

What can't be taught

Ce qui ne s'enseigne pas

Dan Cartwright

When I was asked to write an article about surviving my first year of practice, I had to sit down with pen and paper (I am a neo-luddite and actually do prefer writing to typing), a cup of tea, and attempt to put into words 12 of the most transitional and challenging months of my life. It was a joy to look back on some moments of that first year, and a struggle to remember those memories that I had fervently tried to repress. All in all, I enjoyed flipping through the dusty pages of my memories of that year. Partly because it was so monumental and partly because I know I will never have to do it again.

The transition from student to doctor is years in the making and is made up of an undergraduate degree, hours of volunteer work, acceptance to vet school, and slogging through 4 years of lectures, labs, and tests. Keeping this in mind, the shift from scholar to practitioner still seemed to happen quite suddenly for me. On the Friday I was celebrating the end of school, the end of exams, and the joy of graduation. When Monday rolled around, I was standing in front of an older German shepherd dog collapsed on the floor, with pale gums and a quickly expanding belly. Beside the dog was a distraught owner in tears. This is a situation that cannot be taught in vet school. This is a situation that needs to be experienced so that you can learn from it. As C.S. Lewis wrote; "Experience: that most brutal of teachers. But you learn, my God do you learn." That is how I found the majority of my first 12 months as a veterinarian.

I am not saying that this "deer in headlights" feeling is what everyone experiences, or even that it is a common scenario. It was just how my first year was. Mind you, I think a portion of this was self-induced. In my 4th year of veterinary college, I chose to participate in a lot of clinical rotations that were considered outside the range of normal, everyday veterinary practice. I spent 1 month working in a zoo and another month working in a wildlife rehabilitation centre. I spent 2 weeks in northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories hopping between communities learning about the buffalo population, and working with the sled dog population. I also spent a month in Mexico, splitting my time between a leatherback sea turtle rescue organization, and a large scale poultry veterinary practice. I loved all of these experiences, and feel that I gained a lot from them; however, they did reduce the amount of time I had to

spend in traditional clinical rotations. In those first few weeks of practice after graduation, when I was presented with a cat that had not eaten in 2 weeks and which had icteric ears you could see from the parking lot, thinking back on my time spent assisting on a cardiac work-up of a silverback gorilla, or how we had done beach patrols to discourage poachers from taking sea turtle eggs, surprisingly did not help me. They need a font for sarcasm.

Those trying months were a struggle for me. Genetically, I don't like change. I come from a long line of change-haters. I can imagine a "Jebodiah Cartwright" in the 1700s, begrudgingly accepting the industrial revolution. Working with the steam engine, but pining for the days of animal labor. The key for me was to find and retain a support system. I was lucky, I had keys in place that helped me to survive and thrive. I had a great girlfriend at the time (who I now refer to as wife, and sometimes even "honey") who helped calm me down daily when I got home from work and lamented and ranted about my perceived shortcomings as a vet. I had excellent mentorship from the 2 clinic owners that I worked for. They were patient and generous with support and advice, and definitely played a big role in the vet that I have become. I also had interests outside of veterinary medicine. This was important. This was important. That's not a printing error, I wrote that twice for emphasis. If you don't have a supportive partner or good mentorship (and actually, even if you do), extracurricular activities are a must. I gardened, played hockey, made my own wine/beer, and cooked up a storm. I biked, played mini-golf, and refinished furniture. You need things to do outside of your job. You need a space in which to forget — to destress. You need to be you, a person, not you a veterinarian.

That first year was terrifying, rewarding, vomit-inducing, exhilarating, depressing, and joyous. Since then, I have come a long way. I have seen a lot that vet medicine has to offer. I have worked in a mixed practice, an emergency hospital, and a small animal day practice. I have learned a lot, and feel a lot more comfortable in my role as a health care provider for peoples' pets. I have done LDAs, colics, and calvings. I have done successful GDVs and resections and anastomosis. I have unblocked more cats than I can remember, and I have stabilized and sent home HBCs that presented cold and unresponsive. I have done a lot of things that I am very proud of, but my greatest veterinary accomplishment to date has been surviving my first year of clinical practice. For those of you reading this currently in your first year, or about to start your first year of practice, I have one piece of advice. You can do it. Stressful situations don't last forever. Even board-certified surgeons and internal medicine specialists had first day jitters. Persevere, and try and take something positive away from each day.

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