

From Kanturk to Budapest... and back again

With a family heritage in farming and veterinary medicine, Eamon O Floinn had his sights set on a career as a vet from an early age. He tells Kennas Fitzsimons about his journey to get there



Eamon O Floinn DVM MRCVS.

Eamon O Floinn works in a three-vet practice in Kanturk, Co Cork, with his father, Michael, and colleague, Breeda Fitzpatrick. It's a mixed practice, with a case load consisting of around 60% large animal, 20% equine and 20% small animal. With a family heritage in animal husbandry – both grandfathers were farmers – it was always on the cards that Eamon would follow in his father's footsteps into practice in north Cork. However, he took his own route to get there – via Budapest, Hungary, and a degree in veterinary medicine from Szent István University.

"I've had three primary role models in my life whose influence guided me to where I am today professionally," Eamon says. "These are my two grandfathers – Sean Horgan and Mikie O'Flynn – both of whom were farmers, and my

father, who is a vet. My mother recalls me, as a seven-year-old, telling a relation who asked what I would be when I grew up that I wanted to be 'a farmer like my two granddads and a vet like dad'! As the years passed I grew even more resolute in my desire to follow this career path.

"The year I did my Leaving Cert, I heard about the possibility of studying veterinary medicine in Budapest," Eamon adds. "As a fall-back or safeguard, so to speak, I made contact with Tim O'Leary, a practising vet in west Cork who is the Irish representative for Szent István University. I have always believed in the 'belt and braces approach' in life! I took a very rigorous exam, followed by a challenging interview.

"I was adamant that I wouldn't repeat the Leaving Cert, if required, so I was greatly relieved to receive an offer of a place in Budapest prior to the results being released. I missed veterinary medicine in Dublin by five points and, as I had already accepted the place in Budapest, I left excitedly in 2005 to begin a new chapter in my life."

DESTINATION BUDAPEST

So began what Eamon describes as five-and-a-half very happy and productive years on the banks of the Danube. While there were challenges – Eamon was 19 when he arrived in a strange country where most natives had little, if any, English – studying in a foreign country proved to be a hugely enriching experience.

"I was fortunate to meet up immediately with another Irish student and his Scottish classmate who were nearing completion of the veterinary medicine degree in Szent István. They made the transition very easy and enjoyable for me, and quickly inducted me into the culture, academic expectations and social scene.

"The student community became like a second home to all of us. It's amazing how people rally round to support each other in unfamiliar situations. The help could range from offering someone a room or place to stay, to giving them the info on lecturers or exam technique, to sharing notes, and so on. I often imagine that when Irish people emigrated, for example to the US in my great-grandparents' time, that this is the type of practice one often hears about from visiting relations." Of course, things have changed for the Irish diaspora since then. Coming back to Ireland on frequent visits meant that Eamon was able to stay in touch with community life at home.

"Most of my placements across the five years of study were done in Ireland or Germany and, thanks to Aer Lingus and Ryanair, I was able to come home a few times a year."

A EUROPEAN FOCUS

Eamon is interested in all aspects of veterinary medicine but has a special interest in bovine and equine work, particularly bovine fertility work, which he researched for his final-year dissertation. Academic life in Hungary gave Eamon a solid foundation for his career back in Ireland, he says. The curriculum was tailored to the requirements of a career in the EU, he explains.

“In my opinion, the programme is excellent. It gave me a critical understanding of all aspects of veterinary medicine and excellent research skills. All regulations and practices, etc, regarding animal welfare were the same as in Ireland as we followed EU guidelines and regulations. In our final year we actually had to do a complete module on State veterinary medicine, which incorporated all EU regulations and legislation. After our final-year exams and before graduation, we were required to take and pass the State exams in epidemiology, food hygiene and State veterinary medicine. “The lecturers were a seriously hard-working, committed and dedicated group of academics with very high standards and expectations. Most spoke Hungarian, German and English, as there were three concurrent programmes. “There is a huge emphasis in Hungary on oral exam and oral defence of one’s work. In the beginning this was a significant challenge, as I had only ever before done a couple of orals – in Irish and French! However, I adjusted. The main problem with oral exams is that there is little room for error – the examiner can take you in any direction with any topic at a second’s notice. I now realise that this was a huge bonus for me as an aspirant professional. I learned to be prepared for any eventuality. It has stood me in good stead since.

“Studying in a foreign country, for me, was a hugely enriching experience. It cost more than a degree in Dublin would have cost, but the gains were immense. I now have friends in many corners of the world; I have enjoyed living in a cosmopolitan, diverse, culturally exquisite city where I was afforded many kindnesses.

“It was also there that I met my fiancée, who is also a vet, which helps as she understands the nature of this profession – I find that, being self-employed, while challenging with respect to regular hours or routine, can also afford one a flexibility which other jobs can’t.”

PROFESSIONAL LIFE

Flexibility at the expense of regularity, therefore, is the working vet’s lot, Eamon says.

“My father and I share the out-of-hours work, every second night and every second weekend. We generally work a six-day week from nine o’clock in the morning until six in the evening, but mornings usually start earlier and evenings finish later, especially in Spring.”

With veterinary medicine in the family, the professional life of a vet didn’t come as any great surprise to Eamon.

“Since childhood, I absorbed the routine – or lack thereof – of being a vet in rural Ireland in a mixed practice. I often accompanied my father on calls as a child and loved meeting clients and engaging in the discussions and banter. Doing this myself now has all the familiarity of coming home.”



Eamon pictured with farmer, James O Regan.

Having his father as a mentor has been of huge benefit, Eamon says.

“I was most fortunate to have had the experience of my father, both during my study and placement and also since qualification. This support is invaluable as all young practitioners at some time or another face challenging situations that can be daunting. Many fear asking for advice lest they be deemed incompetent by employers. Therefore, I think that all newly qualified vets should have a mentor (ideally in their practice) – someone they can go to for advice and/or support if required. This might rarely be needed, but it is nice to feel that a colleague can be consulted.”

In terms of career opportunities for vets, Eamon is upbeat.

“There are always positions advertised in the *Veterinary Ireland Journal*. The veterinary profession is ever-evolving, for instance with milk quota abolition, herd health gaining more prominence, new technologies to aid in diagnosis. Most of the Irish graduates from my year are employed in Ireland, while the rest are in the UK.”

Eamon’s advice to young people considering becoming a vet?

“Get plenty of experience, for example in transition year and at weekends, in a variety of settings. Spring in a mixed practice is usually a good gauge of one’s level of interest, commitment and suitability.

“Then, if it’s for you, go for it.”