Teaching the next generation

Dr Liz Mossop of the University of Nottingham, discusses the role practitioner colleagues have to play in training the next generation of veterinary surgeons and nurses.

Clinician, financial advisor, social worker, administrator, detective... There are a lot of different roles that a veterinary practitioner takes on in their work but it is likely that very few would list ‘teacher’ as one of their primary functions. Yet training more junior colleagues has always been a vital part of the responsibilities of veterinary staff. Vet students, new graduates and vet nurses rely on the wisdom and experience of the grassroots practitioner to provide much of their education, certainly more than those entering other professions.

So how can small animal practitioners become more proficient as educators when few if any of them have been taught how to teach? A first step would be to attend the session at BSAVA Congress next April where Dr Liz Mossop of the University of Nottingham will discuss the role of practitioner colleagues in training the next generation of vets and VNs.
Do all practitioners have the makings of a first-rate educator? “Yes, absolutely,” she says. “Developing their own teaching skills may not be something that would necessarily be a priority for every practitioner, but many of the qualities that we develop as vets are completely transferrable to the teaching environment. We have to be good communicators with our clients and colleagues, we have to listen and to manage our cases by providing feedback on what we see – we are doing these things all day, every day.”

A 2000 Edinburgh graduate, Liz developed her interest in teaching after helping to train nurses at her practice. She then applied to become a member of the academic staff at the Nottingham vet school when it enrolled its first cohort of students in September 2006.

“Improving your teaching simply means reflecting on those skills that a good vet uses every day and applying them to training their students. It isn’t difficult as vets are usually very enthusiastic about their job and are keen to pass on those skills to the next generation. It is also something that they will hopefully find enjoyable.

In her Congress presentation, Dr Mossop will be explaining the different theories about how people learn, noting that in the context of veterinary training, experiential learning is probably the most important. At its simplest, experiential learning means learning by doing but there is more to it than simply having the opportunity to carry out a particular procedure.

The learner should be fully briefed about what they are about to do and then allowed to reflect on their experience with feedback from the tutor. They can then decide whether to try a slightly different approach when presented with a similar case next time, she says. This process of preparation, action and reflection is something that is likely to be part of a practitioner’s daily routine around learners, even if only done informally. The difference between a good quality learning experience and a poor one is the amount of time and effort that may be invested into each stage, and this can be challenging in a busy clinical environment.

Dr Mossop emphasizes that learning is a two-way process and that a vet student should be as willing as the practice to ensure that they maximize each learning opportunity.

She says practitioner colleagues should not assume that the learning experiences of today’s students will be the same as the one that they went through as undergraduates. Ideas about the veterinary curriculum and how it should best be delivered have changed over the past 10 to 15 years. There is a greater emphasis at veterinary schools on their students acquiring practical and professional skills which means that goals of a student’s extramural studies may change. Nevertheless, workplace-based training is always challenging because both trainer and student have to try and achieve their goals against the background of a busy clinical practice and the competing demands of patients, clients and colleagues. Yet the education offered to nurses at most small animal practices is of an impressively high quality, she says.

Amongst both vet and vet nursing students there will be considerable individual variation in how and what they need to learn from their senior colleagues.

The take home message for anyone attending the session is to identify those individual differences, she says.

“The student has expectations of what they want to achieve from their training, as does the practice, the veterinary schools and the broader profession. So the important thing for any training session is to work out in advance what each side is hoping to achieve. If you talk about these goals and agree on how you want to achieve them, then you are going to develop a happier and more successful working relationship between the teacher and student.”

The basic approach to the in-practice training of veterinary nurses will be much the same as that of visiting students, although there are crucial differences. Trainee nurses will be present at the clinic for much longer blocks of time, and so there isn’t so much pressure to fit in training in specific tasks within a narrow window, as there would be for a visiting vet student. Trainee VN’s are also assigned a clinical supervisor to try to ensure that their training programme is properly structured and their training log records the acquisition of particular skills.

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For those practitioners who can’t make it to the ICC this year, there are plenty of other sources of information for practitioner colleagues on honing their skills as an educator. Each of the veterinary schools provide plenty of support for the practices where their students undertake extramural studies. Dr Mossop also recommends the BVA booklet on the subject available free of charge from the association’s website: https://www.bva.co.uk/Workplace-guidance/Practice-management/Extramural-studies—a-guide-for-practitioners/