

VSO RECRUITMENT OF VETERINARY SURGEONS

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It appears that there are currently relatively few requests to VSO from overseas employers for veterinarians. Although this has always been the case to some extent, I think it is more pronounced today. Through SPANA I receive many requests from vets (qualified and students) wishing to do voluntary work, therefore I feel there is a body of willing and suitable vets from the UK (and probably other countries).

As less developed countries increase their own home grown body of highly qualified vets and technicians, the need to supply overseas vets working directly as clinicians may be less relevant today. However I feel that certain aspects of delivery of animal health services in many countries (such as the move towards privatisation and less government intervention) impact less positively on the most resource poor of livestock keepers. As countries also become more involved in global trade, requiring access to export markets and requiring stricter regulation of animal health and meat inspection, the requirement for sufficient quantity and quality of animal health staff becomes greater. Global trade and travel also makes it easier for diseases to spread (avian flu, foot and mouth disease, SARS as examples) and vets are uniquely placed to assist in the fight against zoonotic and other epidemic diseases.

I thought it would, therefore, be timely to expand a little on the skills that a current UK veterinarian has to offer and the various roles that they might be able to fill. This may help natural resource or business desks within VSO recruitment to suggest placements for successful VSO veterinary applicants.

Pre Veterinary School

All students accepted onto a veterinary degree course today are high achieving school leavers, they will have high A-level grades in science subjects and, frequently, in other subjects. Competition for places at veterinary schools is extremely high and only those with all round interests and experiences, as well as the relevant academic credentials, are selected. Most students will have done some degree of overseas travel, have musical and/or sporting prowess, have carried out community work as well as completed the necessary animal related experience.

Veterinary Student Curriculum

Preclinical years at veterinary school are taken up by courses in anatomy, physiology, biochemistry as well as animal husbandry. In addition students spend their holidays working on farms and in animal related institutions such as kennels and catteries. This is an obligatory part of the course.

The middle years are taken up with paraclinical subjects dealing with infectious agents (virology, bacteriology, parasitology, pathology), and pharmacology, and clinical subjects such as medicine and surgery are introduced. These days there is a much greater emphasis on problem based learning and group work.

In clinical years medicine and surgery (of farm stock, dogs and cats, equids, small mammals, birds, fish and exotic animals) predominate. Allied subjects include clinical medicine (laboratory work), epidemiology (study of disease transmission in populations), herd health programmes, public health and food safety (including meat inspection). Today business skills and people management skills are also taught, often using outside professionals, role playing seminars etc.

Students will be involved in project and research work and be competent in information technology skills.

During non term time students are required to spend 26 weeks working with private vets in different disciplines. Most colleges now have a lecture free final year when students will be on clinical rotations within the college veterinary hospital working in all of the various disciplines.

Most veterinary degree courses are 5 years long, with the exception of Cambridge which is 6 years. Many students however can intercalate a year within the course to complete a BSc in another subject. Many veterinary undergraduates today are mature students having completed another degree before entering the course or having come to the course from another career later in life.

I have had many vets sending me their CVs which include many skills and experiences acquired prior to attending the veterinary course, including: wildlife management, development projects, other science work in industry, research, business, veterinary nursing, teaching. Some have had overseas experience, including in developing countries.

After qualification

Initially most new graduates go into general veterinary practice in the UK, improving their clinical skills in medicine and surgery and developing skills of dealing with the public as well as fitting into a stressful working environment. Many will also become LVIs (Local Veterinary Inspectors) doing some contracted DEFRA work testing cattle for diseases, checking markets, export animals, quarantine facilities and therefore understanding government animal health services. Vets in practice will also frequently be involved in training of veterinary nurses.

When vets become partners in a practice they then develop further skills of managing a business, including finances and personnel management.

Apart from private veterinary practice vets may go into the pharmaceutical industry (development, regulation or marketing), work for animal welfare charities, work in civil service positions, as researchers in universities, or as teachers of vet students, veterinary nurses or agricultural students.

Vets therefore could be suitable for a multitude of roles overseas:

- Veterinary clinicians;
- Teachers of veterinary students, veterinary nurses or technicians, agricultural students;
- Curriculum development advisers within veterinary training faculties;
- Trainers of livestock extension workers, community animal health workers or training trainers;
- Advisers to Ministries of Agriculture on delivery of animal health services, disease control policies, food safety, improving access to export markets;
- Advisers on pharmaceutical regulation and development;
- Advisers on development of private veterinary businesses;
- Conservation and wildlife work;
- Development of diagnostic and research laboratories.

July 2006

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