as possible, to be sure that he or she will fit in.

Logistics

Once a post has been found and accepted, there is a whole host of matters to consider. Stopping work as an assistant means losing one's accommodation and car. Somewhere to store personal belongings must be found. Commercial storage is very expensive and while friends and family may be able to help, do not underestimate the space needed (I had 14 large boxes of books alone).

Administration of finances

Depending on the duration of the posting, pensions must be considered. Many schemes allow a break in contributions, but one may pay heavily for this privilege. Banks, in my experience, are relatively happy to make helpful arrangements, but a trusted friend or relative is really

needed to deal with much of the routine administrative paperwork while one is away. Both the BVA and RCVS have lower subscription rates for overseas members.

Visas and professional registration

Visas and professional registration need to be considered and it may be possible to obtain guidance from the charity and past volunteers. Voluntary work can cause problems for visa authorities, and it may be simpler to enter the country of destination on a work visa, rather than claim voluntary status. Visas are often valid from the day of issue rather than the day of travel. If other international travel is planned, it might be easier to obtain all visas needed before leaving the UK.

Professional registration can be a complicated issue. In some countries there may be no need to gain registration, but professional etiquette dictates that one should inquire. The RCVS will help with letters of good standing. Professional certificates may need to be certified before travelling overseas. The services of a Notary Public are then needed, and these are expensive (I paid £60 for two signatures!).



Exchange of skills – an Indian colleague performs his first caesarean section

Flights

Volunteers are often asked to take professional equipment, books and so forth with them. Some airlines are prepared to be lenient with extra baggage allowance if approached far enough in advance; others will make no concessions at all. It is worth making inquiries well ahead of departure if extra baggage is anticipated.

Many organisations will provide some assistance towards the cost of travel. The amount may vary depending on the length of voluntary service undertaken and the charity's finances. For example, the Help in Suffering charity has a sliding scale for help towards travel. Any time under six months is at the volunteer's own expense; volunteers staying for a six-month tour of duty have one-way travel paid, and those staying for a year get a return trip paid for. With the exception of large organisations, such as VSO, the volunteer can be expected to make his or her own travel arrangements.

Housing and living expenses

Charities will usually provide accommodation for their volunteers, but it may be to local standards rather than those expected at home. For short periods some charities may house volunteers with supporters, staff or trustees. This may be acceptable, and may be an interesting cultural experience, but I have found that there are rare times when I have needed to 'escape' completely to my own space away from local culture, people, work, and even other volunteers. The opportunities for this are clearly much fewer if living in a local's house.

As with airfares, living expenses vary with the charity and the length of service. Short periods of service may mean that the volunteer has to find all his or her expenses. Many charities link this honorarium to local salaries.

Donations

One of the advantages to an organisation hosting volunteers is the donated supplies they may bring with them (see box on page 36). The CVA and the BVA Overseas Group run a book donation scheme, where practitioners are encouraged to give unwanted texts, and these are then donated to organisations in the developing world. Equipment and drugs may be obtained from practices, drug companies, and so on.

These will often be damaged or out of date but still usable. One should probably declare such things to customs but experience suggests that it may be easier to by-pass such agencies in developing countries, and just bring medicines and equipment in as personal luggage. I always carry letters detailing any medicines that I bring with me from both the donor and the charity in case I am challenged, and I have refused to carry anything that could be construed as a narcotic. I have had no difficulty but did once have to try to explain what a pair of horse emasculators were to a customs' officer who spoke no English! The donation of drugs, equipment and books is an excellent way for practices in the UK to help colleagues overseas, but if excess baggage allowance or duty has to be paid it may be more cost effective to send money in place of such things.

Cultural preparation

Veterinary education prepares one for most things professional, so the best pre-posting preparation is probably cultural. The understanding gleaned from tourist guides and travel literature may not be complete, but may help one avoid too many faux pas in the all-important first few weeks in a new country.

RIISING TO THE CHALLENGES

Professional

Professionally, one may be confronted with fewer drugs, less equipment and negligible diagnostic aids. Unfamiliar diseases in unfamiliar species present constant challenges and excitement. Dealing with colleagues whose professional knowledge in some spheres is more limited than they perhaps realise poses particular challenges. Judging the correct time, if at all, to intervene when animal welfare is compromised can be a very difficult decision. One learns to accept that the British view of animal welfare may be inappropriate, or even wrong, in some circumstances. For instance, I have come across several cows which have had a leg amputated a number of years previously and, to my mind, seemed much less of a welfare problem than many of the chronically lame cows I encountered in the UK.



A volunteer's life presents many challenges. This donkey owner wanted treatment for his own toothache

Personal

Adapting to a completely different culture presents enormous challenges. Foreign languages may present further interesting situations. Many of the countries where voluntary work is possible or needed are a part of the Commonwealth and, consequently, in most, some English will be spoken by some people. Larger charities such as VSO run classes to help with learning local languages, but in smaller charities it may be up to the volunteer to learn.

In my experience, essential local words are quickly picked up but fluency requires a great deal of determination and skill. Some volunteers here have mastered Hindi very well; I can read and write in Hindi script but the spoken language is much more difficult. It has amazed me how much communication can occur with very little common language but large amounts of goodwill. A smile is a smile in any language. Confusions do occur, clinical histories can be sketchy and one is often left looking silly. I once thought a sick camel was to be given dogs to eat as the Hindi words for 'dog' and 'hay' sound similar to the British ear.

I try to approach every task with these differences in mind, and try to remember that my way of doing things may not necessarily be the best. Being part of a team where everyone learns from each other is much more important than merely teaching the British way.

In India, I have learned that I am expected to take a far more paternalistic interest in the lives of all our workforce than would be expected at home. I have been called upon to 'rescue' people from prison, sort out

A day in the life of a volunteer vet

05.30 Dog population survey (one vet, three technicians) on foot in the Elephant Quarter of the Pink City.

08.45 Count finished: 359 dogs counted, 63 per cent of which were already vaccinated. Stop for chai and cakes at a roadside stall on the way back.

09.00 Return to shelter, quick 'bucket bath'.

09.15 Check dogs caught today: 12 bitches for spaying, plus two to be euthanased (severe mange and transmissible venereal cancer). Enter into register.

09.45 Start operations. Two surgeons, but only one scrubbed assistant due to holidays.

11.15 Finish spays in time for chai.

11.30 Dog checking: 11 to release.

12.00 Record today's operation details and prepare releasing list.

12.20 Discuss survey results with colleagues.

12.45 Lunch – egg curry, rice and dal.

14.15 Another quick 'bucket bath'.



Unfamiliar species cause some professional excitement

14.30 Start treatments in cow shed. Three new admissions (one metatarsal fracture, an emaciated street cow with plastic bags in the rumen, and a case of horn cancer).

15.00 Treat in-patients (camel with nose-peg myiasis, three cows with RTA wounds, donkey with mange, two calves with myiasis following FMD, bull with laminitis).

15.45 Called away to attend to an inappetent buffalo brought to the clinic.

16.15 Finish treatments. Afternoon chai in cow shed.

16.30 Supervise dog releasing, and arrange tomorrow's catching team and numbers.

17.00 Record dog releases in register. Arrange staff holiday cover.

17.25 Paperwork to office, to ensure men get paid.

17.35 Rescue team going out to attend bull stuck in a culvert. Asked to go along.

18.20 Arrive. Large crowd gathered. Administer xylazine from top of culvert. Staff enter and secure with ropes. Manually haul 700 kg bull to street level with aid of staff and crowd. Much back slapping all round. Bull released unharmed. Wash up, chai at a local stall.

21.00 Arrive back at the shelter. Euthanase street dog (RTA) rescued during the evening by other staff.

21.20 Supper. Another 'bucket bath' and bed.



The team tackles an unusual rumenotomy – 40 kg of plastic being removed from a bull



Becoming friends with people from different backgrounds is flattering and very rewarding. This is a scene from a village festival in a colleague's village

accommodation and financial problems, arrange and accompany hospital treatments (I was once asked to re-bandage our knackerman's lacerated penis!), and generally assist with other domestic crises.

Living conditions may be very different from those in Britain. Poor electricity supply, unwholesome and unreliable water supply, poor communications, rigorous transport systems, insects and other unexpected visitors all mean domestic challenges as well.

BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING

In my experience, the benefits of voluntary work overseas are enormous. Working among and being friends with people of completely different backgrounds is both rewarding and flattering. Perhaps the most satisfying of all is promoting the professional development of local colleagues. My single most rewarding experience has been giving an illiterate village boy on our

staff the confidence to learn to read and write. It is possible to make a positive difference to people's lives in a way that is not possible at home. For me, improving the efficiency of a family's only cow, or getting a recumbent draught camel, costing four months' salary, back to work for its owner, makes more difference than squeezing the anal glands of pampered pooches.

Increased responsibility is good for professional development. One becomes more adaptable, both prac-

tically and in attitude. With no referral centres and limited facilities, one learns to stand alone relying on one's wits, education and first principles. I have treated camels, elephants, monkeys and buffalo and performed bovine thoracotomies and donkey caesareans because if our team did not do these, no-one would. Being in a small team and having time to work together is a great opportunity and is a reward in itself.

ON RETURNING

A number of practical difficulties present themselves on returning from voluntary work abroad – where to live, shortage of money, transport, arranging a new job, etc. Many people find that adapting to life back in Britain is more difficult than adapting to the challenge overseas. Life at home appears to be more trivial than life in developing countries.

After working in a small team with limited facilities, returning to

practices where rotas, accommodation, cars and the latest equipment seem more important than the decency and cohesion of the workforce is a difficult transition to make. Voluntary work abroad may, unfortunately (and misguidedly), be viewed as an extended holiday by some employers, who may thus seek to obtain one's services more cheaply. These attitudes add to the feelings of dislocation on return, but at least indicate which practices one is less likely to fit in with!

It may be difficult to find a job which reflects one's new or altered view of the way ahead. Voluntary work is very rewarding but the reality for most people is that it can only be a temporary interlude from paid employment, and so the need to find rewarding and paid work is pressing.

Re-establishing contact with friends after a prolonged period away can be difficult. I have found large groups of friends to be rather overwhelming after being used to life with few contacts outside one's immediate team.

CROSS-CULTURAL TIES

The enormous benefits, both personal and professional, to serving as a volunteer overseas in my experience far outweigh the disadvantages and problems. Strengthening cross-cultural and international ties must always be a good thing. As veterinary surgeons we have the great good fortune to have a professional qualification which is easily transported around the world, and which, moreover, has the potential to be of great benefit wherever it is applied

Contact details

Brooke Hospital for Animals,
telephone 020 7930 0210

BVA Overseas
Group/Commonwealth
Veterinary Association,
telephone 020 7636 6541

SPANNA, telephone 020 7828
0997

Vetaid, telephone 0131 445
6241

VSO, telephone 020 8780 7200

WSPA, telephone 020 7587
5000

BVA Overseas Group

THE BVA Overseas Group is often able to assist vets who are considering working abroad in a developing country. It provides general advice and puts inquirers in touch with colleagues who have served (or may still be serving) in a specific country or region. The group offers support to vets working overseas by corresponding with them and helping with professional queries. It has access to books and equipment which can be made available to projects and it functions as a network for volunteers and others, both while they are overseas and after they return to the UK.

Note from America

Ewan McNeill reflects on a disease from 'over there' that could soon be a diagnosis to consider over here

OLD Lyme in Connecticut is a quintessentially quiet New England town, complete with picturesque clapboard houses, obligatory white-painted church and fine views across the estuary to Long Island Sound. Now modestly well known as an art colony, its notoriety in medical history was assured when borreliosis – Lyme disease – was first recognised there in the 1970s. Since then, this tickborne disease has spread inexorably throughout the USA, so that few areas are now completely free of the problem, and the public's awareness of the threat from ticks to both themselves and their pets is immense. Despite America's love of huge conurbations involving acres of concrete, glass and tarmac, much of the USA is still rugged, undeveloped countryside providing immense scope for ticks to live and thrive. Even the grass and bushes of a typical New England backyard will offer an ideal habitat for these tiny creatures, and the species which carries Lyme disease is minute – difficult to spot with the naked eye when they attach to canine or, for that matter, human skin.

Should you visit a veterinary practice within an endemic area you'll certainly notice that it isn't long before a suspect Lyme disease patient is presented. It's nearly always a dog, although there are reports that cats, horses and goats can also contract the illness. Veterinarians practising in these areas will tell you that they can diagnose the disease almost as soon as an affected dog walks into the waiting room – or rather limps in, as a common presenting sign is heat and swelling of one or more joints.

It's now common for pet owners to be offered a Lyme test – along with tests for heartworm and ehrlichiosis – at their dog's annual health

check, and most vets will use a simple three-in-one blood-testing kit for immediate results. Although the disease is treatable if caught early, the chronic phase (which may appear more than four years after infection) can lead to arthritis, renal failure and other major problems. The good news is that vaccines are now available, and recommended for all dogs living in, or visiting, endemic areas. However, the efficacy is less than 100 per cent and both annual retesting and booster vaccinations are to be recommended. Tick control is still of prime importance for prevention, and involves spraying the immediate environment, as well as treating the dog itself. Given the size of an average American yard this may be easier said than done!

'So what?' you may yawn (assuming you have read this far). Well, I recently attended a CPD meeting on tick diseases where the speaker suggested that Lyme disease is becoming more of a problem in northern Europe. I must confess that I have never yet diagnosed a case of Lyme disease, but it does seem that we now need to be considering this as a differential diagnosis in dogs presenting with pyrexia, stiffness and joint swelling. With the success of PETS and the consequent increase in the number of British dogs now tanning themselves on the beaches of the Costa Brava or enjoying the smells of the sangliers in the forests of Provence, how soon before we find ourselves doing routine tests for what were once merely exotic diseases briefly mentioned in voluminous textbooks we only glanced at as students? Like it or not, heartworm, babesiosis and the New English Lyme disease may yet become need-to-know diseases for all vets in the old country!