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ORIGINAL RESEARCH

“Refugees from practice”? Exploring why some vets move from the clinic to the laboratory

Alistair Anderson¹  | Pru Hobson-West^{1,2} ¹ School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK² School of Veterinary Medicine and Science, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK**Correspondence**

Alistair Anderson, School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK.

Email: alistair.anderson@nottingham.ac.uk**Funding information**

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Abstract

Background: Named veterinary surgeons (NVSs) are a mandated presence in licensed animal research establishments in the UK. Some NVSs come into their laboratory roles having left general veterinary practice, which is currently facing significant recruitment and retention challenges. Understanding the factors that motivate veterinary professionals to move from practice to laboratory roles provides insight into the issues underlying recruitment and retention challenges in veterinary practice.

Methods: Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 33 NVSs were conducted in-person or over the telephone. The interviews were transcribed, anonymised and analysed using an inductive approach.

Results: Participants' accounts of their career trajectories generally emphasised push factors motivating them to leave practice, rather than pull factors to move into a laboratory role: Indeed, many participants recalled originally having little knowledge of the NVS role upon discovering it. The push factors recounted by interviewees strongly reflect the factors identified in recent research into recruitment and retention in the veterinary profession, such as business concerns and poor work-life balance.

Conclusion: This study shows that laboratory animal work is often considered by NVSs as more manageable or fulfilling than practice work. To improve retention, the push factors identified by NVSs should be addressed in practice management and veterinary pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

All animal research establishments including universities and commercial organisations, must, by UK law,¹ have a Named Veterinary Surgeon (NVS). The Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons Code of Professional Conduct summarises the role of an NVS as providing ‘advice on the health, welfare and treatment of animals within these establishments’.² Several aspects of veterinary training are considered key, as neatly summarised by Poirier et al³:

‘Veterinarians have a solid base of knowledge and expertise in comparative pathology, diagnosis, prognosis, disease prevention and treatment, anaesthesia and surgery, pain recognition and control, breeding control and euthanasia that is relevant to laboratory animals. They are therefore uniquely qualified to provide

training, assessment and supervision on what is considered to be veterinary interventions for scientific procedures’.

In other words, NVSs are not only involved in the direct management of animal health and welfare, but are also involved in training of other staff, ethical review and the implementation of the 3Rs (reduction, refinement and replacement)^{4,5}: The 3Rs have formed the basis of regulation and professionalisation of laboratory animal welfare in Europe and the UK, prioritising the refinement of experimental procedures to minimise suffering, reduction of the number of animals required for given procedures, and the replacement of animals with alternatives.⁶ While Named Vets make up a very small proportion of the UK veterinary profession,⁷ they have an important role to play in ensuring standards in laboratory animal practice and, ultimately then, in the production of new medical knowledge and the creation and testing of

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new medicines for humans and animals.⁴ Despite this important and complex role, little is known about the career experiences and motivations of these veterinary surgeons.

This article reports findings from a novel qualitative study which involved 33 in-depth interviews with NVSs in the UK. These interviews were wide ranging and included discussion of the veterinarian's relationship with the animals under their care, their relationship with other staff in the laboratory and the role of regulation. However, this paper focuses much more narrowly on how NVSs explain their personal career route into this role. The analysis suggests the importance of 'push factors' for leaving clinical practice, rather than 'pull factors' into a career in laboratory animal medicine. Existing work confirms that veterinary practices face a high turnover of qualified staff and difficulties recruiting new staff, particularly when experienced staff are desired.⁸ A recent survey reported that 43.7 per cent of a sample of 2474 veterinarians working in the UK were planning on leaving their current employment within the next 2 years, with 51.5 per cent of those planning on leaving intending to do the same kind of work with a different employer, 31.7 per cent intending to do different work in the veterinary field and 17.2 per cent intending to take a break or leave the veterinary profession.⁹ The 2019 Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' (RCVS) Survey of the Profession⁷ found similarly that 9.5 per cent of its respondents were planning on leaving the veterinary profession.

The 'leaky bucket' of veterinarians leaving the profession may be explained by challenges such as gender discrimination,¹⁰ corporatisation and consolidation of general practice,^{11,12} the compounding effects of understaffing,^{9,13} the complexity of lay-expert relations during diagnosis¹⁴ and an increasing distance between the expectations of graduates and the reality of professional veterinary work.^{13,15} For individual vets, these issues may translate into decisions to leave employment for reasons of work-life balance, practice management, salary, burnout and fatigue, stress, physical health and ethical discomfort.^{9,16–20} Compounding these issues, those who leave clinical practice for non-clinical veterinary work may experience stigma with 'many' participants of a meeting of early-career veterinarians 'feeling that non-clinical work was widely regarded as not being "real vet work"'.²¹

The analysis presented in this article shows that some laboratory animal veterinarians also cite these issues as part of their career histories, although some vets combine roles in both practice and laboratory work. These findings have value firstly because the NVSs identify negative areas of general practice (that they do not experience as an NVS) as being key motivators for leaving practice, while low levels of prior knowledge about laboratory veterinary roles limited the role of pull factors in their career movements. Consequently, we note that further study of NVS' motivations may hold lessons for decision-makers looking to improve retention in general practice and that labora-

tory veterinary medicine could be made more prominent in veterinary curricula.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection

The data in this project were collected as part of the 'Animal Research Nexus Programme', a 5-year programme of work funded by the Wellcome Trust.^{22,23} A key objective of the programme is to demonstrate the value of social science and humanities approaches to the animal research domain.²⁴ One sub-project is designed to understand the role and experiences of NVSs. Given the lack of existing published data on this group of vets and our aim of exploring in detail their own accounts, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate.

While the analyses from qualitative data are not always easily generalisable, their advantage is that they can provide deep insight into the perspectives of participants. Indeed, qualitative methods are being increasingly deployed in veterinary topics, for example in studies of retention,¹⁸ vaccination decision-making²⁵ and communication strategies.²⁶

Ethical approval for data collection was granted by the School of Veterinary Medicine and Science at the University of Nottingham (approval number: 1800160608). Data collection took place in 2018. Participants were contacted through snowball sampling, where interviewees suggest others to contact, initiated via email through the interviewer's networks and via a call for participation during a specialist conference. Thirty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with working NVSs in person; interviews lasted about an hour. The sample included 16 male and 17 female NVSs. Anonymised and aggregated data on the attendance of an NVS training course between 2012–2020 shared with the authors (e-mail communication received by AA in March 2021) suggests this may underrepresent female NVSs, who made up 59 per cent of training course attendees. An interview guide ([Supplementary Material](#)) was developed and discussed with an expert advisory panel of three NVSs and was trialled during two pilot interviews which led to no substantive alterations to the initial interview guide. The interview guide was used to prompt conversation and was subject to revision as the project developed, as is standard in this kind of exploratory qualitative research.

Analysis

Interviews were fully transcribed and anonymised by a third-party under a confidentiality agreement. Each transcript was then assigned a random but gender-specific pseudonym beginning with the letters M, N, O, or P. These transcripts were then analysed using NVivo 12.

The analysis method was reflexive Thematic Analysis.^{27,28} The analysis was conducted through two cycles of inductive coding, meaning that the researcher did not decide in advance what themes would be important. In the first cycle, transcripts were coded in detail line-by-line, in order to capture participants' own language use with an emphasis on in vivo and process codes.²⁹ These codes were then organised as broad categories. The second round of coding looked for patterns of meaning that underpinned those broad themes, with further revision of the first-round categories and codes.³⁰ Together these cycles of coding produced a set of analytic themes that reflect the in-depth nature of the qualitative data. The findings discussed below represent the themes covering participants' careers prior to becoming an NVS, illustrated with quotations from the interview transcripts.

RESULTS

The results are divided into two themes: 1) escaping general practice and 2) discovering the NVS role.

Escaping general practice

The interview analysis showed that participants who had quit practice described a moment in which they felt the need to look beyond general practice for a fulfilling – or at least, manageable – career in veterinary medicine. The narratives within this theme recount the varied stories of those whom NVS Margaret referred to as:

'[R]efugees from practice (...) who try it in practice and when it does not work (ask) what else is there?'

Overwhelmed by the business of general practice

For some NVSs, their journey out of practice was attributable to a general feeling of dissatisfaction with general veterinary practice. Each interviewee had their own unique career story, but reference to the perceived overwhelming nature of the business side of veterinary practice and the complex client relationships was almost ubiquitously present. Despite having a good social network, Maeve, for example, described feelings of loneliness and isolation. She also highlighted the business aspects of small animal practice:

Maeve: 'I started and within 6 months, I knew that I could not do that for the rest of my life. (...) Because it's just like, nobody had taught me that it is all about business, the business side was something I seriously struggled with and the money making, and the attitude of some of the (pet) owners.'

Mabel recalled moving through multiple practice jobs before concluding that she was not happy with

general practice itself. Like Maeve, Mabel attributed her unhappiness with general practice to the role of business within the job, and especially the emotional strain of clients' money concerns:

'To be honest the reason I took this (NVS) job is because (...) it was good hours and I did not have to worry about the general public and other people's money concerns. I think that is what I found that I did not like in general practice, is that you have got people's money concerns which give them this emotional strain and then they pass that emotional strain onto you and I found that overwhelming.'

In a third example, Molly described a growing daily disillusionment combined with existential professional discomforts that culminated in a clear fork in her career path to become a partner in her practice, or try something new:

'I had had a couple of jobs, and they were both dreadful. Got a lot out of them but they were really hard jobs in different ways and if I would have chosen a different job, maybe I would still be in general practice. (...) I was going up into (location) and trying to calve cows and turning up on a farm and the farmer saying "Boss not coming?" and things like that. (...) And then I was in sole charge in a small animal branch practice of a bigger practice, and I was making money for other people, at the point of becoming associate partner and partner, and it just felt it was all about making money. And I was in a small town near where I grew up and thinking if I take this on, if I sign on this, I am going to be doing this with the same people for the rest of my life and I couldn't do that.'

These examples demonstrate the role of business concerns at various stages of the veterinary practice career as push factors in these NVSs' accounts. The effect of the business requirements of veterinary practice were consistently present alongside other cited personal reasons for dissatisfaction, such as Maeve's isolation or Molly's experience as a young female farm veterinarian. These NVSs were overwhelmingly aware of the acute pressure that the financial requirements of practice placed on them as individual professionals and identified this pressure as a push factor within their own career journey.

Difficult environments in which to make a living

In addition to this systemic aspect of veterinary practice, some interviewees emphasised particularly difficult environments within which they had personally worked as general practitioners. These accounts varied from poor working conditions to the stresses of

owning a practice, demonstrating the breadth of career stages at which NVS participants had left general practice.

For example, Nancy spent 3 years in mixed and large animal first opinion veterinary practices and felt that she would not have been able to cope with the working conditions:

'I found that role very demanding, I had probably not chosen the best practices. So my last practice was me and my boss, it was the two of us, I was on call every second weekend and every second evening. And towards the end, I was actually experiencing burnout because it was just every time that you thought 'I am done', you were not done. There was another mastitis or you come back from that and you had to do another thing. I could not see myself being able to cope with those working conditions, that was basically it.'

After these 3 years, Nancy went back to university to do a PhD and later became an NVS. Olivette similarly cited exhaustion, having never been in a practice that did not do its own out of hours:

'I was never lucky enough to be in a practice that did not do its own out of hours, and just that sort of frustration. You are working all night, and then you're expected to go in the next day and still work, and I used to think I was a people person. After 6 years of practice I realised I am not a people person. And after I have not had any sleep, I am definitely not a people person.'

In these two examples it was not the general structure of veterinary practice that participants reported discomfort with but rather the demands of working in practices that did not use separate out-of-hours veterinary care providers. This illustrates that while some push factors were identified as systemic, exemplified in the previous subtheme, for some of the participants the drivers were perceived as associated with individual practices: However, this is not to say that these do not also relate to the systemic pressures previously highlighted.

Max, on the other hand, presented a different issue arising from their specific practice environment. With their spouse, Max had opened their own veterinary practice and grown it to four full-time vets:

'We had done that for 10 years and then we thought, 'Well this is a bit hard actually, running our own practice and being responsible for it and our staff and providing a 24-hour service to everyone who wants to ring up at any time of day or night;

there must be easier ways of making a living than this', not having to worry about VAT and hiring staff and all the rest of it (...). So, we decided to sell up, (...), and I came here and I have been here ever since which is now 18 years'.

Among the multiple narratives of discomfort with working conditions, Max, and similarly, Molly, demonstrate that there can be several reasons for leaving general practice. Some veterinarians knew they were not happy with being a general practice veterinarian within 6 months of starting, whereas others like Max progressed to practice ownership and had worked for a decade before deciding to change role.

In summary, this theme illustrates that it is not possible to identify within these NVSs' accounts one specific push factor within their journeys that catalysed movement from the clinic into the lab. Rather, the push factors cited are reflective of wider and ongoing issues facing recruitment and retention in the veterinary profession motivating some veterinarians to escape general practice.

Discovering the NVS role

This theme illustrates the way in which laboratory vets discovered the NVS role. This theme is important because it helps highlight the absence of pull factors specific to laboratory work, and the often-accidental nature by which interviewees arrived in an NVS role within their accounts of career journeys.

Trying something new

While some current NVSs like Nancy left general practice to pursue further education, others in the study were not clear when leaving general practice about what their next role would be and recalled instead simply wanting to try something new and different. Temporary cover positions provided a route into NVS work for multiple participants, for example, as Molly explained:

'I came from practice to cover maternity leave with no NVS experience at all, 8 years in practice and it was a baptism of fire. I had a bit of support part-time but it was in at the deep and yeah, I could do it because it was a very clinical role at the time.(...) I just did not want to do that (general practice) for the rest of my life and that opportunity came up, and I did not know if I would like it or hate it but I just thought I would give it a go.'

Melody recounted a similar story involving a maternity cover position:

'I was then looking for something else, something different, something that meant more, and I saw an advert for (organisation) in the Vet Record for maternity cover and I thought 'let's give that a try'. I realised I knew absolutely nothing about laboratory animal medicine or what happened in that world because nobody talks about it of course, in our world, in the outside world.'

In both of these examples, temporary cover positions provided an opening to move from general practice into 'something different' that interviewees had no prior experience in or knowledge about. The difference that Melody attributes to the NVS role may itself stem from her observation that laboratory animal medicine is not discussed in 'the outside world' – a reflection made often by interviewees in relation to both the veterinary profession and the general public. Max, on the other hand, took a different route, and recalled a more exploratory search for his new role:

'It was not actually advertised, so I thought to myself, 'Well, industry will be quite fun'. Not specifically the NVS role, it could have been any kind of role in industry, at least that was what I was targeting, so I wrote off to about 200 different companies and said, 'Have you got any openings for a vet? This is my experience'.

Rather than responding to a specific opening as Molly and Melody did, Max had a general vision for life after general practice. This demonstrates that for veterinary professionals moving out of practice and into other veterinary roles, the discovery of the NVS role can take a number of forms dependent on the state of the job market at the time.

Redeploying veterinary expertise

While the above accounts describe movements out of practice, other trajectories into NVS roles were also described. For some, their route into NVS work came through a transition from an adjacent laboratory role into an NVS role. For example Margaret recounted filling a gap created by a retirement:

'It was a bit by accident, I was working for a pharmaceutical company as a technical advisor and they had some animals on site because they were doing (...) vaccine batch testing and some development work and their NVS retired, and there wasn't anybody! I took it on, not knowing that much about the job, I had done a bit as a student (...) just to see what it was all about so I had a bit of a vague idea but not really'.

Other interviewees who worked as researchers recalled having the NVS work 'tagged on' to their

research work, such as Michelle who was working in a research role shortly after the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 (A(SP)A) was introduced:

'Then it was tagged on when I started, 'Oh, can you be the Named, are you happy to be the NVS for the horses?' So, I started doing that and we were doing clinical cases, research into equine (topic), and I was being the Named Vet'.

Porous borders of laboratory veterinary work

Finally, some interviewed NVSs did not leave practice for the lab, but their practice work provided the route into NVS work. Some of the interviewees who did laboratory work alongside their clinical work described how the introduction of A(SP)A led to a formalization of the laboratory work that they were already doing, such as in Owen's example:

'I was in practice, and we were asked to come and look at some (species) here that were under experiment (...) and so I did that for a few years and then one day, the new Act came in, they had to have an NVS. They asked me if I would like to be their NVS and in the absence of any other volunteers, I agreed. (...) But having started effectively at one establishment that had the (species), there were two other establishments on the same campus and they also asked me if I would act as their NVS part time, and then others came out of the woodwork'.

Other interviewees recalled taking on laboratory work to help finance loans for recently-bought practices, while for others their laboratory work was limited to out-of-hours provision. These brief examples help illustrate the ways in which the borders of laboratory veterinary medicine are not necessarily impermeable, as a minority of the sample either currently or had previously worked simultaneously in both practice and laboratory roles.

In summary, this theme illustrates that pull factors towards laboratory veterinary work were not prominent in the accounts of NVSs career journeys. Rather, the move into an NVS role was generally an unplanned event – a discovery – catalysed either by a move out of practice driven by the aforementioned push factors, or by a specific call for veterinary input such that the laboratory work 'came' to the interviewee.

DISCUSSION

This study has analysed a novel set of interview accounts from NVSs. While the interviews were wide ranging, this paper has focused on career journeys with the aim of understanding how veterinarians end up in the lab. Accounts of leaving general practice were sometimes emotive and took the character of

an escape from general practice, often characterised as a systemically overwhelming or otherwise difficult environment to work in. The language used by participants was striking, with reference to being 'refugees' from practice and 'overwhelmed' by the financial side of veterinary practice. The consistent presence of strain caused by the financial aspects of veterinary practice was accompanied by more individual experiences such as burnout and emotional burdens, together framing the departure from general practice as a necessary escape. Crucially, these push factors appear consistent with previous studies of the recruitment and retention challenge facing contemporary general practice.^{9,10,16-20}

In contrast, the analysis suggests that the accounts of how veterinarians took on the NVS role were less consistent and more varied. They also suggest the importance of chance as a route to discovery of the role, rather than a planned trajectory into laboratory veterinary work. This may partly reflect a low level of public and professional awareness of the NVS role; indeed, this argument was made by the interviewees and has been noted elsewhere in the context of veterinary curricula³. Therefore, the discovery of the NVS role was facilitated, for example, by temporary positions or networking with industry stakeholders that enabled participants to find refuge and continue using their veterinary skills in a new context. However, the analysis also revealed that the borders between veterinary professional silos are not impermeable, and some participants worked both in general practice and as an NVS. Nevertheless, overall, this interview study suggests that push factors were more prominent than pull factors within their accounts of career trajectories.

There are some limitations to this analysis. As this study was qualitative in nature, strong inferences cannot easily be made about the national population of NVSs and their career trajectories or motivations. Future research looking at the experience of NVSs could, for example, usefully examine whether the documented gendered experiences of veterinary professionals¹⁰ are also experienced in the laboratory workplace. It is also important to note that many NVSs hold part-time positions in both practice and laboratory roles. However, focusing in this paper on the accounts of those who have quit general practice is justified, given the wider context of professional concern over retention. The use of inductive qualitative methods has also proved successful as the original focus of the project was on understanding the relationship between laboratory vets and other stakeholders in the laboratory; only through in-depth interviews did the push factors from general practice emerge as a significant finding.

This project also has several wider implications. In a recent piece in the *Veterinary Record*, Gardiner³¹ advocated more attention to fundamental questions such as: 'What should the veterinary profession look like?', 'How many vets do we need?', 'What areas will they be working in?', and 'What role should veterinary schools play?'. Gardiner also reminds us of the value of veterinary training, and that its 'essential compara-

tive character and its unique blend of scientific insight and pragmatism should be valuable commodities in a changing world'. This 'unique blend' is perfectly exemplified in the NVS role, where skills are required to design environments, train researchers, safeguard the 3Rs and provide expertise in therapeutic treatment, pain relief, and euthanasia.³ Focusing on the experiences of Named Veterinarians may therefore help us grapple with some of these fundamental questions about the future of the profession and the role of veterinary expertise in society.³²

This paper also has some practical implications. First, while the formal veterinary curriculum is undoubtedly under pressure,³³ ensuring the NVS role is presented as an option in University career sessions may ultimately assist those who may be keen to work in veterinary clinical practice, but later experience it as not a good fit. Additionally, ensuring that the veterinary course sufficiently stresses business alongside technical skills may better induct students into the professional workplace. However, we hope that the paper also may provide broader and valuable insights for those seeking to improve retention and job satisfaction in the wider veterinary profession. Existing examples suggest that this could include practice owners allowing flexible working for out-of-hours schedules or childcare needs at different stages of life³⁴⁻³⁶ and supporting staff to pursue personal fulfilment through sabbaticals.³⁴ If the push factors undermining recruitment and retention in practice presented in this study and the simultaneous absence of explicit pull factors for laboratory roles are not addressed, the challenges faced in the practice context may have knock-on effects to other vital veterinary roles if veterinary professionals leave the profession altogether.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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The data are not available for sharing due to anonymisation requirements.

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ORCID

Alistair Anderson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2385-0211>

Pru Hobson-West  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6105-0747>

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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