

Using very basic Chichewa, the local language, Eithne and the WVS team explain to kids and adults the danger of rabies so that their dogs (like this local's dog) can get checked.



Day-to-day diversity in mixed practice

Eithne Leahy, a mixed-animal vet in the midlands, tells Oonagh O'Mahony that, despite the long hours, veterinary practice is hugely rewarding

For the past two years, Eithne has been working at the Veterinary Centre in Mountmellick, Co Laois, a mixed veterinary practice. The clinic also services the surrounding counties of Offaly and Westmeath. She describes it as a very progressive practice but says it can be tough work, especially as working with large animals means vets aren't working typical nine-to-five hours. "Personally, I have always like mixed practice because of the variety of the work involved. I think it also comes down to personal taste and personality and whether you are happy working at three o'clock in the morning doing a C-section on a cow or working on a cat at nine in the morning. You are absolutely jumping from one species to the other, and you have to process a lot of different knowledge."

As well as working full time in Ireland, Eithne enjoys travelling with her work and volunteers abroad with the Worldwide Veterinary Service (WVS). "My boss is very understanding of my interest in overseas work and he allows me to pop off every so often for different stints, which is the most important thing that I can do within veterinary. I think if you can travel abroad and do anything that makes a difference, it is massively satisfying."

SPANISH INFLUENCE

Eithne says she always had an interest in animals and the natural world, which prompted her progression into the veterinary sector. She graduated as a vet in 2009 from

the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. "I have always had a massive interest in languages and I am fluent in Spanish and Catalan. I studied in Barcelona University. It was fantastic fun. Barcelona is a great city and Catalonia is a really interesting part of the country to live in. It was a brilliant facility outside of the city. It had a very large area that included its own farm and a big equine hospital." Eithne says it is difficult to compare the training and education in Ireland and Spain, as she has only experienced one system. However, from a veterinary practice point of view, she says: "Veterinary in Spain has become very specialised and there are not many places you can work across different areas, we still have that in this country. I think Ireland and the UK are the only places in Europe where true mixed practice still exists." She says that people she knows who have gone on to specialise are lucky to have an outlet in which to practise, in particular in large cities where they can operate in veterinary hospitals, and she believes Ireland will follow suit in time.

Eithne also believes that, as a whole, the veterinary profession in Ireland will have to move more in line with Europe in terms of its approach to service delivery and continuing veterinary education (CVE). She suggests there will need to be a more business-like approach within the sector. "Perhaps bringing everyone together instead of having lots of random, small clinics. The idea of co-ops would be fantastic to cover nights on call. It is going to be



ROLE AS AN NGO VET

Eithne is passionate about knowledge sharing and does so internationally through her voluntary work with the WVS, which has projects all over the world. It is a very well-organised non-governmental organisation (NGO) and it needs vets with skills on the ground, such as surgery skills." Eithne has been involved in a number of projects with the WVS in Thailand and Malawi and will travel to Armenia this new year. The idea is to provide vet services to vulnerable communities that wouldn't have the infrastructure to provide appropriate veterinary care. In Malawi, Eithne worked on a project to vaccinate dogs against rabies. "In the next 11 years they plan to have every dog vaccinated. It has been proven by studies in places like Sri Lanka, where rabies was a huge issue 11 years ago, that if you can vaccinate dogs and cats you are massively reducing the risk of rabies being transmitted from warm blooded mammals to humans. Rabies is a killer of humans in Africa and we forget about that in Europe because we vaccinate for rabies in Europe." Next year, Eithne will work at a training level for a new project in Armenia. "Because I have worked in numerous diverse projects overseas with WVS, I can now be responsible for start-up veterinary projects in countries like Armenia. I will be trying to set up links with universities and local dog shelters. This is to enable students that are studying at the universities to use the animals in the dog shelters as their patients and to get hands-on experience." Eithne says that there is great enthusiasm among the people she works with overseas to learn from her experience. "By working with people on the ground you are going to make the project more sustainable in the long term." In 2016, Eithne has a number of overseas projects in the pipeline and, she says, she is very lucky in her current role to be in a position to avail of the opportunity to work internationally and, she says, it is something she would encourage all vets to do. "It's phenomenal to get to go abroad and make such a difference. The people that you meet along the way are incredible. And, if you can do anything to make a change you should do it."



Malawi milking parlour.

slow to change but, with more women in the profession, potentially there will be an increased demand for maternity leave and a need for greater flexibility where people could job share and not always be based in one clinic." Additionally, Eithne believes we need to evolve if the profession is to progress, here in Ireland.

"CVE is fundamental to keeping us on top of our game and to keep the profession moving forward and up to date on recent advancements. If we are not educating ourselves, how can we be providing a good service? Allocating dedicated time and extra funds to attend CVE events, would be more beneficial for our younger members of the profession. Also, if CVE was more accessible for vets, this would help both practitioners and in turn, their patients, across the board."

Outside of her day-to-day duties within the veterinary practice, Eithne also contributes to a local radio station, offering advice. "They contacted me and asked me to contribute because they felt there was a lot of interest from listeners in veterinary issues, both in farming and small animals."