

# Finding the right balance

*Managing professional and family life can be a delicate balancing act for vets, but equine vet Andrea Ryan and her family seem to have found the right equation. She talks to Kennas Fitzsimons about dealing with unpredictability in working hours, the increasing feminisation of the profession, and the challenges facing practice in the future*



Andrea Ryan.

Andrea Ryan remembers the old UCD veterinary school in Ballsbridge, Dublin, having studied there from 1989 to 1994. While the two decades since her graduation have seen significant improvements in veterinary practice, according to Andrea, the fundamentals have remained the same. “I’ve been working as a vet for 20 years and I don’t think things have changed that much in that time, other than access to better equipment and therapies,” Andrea says. “But that might just be on the equine side of things. The horse doesn’t seem to be changing much over the years but thankfully our understanding of equine medicine has improved dramatically. As equine veterinary is predominantly about improving efficiency in the horse, whether reproductive or performance, new therapies and techniques are vital in keeping up to date.” Andrea describes herself as a horse person who happens to be a vet rather than a vet who happens to work with horses. “I was passionate about horses from a young age. I used to pretend I was the vet coming to attend my pony when I was in primary school. My older sister is also a vet and she influenced me and made me believe it was possible for me to take the same route.” Andrea is a partner in Kilcash Equine Clinic in Co Tipperary. She set up the practice in 2008 with her husband, Shane Ryan, who is also an equine vet. “We are well established, having both previously worked in

the Tipperary/Waterford/Kilkenny area,” Andrea says. “The practice is 100% equine and we have a particular interest in stud work, racing and sport horses. We also offer surgical procedures and do sales work. We employ one veterinary assistant and an office administrator.”

The bulk of the practice’s work involves performance-related problems such as respiratory problems and lameness in racehorses and sport horses. The practice also does a huge amount of stud work in the breeding season, which involves lots of repetition of routine reproductive techniques. “We also offer an emergency service and see plenty of sick foals and colicking horses – usually after hours!”

## UNPREDICTABILITY: THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

After-hours work is a feature of the profession, with the potential to significantly impact work/life balance, as readers of the *Veterinary Ireland Journal* will be aware. Balancing family and professional life can be a particular challenge for vets in practice, but it’s one that Andrea and husband Shane seem to have struck.

“I am lucky in that I am able to work part-time for a lot of the year and I can take time off when my children are out of school,” Andrea says. “Shane makes up for this shortfall by working longer hours and he does most of the after-hours outside of spring. This works well for us as we are a married couple who are in practice together. Not everyone has this luxury. Equine work is usually 8am to 6pm, five days a week, with a lot of weekend work in the spring and a rota of 1:2 or 1:3 for most equine vets.

“For me, the main challenge is the unpredictability of veterinary in terms of forward planning time off and family activities. In the off-peak season I can be quiet all morning and then get a call half an hour before I am going to do the school run. Veterinary would balance a lot better with family life if you could plan the calls to come in when you are free to work, but unfortunately that is the ‘nature of the beast’. This is perhaps less of an issue in large hospital-based practices and in small animal practice, where I imagine most of the animals are seen at set clinic times.

“I think mental health is a big concern in most work environments but veterinary has the added challenge of a lot of out-of-hours work. Compared to medical professionals that I know, vets still seem to do a lot more weekend and night work, and I think this is the major stressor for most vets. I think that positive mental health could be supported by vets working together rather than against each other and sharing out-of-hours and emergency work, thereby giving everyone a better quality of life.”



A tie-back procedure being performed by the team at Kilcash Equine Clinic.

### A FEMININE FUTURE?

Another imbalance that has garnered a lot of attention is the trend towards feminisation of the profession, with more female than male graduates coming out of universities. This, combined with an increase in output of veterinary graduates from at home and abroad, has made the future of the profession look a little uncertain, Andrea says.

“When I was at university the gender balance was 50:50, which was ideal. I think female graduates have a huge amount to offer to the profession, but the high level of out-of-hours work, combined with the manual nature of the job, can mean that female vets are less likely to work in practice as long as their male counterparts. This will create a problem in years to come and I think measures need to be taken to address this issue now. Also, it is a recognised problem that females in the workforce in general don’t get paid as well as their male colleagues for doing the same job, so a feminisation of the profession may reduce the overall pay rates for vets and result in a race to the bottom of the professions.”

One of the strengths of the profession as a whole, Andrea says, is its genuine commitment to caring for animals and an ability to work hard that many other professions would be proud of. She feels there are career opportunities in Ireland in terms of food safety and also in small animal practice in responding to a growing urbanisation of the Irish population. In equine practice, an increase in the profile of the Irish horse, both in the thoroughbred and non-thoroughbred industry, has created opportunities, she adds.

Andrea believes the veterinary profession is held in high esteem by the public: “I think the Irish public have a good view of vets and see them as more caring than some of the other professions. I often hear people say, when they are complaining about the health system, that their loved ones would get ‘better looked after at the vet’s!’”

### A PRACTICAL APPROACH

However, she identifies a lack of business acumen and a tendency for practices to compete aggressively against each

other as weaknesses within the profession.

“I would like to see a much bigger emphasis on the business side of veterinary being taught at university and at CVE level, as this is an area that vets are traditionally bad at. A lot of clients seem to be under the impression that veterinary is a hobby, and if the profession could be more business-orientated then this attitude might change.”

Andrea also sounds a note of caution on the implementation of regulations. While she feels that regulation with regard to veterinary practices and animal welfare is to be welcomed, she believes that the overall impact of the animal remedies legislation on her practice has been negative, as much of the regulations – as they currently stand – are very difficult to implement.

“While I think the overall concepts of prescriptions and control of medicines are worthy, the legislation is impractical in its current form.

“I think the main threat [to the profession] in the short term relates to ever-increasing EU regulations, which are often unavailing but which can make day-to-day life in practice hard. In the long term, the feminisation of the profession and competition from non-vets for work such as dentistry, scanning cows and so on is a significant threat.”

What advice would Andrea give to a young graduate setting out on their professional career today?

“I think I would advise a young veterinary graduate to travel and work abroad when starting out, as it broadens one’s outlook on veterinary as a whole. Also, I would suggest that young vets choose their first job carefully, as new graduates can be easily put off by an unsuitable job early in their career.

“Although there are days when I wonder why I didn’t become a doctor or a pharmacist and pursue my interest in horses as a hobby, my overall feeling towards veterinary is positive. I like what I do for the most part and, although being a vet and a mother can be a challenge, I try to be living proof to my daughters that you should pursue the career of your choice and make your life work around it. Veterinary can be a rollercoaster of a job, but the good days make it worth it.”