

# From the classics to veterinary nursing

*Susie Walton talks to Georgina Self about how she became a veterinary nurse*



## WHEN DID YOU FIRST BECOME INTERESTED IN VETERINARY NURSING AS A CAREER?

It took me 22 years to discover that veterinary nursing even existed. In 2003, when, as part of exploring my options to change my career path, I discovered UCD's Veterinary Nursing Programme outline. I had never heard of this career option before, and I was excited to read about all the skills and knowledge I could gain with this course and apply through a job in a veterinary practice.

I grew up in a beautiful but very rural part of West Wicklow. By the time I applied to UCD's Veterinary Nursing Programme, my knowledge of animals was limited to my experiences with my own dog, a few cats, weekly horse-riding lessons as a child and my own stubborn attempts to build a 'rapport' with any cattle or sheep I came across in our surrounding fields. My student experience, therefore, was one of the steepest learning curves I've ever embarked upon.

## WHAT TRAINING ROUTE DID YOU FOLLOW?

A very challenging one – but in my experience when you want something badly enough you do whatever it takes. UCD's admissions criteria for the then Veterinary Nursing Programme included one science subject or Home Economics at Leaving Certificate level. When I was choosing my subjects for the Leaving Certificate, my timetable options restricted me to choosing either Biology or Classical Studies. These were subjects I loved equally. Other science subjects or Home Economics weren't an option for me and so I made my choice to study classics. However, it meant that in order to apply to study Veterinary Nursing in UCD, I would need to either wait a further 24 months to be eligible for mature student entry, or use the interim period to get a science subject under my belt. At 22 years of age I enrolled for Leaving Certificate Biology and set to work.

Meanwhile, I reduced my working day so that I was earning

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a part-time salary while the rest of my day was spent applying myself to meeting the admissions criteria to study veterinary nursing – this involved seeking employment of 20 hours minimum per week in one of UCD's list of eligible veterinary practices. I was eventually successful in my attempts, and my student career began in a busy South Dublin small animal and exotics practice.

As soon as I completed Leaving Certificate Biology, I immediately submitted my application to UCD and I was admitted to the Veterinary Nursing Diploma on the first round of offers in August 2005. In June 2008, I graduated with distinction and two awards for my academic and practical work. That day was very special.

### WHAT CAREER PATH HAVE YOU SUBSEQUENTLY FOLLOWED?

From June 2008, I practiced full-time in UCD's Veterinary Hospital. Part of my job involved teaching the final year veterinary medicine students as well as student veterinary nurses who participated in rotations within the hospital disciplines as part of their respective programmes of study. I thrived in this teaching and learning environment, and began to carve my own niche in delivering structured lecture material to the BSc (VN) Programme as an occasional lecturer. Most of my experience as a practicing RVN was spent in the small animal disciplines. In September 2011, I successfully applied for a temporary contract, still in the same Veterinary School in UCD, but this time to cover the then BSc (VN) tutor's maternity leave full-time. This posed another significant learning curve, but one that I enjoyed so much that I was delighted when I had the opportunity to extend my contract within the veterinary nursing academic team. In July 2013, I successfully completed a Graduate Certificate in University Teaching and Learning through UCD. Just before Christmas 2013 I was delighted to receive news that I was successful in my application for permanency in my position as tutor for the BSc (VN) Programme in UCD.

### YOU'RE CURRENTLY ONE OF THE TEACHING STAFF ON THE VETERINARY NURSING DEGREE COURSE IN UCD. DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY.

As tutor for the BSc (VN) Programme, the main focus of my role involves a lot of contact time with veterinary nursing students at each stage of the four-year programme, as well as some contact time with veterinary medicine students. I deliver taught material through lectures, tutorials and practical classes across a range of the modules within the undergraduate programmes' syllabi. Each hour of teaching involves many hours of preparatory work – from updating slides to be delivered as lecture material to collecting equipment and setting up for practical demonstrations. Ultimately my role supports all aspects of the success of these programmes – from achieving and maintaining our accreditation status, assessment of student knowledge and practical abilities at each stage, assisting student queries, sourcing and maintaining equipment all the way to the many administrative tasks such as the various meetings that need to happen 'behind the scenes' in order to support the programmes' goals. Therefore my typical day really involves, as well as teaching students, juggling a variety of tasks and demands.

### WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE PART OF YOUR JOB?

My favourite part of my job isn't a duty or responsibility as such, it's a time of year – UCD's graduation ceremony in honour of the veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing graduates. Everything about that day means so much to me. I love the pomp and ceremony of the processions, and I feed off the incredible energy that surrounds the new graduates. There's such a well-earned sense of excitement, achievement, pride and anticipation during the day.

### WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO STAND FOR ELECTION FOR THE VETERINARY COUNCIL?

Ever since the Veterinary Practice Act 2005 came into effect, I've had my sights set on committing to serving a term on the Veterinary Council. The Act (2005) opened up a position on the council for any qualified veterinary nurse registered with the VCI in Ireland to fill. I feel that this commitment of my energy and experience is a meaningful contribution to the VN profession and the veterinary sector at large – it's my way of giving back to a profession that gives so much.

The last eight years of Melanie's term on the council have been pivotal in the significance of shaping the profession and navigating some of its most formative years. My decision to agree to put my name forward for election to Veterinary Council was not one I took lightly, however. I reflected on my career path, past and future, and identified that the next decade would be the most appropriate time for me to go for it. This was reached on the basis of years of experience, health status and age of my immediate family and ultimately the period of time during which I would be able to commit my energy to this role.

In September 2013, the Veterinary Council announced on its website that my nomination was successful, and it was a great honour to receive a letter recently from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine confirming that the Minister had ratified my appointment to the council.

### WHAT HOPES DO YOU HAVE FOR THE FUTURE OF VETERINARY NURSING DURING YOUR FOUR YEAR TERM?

Big ones – I truly believe the sky's the limit for veterinary nurses in Ireland. However I have to be realistic and deal with the most urgent issues for the profession during the four years. I do feel that the next decade is crucial for our profession and its development, and I am comfortable with upholding and championing the profession and its reputation not just through my work on the council, but through every aspect of my life.

My initial hopes are threefold: firstly, that the veterinary nursing profession will continue to grow and develop – both in terms of career opportunities for veterinary nurses here at home, and also in terms of opportunities for further study and specialisation. Secondly, that, in the fullness of time, we will move towards having our own Regulatory body for veterinary nurses in Ireland; and finally, that a framework is put in place to ensure adequate support and personal development for veterinary nurses, especially given the invariably pressurised and stressful nature of the job.