

# What Can't Be Taught

## Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

### Catheters, calving, and conundrums: Field notes of a first year veterinarian

Adrienne Johnston

It's a sentiment that's commonly expressed by final year vet students, and one that I remember well: the looming sense of uncertainty that sets in as graduation approaches. Life as a vet student is a veritable marathon, to use a tired metaphor, but at least the ultimate goal is clear. We commit years of our lives, trudging through seemingly endless hours of academic sludge with a single, all-consuming purpose: BECOME A VETERINARIAN! When I finally finished school, I remember feeling both elated and vaguely lost. My first thought was, "I made it!" — followed closely by, "Uh, now what?"

What I knew for sure was that I was ready for a change of scenery and a good old-fashioned, freewheeling adventure. So, I set out in my trusty little Volkswagen and drove east to join a mixed animal practice in small town Nova Scotia. It wasn't long before I was answering my first middle-of-the-night emergency call, a scenario that would soon become all too familiar: a pit bull with a face full of porcupine quills, and a panicked owner on the other end of the line explaining, "I don't have much money to spend..." The first ethical dilemma of my professional career! How exciting!

Memories of my first year are a mixed bag of ups and downs, speckled with a handful of shining moments that helped to build my confidence. I recall pulling up to a dairy farm for a calving one afternoon, to be greeted with a look of skepticism from an old-school farmer: I was a 5'4" woman practicing large animal medicine in a region accustomed to taller, stronger, "maler" veterinarians. The cow in question had a uterine torsion, and it was clear that my skills were on trial. The male vets in my practice typically relied on upper body strength to manually de-torse a uterus, which was clearly not an option for me. Instead, using one of the casting methods I'd practiced on farms as a student, I laid the cow down, allowing us to roll her over with relative ease. She gave birth to a live calf, and I gained some credibility with the producer. I felt a swell of pride when, months later, that same farmer walked into the clinic asking to speak with "the little girl vet" about a herd problem.

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"You know more than you think you know." This mantra got me through my first year of practice. I repeated it in the back of my mind while I dealt with my first colicky horse. I repeated it while I performed my first C-section. I repeated it every time I began to feel like I might vomit from stress. And it was true. At times, I would overhear myself speaking to a client as though eavesdropping on myself from afar, and sometimes I sounded pretty darn clever! It was like I'd been taken over by articulate aliens who really knew what they were talking about.

There were also nights that I stared at the ceiling instead of sleeping, distracted by thoughts of the day's cases and wondering whether I could have handled a situation "better." Spoiler alert: often, I could have. It's easy to obsess over the problems you couldn't solve, the things you wish you'd said (or hadn't!), and the medical decisions you didn't feel confident about. Like most vets, I have a mildly obsessive type A personality, and don't love to acknowledge my glaring human fallibility. One of the most valuable lessons gleaned from my first year is that it's easier on my mental health when I can be kind to myself in these moments of self-doubt. Hindsight can be a kick in the teeth, but when I do make mistakes — as all humans do, doctors or not! — I try to approach them as opportunities for growth rather than reasons to self-flagellate.

I've learned that it's okay that I don't know everything. To my knowledge, I've never had a client lose confidence in me for telling them honestly, "I don't know the answer to your question." This happened fairly regularly during my first year of practice. When it did, I would hit the books, chat with a colleague, or log onto VIN and get back to my client later with the pearls I was able to dig up. ("Well, Mrs. Jones, we don't see a lot of sugar gliders/hedgehogs/potbellied pigs here, but I learned something interesting about them, which might be relevant to your little guy..."). I believe that people recognize when you are genuinely invested in their animals' health, and that a willingness to seek out the answers you don't have can go a long way toward building a trusting veterinarian-client relationship.

Life is chaotic and fickle and unpredictable, and professional interests can shift in unexpected ways. Five years out of school, I now work in a more populated centre, and have a greater focus on companion and exotic animal medicine — somewhere I never thought I'd be, though I love it! Still, I cherish the wild and wonderful memories from my early days in rural practice: the simulated pioneer village where I treated farm animals, assisted by men and women dressed in period costumes; the injured bald eagle who was brought into the clinic one day

by a government employee; the crayon-on-construction-paper “thank you” card that I received from a young girl whose cat was recovering from a life-saving foreign body surgery. I wouldn’t trade these moments for anything.

That said: the transition from student to veterinarian can be a bit of a shock to the system. It’s a sobering moment, when

you suddenly realize that *you are the one* who is supposed to have all the answers. If there’s one thing that I’d encourage new veterinary graduates to bear in mind, it’s this: If you’ve made it this far, you already have the tools you need to be a great vet. Imposter syndrome is a heck of a beast, but you’ve got this, Doc. I promise.