

Preparing tomorrow's vets

The Embryo Vet School was set up in 2005 to give schoolchildren a realistic view of what it is like to work in the veterinary profession. One of its directors, Tony Andrews, discusses its aims

TRADITIONALLY, there has been a strong demand for places at veterinary schools, despite an increase in student numbers and the establishment of Nottingham vet school.

In the distant past, many of those planning to study veterinary medicine had had exposure to farming, and were aware of the activities of veterinary surgeons on farm or at the local practice. Increased urbanisation of the population has meant that most wishing to enter the profession have limited knowledge of veterinary work except from work experience.

While work experience can be helpful, it is, at best, a snapshot of veterinary work and may exaggerate a glamorous side to the profession. This 'exciting' image has been perpetuated by a number of television programmes, from 'All Creatures Great and Small' through 'Vet School' to 'The Bionic Vet', with others in between. While these programmes help to sustain the good general image of the profession, they tend to make the career appear more exciting and less mundane than much of the day-to-day work actually is. It is, therefore, not surprising that many wishing to enter the profession may have a skewed impression as to what the profession does and what is involved.



This lack of exposure to veterinary work and rural or farm life prompted the creation of Embryo Veterinary School (EVS). Its aim was to give older schoolchildren an introduction to some of the realities of veterinary practice and show them what working with farm and companion animals is like. Another aim was to try to help them to determine whether they really did want to be a vet, while promoting farm animal practice as a career for those that did.

We felt that, with the increased education of farmers and the sophistication of approaches to animal health and preventive medicine, it was too late to expect most undergraduates to learn enough at veterinary school to give them the competence and confidence to enter large animal veterinary practice. The best way to tackle this was to create an interest in farm animals and allow them to obtain further experience before they entered university. Then, as undergraduates they could build on their experiences throughout their veterinary training.

The course

The course is held on a farm in Devon over a long weekend. It is intensive and has small numbers to allow a good staff-student ratio. This makes it relatively expensive to run, which is not helped by a lack of affordable local accommodation.

It is a mixture of practical sessions, group interactive exercises and didactic learning. Students are exposed to the main species of farm animals, including cattle, sheep, pigs and poultry, as well as companion animals – horses, dogs and cats. They learn to handle the animals and how to do certain routine tasks. They become involved in dissections, as well as seeing postmortem examinations. They are shown how their A level biology relates to the animals that they are dissecting and seeing at postmortem examination.

In the teaching periods, mention is made of different veterinary careers, with advice on being realistic about their expectations of the profession. Topics considered include the financial costs of studying veterinary medicine, alternative careers with animals, preparing to apply for veterinary school, the problems experienced by veterinary surgeons, and why some leave the profession or change career. The students also have the chance to hear from undergraduates who describe their experiences at college.

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At the end of the course, the attendees are invited to complete a questionnaire, and in return they receive a short report on their performance. This feedback is completed by all those involved in the course. It indicates how they have performed within the group, including their attitude, practical skills and dexterity, interaction with the rest of the group, communication skills, and so on.

Afterwards, they are encouraged to let the EVS know how they are getting on and,

when required, farm experience can be found and suitable veterinary practices can be contacted if some have had difficulties finding appropriate placements.

Since September 2005, 137 schoolchildren have been through the 12 courses, and according to the completed questionnaires, all have found the experience useful. Following the course, about 10 per cent have decided not to pursue a career in veterinary medicine. The reasons for this vary, but in many cases are

because they had not grasped the reality of what the profession does. Many have chosen to undertake other animal-related courses. The majority of EVS students are resolute and wish to pursue a veterinary career. About a third have kept in touch, and two-thirds of these have been accepted at or successfully entered veterinary college.

■ More information is available from www.embryoveterinaryschool.com or by e-mailing info@embryovets.co.uk.