

UNDERSTANDING WHAT WE NEED FROM TOMORROW'S VETS

The BVA-RCVS Vet Futures project revealed a disconnect between the expectations of many veterinary students and the realities of a veterinary career. As a result, the Vet Futures Project Board tasked the RCVS to review outcomes for graduates and to explore some challenging questions, including whether our vet schools are preparing students sufficiently for the workplace and whether the workplace is doing enough to offer them fulfilling careers. This project is called RCVS Graduate Outcomes.

At a time when recruitment and retention are a significant concern within the profession, one of the most eagerly awaited sessions at the LVS will be a discussion between Dr Chris Tufnell, Senior Vice-President of the RCVS, Hannah Mason, Senior Vice-President of the Association of Veterinary Students and Joanne Reeve, Professor of Primary Care Research at Hull & York Medical School, on what we need from tomorrow's vets - and how to make sure that we get it.

The RCVS Graduate Outcomes project was launched in June 2017 under the joint RCVS and British Veterinary Association (BVA) Vet Futures Action Plan. It is considering far-reaching changes to the education of veterinary students. Among the areas to be explored, according to Chris Tufnell, a member of the Graduate Outcomes Working Party, are the skills and competences required by veterinary professionals in a future - post-Brexit - era and the viability and desirability of limited licensure.

He says: "We are concerned at the mismatch between the expectations of veterinary students and the realities of a veterinary career. Advances in veterinary science, the rising expectations of pet owners, the development of new technologies and the commercial realities of practice in a competitive environment are all contributors. Vets work hard to qualify so the fact that we face such difficulty in retaining them in the profession just confirms the need for change to ensure that our veterinary education provides the best possible preparation for a veterinary career in a fast-changing world."

"In delivering Graduate Outcomes, we are working with vet schools, representative groups and other stakeholders to see how veterinary education can better manage expectations and so improve outcomes for our veterinary graduates. Our priority is to retain more of them within the profession and to reduce issues such as mental ill-health and stress."

He adds: "One of the areas we will be exploring is the amount of training given



CHRIS TUFNELL



HANNAH MASON



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in so-called 'soft', non-clinical skills, such as communication, resilience, problem-solving and handling difficult situations as we believe these are important in supporting new vets as they enter clinical practice.

"We are also looking at the issue of limited licensure because it may be that focusing on a particular area of practice could better prepare students for their career and enable the degree to be shortened, which would reduce levels of student debt."

Hannah Mason agrees with the need for change: "We welcome Graduate Outcomes because we believe it is essential to invest time and effort now in understanding many deep-seated issues to fully address the concerns of today's veterinary students and to ensure they will find the profession a welcoming, stimulating and rewarding place to work."

"The 'disconnect' problem is most acute among first- and second-year students," she explains. "Once they are out on extramural studies (EMS) placements in their third year, the working hours and routine start to become clearer but students are still often very unprepared for most aspects of day-to-day life in practice, including the sudden weight of responsibility that comes with graduation."

She continues: "We hear from many students that they are concerned about a potential lack of opportunities for career progression. Many have aspirations to own their own businesses and to progress professionally - but they are often unclear as to how to go about it. Others are concerned by work/life balance issues or at the prospect of 'plateauing' in general practice."

The need to broaden the range of skills taught in non-clinical areas is something that the Association of Veterinary Students agrees with. "The nature of veterinary work and an ever-increasing caseload makes resilience an essential quality for vets," adds Hannah Mason. "However, whether resilience in particular is a skill that can actually be taught is another issue. We see this discussion as an integral and important part of the review."

The issue of viability and desirability of 'limited licensure' is likely to be one of the toughest areas for Graduate Outcomes to consider. It reflects a trend within vet schools to place increasing emphasis on educating students in the culture and systems of specialist practice

which, some argue, is being done at the expense of primary care.

Veterinary students are overwhelmingly opposed to the prospect of limited licensure, according to Hannah Mason.

"The majority of those we talk to have either not decided what they want to do or say they only decided following their final-year rotations. On the other hand, they do express a wish to have more choice within their education - perhaps the inclusion of non-compulsory modules which would allow for slightly more ownership over their end degree."

Chris Tufnell believes that, as veterinary medicine advances, it becomes more and more difficult to fit everything that needs to be learned into an undergraduate degree. "Either we need to look at graduating well-prepared vets into specific areas of practice or we need to look at developing more formal post-graduate training and differentiation. We don't have the answer yet and hope that this project will provide direction," he says.

Joanne Reeve sees parallels between human and veterinary medicine in terms of a growing disconnect between the way we teach and assess professionals in training and the realities of the day job. She says: "One of the biggest problems in human medicine is that, faced with an ageing population with ever more complex needs, we are having to rediscover the concept of whole-person medical care. I see this as having the capacity to interpret and to make 'defensible decisions' about what is the right course of action for this individual in their context. This is the expertise of generalist practice. We train students in a diverse range of condition-specific (what we would describe as 'specialist') medicine but, in the real world, of practice, most of our colleagues are dealing with something much more complex."

"Because we have failed to describe properly the tasks of whole-person generalist practice, we don't adequately teach the skills for what is one of the

most demanding jobs in medicine. Add to this that medical generalists are also perceived by some to be second-class doctors* - a 'jack of all trades, master of none' - and we have a recipe for unfulfilled, burnt-out doctors.

"I understand that the situation is different in veterinary medicine as the term 'specialist' only applies to someone who has RCVS Specialist accredited status in a particular area but perhaps veterinary education too is in danger of becoming 'stuck' at the 'specialist' and more technical end of practice and this is resulting in a lack of training and support for both 'generalist' and more 'flexible' practitioners. In this case, work needs to be done to better define 'generalist practice' in veterinary medicine - what it is, why it matters, why it is exciting - to ensure that vets are engaged and enthusiastic about working in this area. You could then describe the spectrum from generalist to specialist practice and map out what is and isn't being delivered/taught currently so that you could review training, assessment and postgrad professional development appropriately."

She added: "Perhaps, more fundamentally, there is an intellectual need to revitalise the view of professional veterinary practice. To ensure it is not just seen as being about 'what you know' - and therefore something you will always fail at because you can never know everything - and is instead about 'how you use what you know.'"

There is no doubt about the seriousness with which all of the stakeholders are approaching the Graduate Outcomes project. Hannah Mason says: "Veterinary students graduate with a fantastic technical education and as well-rounded and accomplished professionals but the combination of lower pay and longer working hours than similar vocations means they often feel a lack of pride in what should be one of the most wonderful, diverse and fulfilling professions available. We are looking forward to helping to create a brighter future through contributing to Graduate Outcomes."

Chris Tufnell agrees: "Some of the areas we are looking at may be controversial but that's the point of the project - we want robust and challenging debate on the topics under discussion because we need to make real change and are approaching the whole project with a very open mind."

* in 1967 Lord Moran described GPs (generalists) as doctors who had "fallen off the specialist ladder"

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The panel discussion:
'What will we need from tomorrow's vets?'
chaired by BVA President John Fishwick
will take place at 3.40pm on Thursday
16 November at the London Vet Show.