

Flexible learning options for the degree MMedVet (Chir)

The article 'A comparison of the surgical caseloads of selected companion animal hospitals and a veterinary academic hospital in South Africa' by L J Van Niekerk, F J M Verstraete and J S J Odendaal, published in the *Journal of the South African Veterinary Association* (2002) 73(3): 115–118, refers.

It is not the intention of this letter to comment on the comparisons made in the article between the surgical caseloads seen at the Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital (OVAH), Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria, and a number of South African private veterinary practices. Changes at OVAH and in private practice in the intervening 12 years since the data in the article were recorded would in any case probably result in different conclusions being drawn at this point. We would, however, like to respond specifically to the last paragraph on page 118 of the article, which reads as follows:

With the graduation of specialist surgeons, the pet-owning public will demand higher standards of care. In this regard, it must be noted that most veterinarians who wish to become companion animal specialists, do so by acquiring their academic and practical training at a veterinary teaching institution. Acquiring specialist status while in practice, however, is fraught with difficulties at present. Practitioners find the allocation of time for study difficult, especially if this requires long periods away from a practice. We enter a plea for courses to be run in modular fashion, i.e. broken up into number of short periods, but adding up to the same total. Modern education should be flexible and

the constraints imposed by traditional course regulations should be softened to widen the availability of postgraduate education to all who wish to take advantage of it.

The current status with regard to the acquisition of the specialist degree MMedVet (Chir) (Small Animals) from the Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria at Onderstepoort, is as follows:

- Ancillary courses (Anatomy, Diagnostic Imaging, Anaesthesiology and Veterinary Research Methodology) can be done largely by specified self-study and the attendance of monthly seminars, tutorials and/or practicals.
- The theoretical component of the main course, Surgery 803, is again largely through specified self-study augmented by tutorials held monthly over a period of approximately 18 months.
- The practical and experiential components of the main course can either be done at OVAH as a full-time clinical assistant ('Resident'), lecturer or as a full-time, self-funded student. These individuals spend 30 weeks on clinic duty per annum for 3 years (total of 90 weeks) under the supervision of a registered specialist small animal surgeon. During this period the student is required to build up a case log of at least 400 cases with specified numbers of cases within 11 categories. Alternatively, the practical and experiential components of the main course can be done largely outside OVAH. 'External' students are required to do 22 weeks of

clinical work per annum for 3 years (66 weeks) at an approved private practice with an in-house registered specialist small animal surgeon. In addition they are required to do 8 weeks per annum for 3 years (24 weeks) at the OVAH Small Animal Surgery clinic as for the full-time OVAH students.

- The research component of the main course requires both internal and external students to plan, conduct and write-up a research project which can be done at, or outside, the OVAH. The project should, preferably, be based on one of the Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies' current research focus areas. In addition to the research and a dissertation, the student is required to produce for publication in a refereed journal at least 1 original research article (arising from the dissertation) and 1 other 1st-authored paper which may be either a case report or a review article.

Provision is therefore already in place for veterinarians wishing to specialise in small animal surgery to do so largely from outside the Faculty of Veterinary Science at Onderstepoort, albeit with the restriction of having to do so through an approved practice with a specialised small animal surgeon. Future development of telematic teaching materials for the theoretical components of the course will in time further expedite the flexible learning referred to by van Niekerk and his co-authors.

Any queries with regard to this letter should be directed to P H Turner.

P Bland-van den Berg^a, P Stadler^b and P H Turner^c*

^aDirector: Clinical Services, Onderstepoort Veterinary Academic Hospital, ^bHead: Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies,

^cSection Head: Small Animal Surgery, Department of Companion Animal Clinical Studies, Faculty of Veterinary Science, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X04, Onderstepoort, 0110 South Africa.

*Author for correspondence. Tel: (012) 529-8047; fax: (012) 529-8307; e-mail: phturner@op.up.ac.za