

# Creating connections

Dr Michael Doherty, dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine, University College Dublin and professor of veterinary clinical studies, discusses his influential Inishowen beginnings with Shauna Rahman, and his journey along the road to the dean's office



Although a self-described son of Derry City and the Inishowen Peninsula, Michael Doherty was actually born in Tanzania, East Africa. Michael's mother, Margaret was also a native of Derry City and his father, Michael, from Donegal. "For six years my father worked as a field veterinary technician in Tanzania during the Rinderpest eradication campaign in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Significantly, in 2011, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced the eradication of this terrible cattle plague.

"My early interest in working with animals was borne out of the romance of the family connection with East Africa and pouring over my father's photographic collection, which included many of the wonderful wildlife and the stunning beauty of the Ngorongoro Conservation Area," he says. "The fond Tanzanian memories were reawakened during my final year at Edinburgh University, where I studied veterinary medicine for five years. I was taking part in a clinical parasitology class being delivered by Dr John Hammond. During a benchside conversation, he revealed that he was one of my father's closest friends when they were both working in East Africa and, through the years, had lost contact. It was wonderful, that after more than 20 years, they were able to reconnect at my graduation."

## HERD HEALTH: THE FORMATIVE YEARS

Large animal veterinary medicine is rooted in Michael's DNA. His grandfather, Edward, was a sheep and cattle dealer from

Buncrana, Co Donegal. "My father had a real interest in animal health but it was a different time and I was very lucky to avail of educational opportunities that were not available to his generation. Within our own sheep flock, my father and I would meticulously record health data (by hand) around lambing time, which stimulated my interest in becoming a vet.

"After graduating from the Edinburgh's veterinary school, my very first job was in small animal practice in Southend in England. It was an established veterinary hospital, with all the modern equipment, veterinary nurses and laboratories. I enjoyed it but missed the wide open spaces of the countryside, the mental space between calls and being part of the fabric of a rural community."

After this sojourn in Essex, Michael returned to the Inishowen Peninsula, Co Donegal, where he worked in a mainly large animal practice, owned by Jim McCarroll, who, Michael says, was an important mentor for him.

"Jim was a very supportive colleague and an excellent clinician; he was one of the first vets to build a farm animal hospital in Ireland.

"After almost three years in Inishowen, where the practice base was mainly beef herds and sheep, I had an opportunity to take up a post at the University of Glasgow's veterinary school teaching practice based in Lanarkshire in Scotland. This afforded me the chance to experience predominantly dairy practice.

## I INTERVIEW

"While there, I upskilled in dairy herd health including the computerised management of data, the use of ultrasound, etc., which was really only beginning in the 1980s. This was a very formative time for me as I was working in a large animal practice, learning about herd health, teaching students and conducting clinical research with academics in the Glasgow veterinary school and the Scottish Agricultural College. The prospect of developing a similar career, which married clinical teaching and research at University College Dublin (UCD) was one that I couldn't resist and when I saw the position advertised in the *Veterinary Record*, I knew I had to apply."

### ACADEMIA AND SHEEP SPECIALISATION

In 1986, Michael began his full academic career working alongside close friend and mentor, Michael Monaghan, in the late Professor Dan Collin's Department at the UCD Veterinary School in Ballsbridge. While there, he worked in the farm animal academic department, where he ran an ambulatory practice taking students to Raef Warner's veterinary practice in Athboy, Co Meath. This exposed them to day-to-day, first-opinion cases, such as calvings and outbreaks of respiratory disease in calves, which served as perfect on-farm tutorials. As an Irish speaker, Michael was delighted that the practice included a client base in Rath Chairn, a Gaeltacht area.

"Depending on the competency of the students with Irish, we had great fun," he says.

At this time, Michael also taught sheep health as a clinical and academic subject. "Dr Anne Healy and I, along with fellow UCD colleagues, conducted significant research during the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) outbreak in the late 1990s. There was a large, European-funded framework research programme looking at scrapie in sheep, which involved colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, UCD and several partners in continental Europe," he said.

In response to the demands of a rapidly changing agricultural industry, Michael's career emphasis moved back to dairy herd health which culminated in his appointment as president of the European College of Bovine Health Management in 2008. However, in 2014, a more personal and special honour was posted through his letterbox. "When I received the letter confirming that I had become European Specialist in Sheep Health, recognised by the European College of Small Ruminant Health Management, I felt a deep sense of pride and connection with my father, Michael, and uncle, Colm, and the time spent lambing in Inishowen. I am delighted that I can continue with my sheep health teaching and explore clinical research in flock health."

### KNOWLEDGE EXPLOSION

*Since becoming dean on September 1 and having worked in UCD for over 30 years now, what are the significant developments to have come to Michael's attention in the veterinary school?*

The knowledge explosion allied to the development of the worldwide web, has been the real phenomenon, says Michael. This has significant implications for teaching veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing.



"When I graduated, veterinary medicine was a five-year programme and today it remains a five-year programme, but the amount of knowledge generated over the past 20 years right across the vet programme, but particularly in small animal medicine and surgery, oncology, diagnostic imaging, etc., is quite extraordinary. The level of sophistication in many cases is similar to human medicine.

"Therefore, one of the major challenges faced by veterinary schools today is managing that knowledge. In the context of delivering 'day one competencies' and avoiding dreadful 'curriculum cramming' and student overload. We need to ask ourselves, do we need to deliver as much sophistication across all the veterinary specialities? This is something as a School we keep to the forefront as we embark on the next stage of curriculum review of the MVB programme."

The expansion of professional specialisation has also been a very significant development, says Michael. "There are 25 European Board of Veterinary Specialisation (EBVS) specialist colleges containing European specialists in many clinical specialities. These include bovine, porcine and

small ruminant health management, diagnostic imaging, surgery, and reproduction. There is also a move towards the 'middle tier' and encouraging the development of our online graduate certificate programmes in dairy herd health, small animal medicine and equine sports medicine being awarded 'advanced practitioner' status by the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS)," he said.

Another significant change, Michael continued, is the shift in gender balance. "If you consider Aleen Isobel Cust, the first female veterinary surgeon to be recognised by the RCVS in 1922, and the difficulties she overcame to become a successful veterinarian, and how many women today are choosing this profession as a career, compared to men, it is a very positive story. The international evidence on the ratio of males to females studying veterinary medicine now shows males under-represented.

"Unfortunately, there has been very little analysis of this, although there is evidence that the imbalance in the gender ratio is similar when one looks at the cohort actually applying for vet school. The question is why? And more research is needed to allow us understand why fewer males are applying to study veterinary medicine."

Michael is married to Dr Cliona Skelly, European specialist in diagnostic imaging and assistant professor in the UCD Veterinary Hospital, and has five children Sadhbh, Elinor, Aifric, Micheál and Colm. Two of his daughters are studying medicine at UCD. "Although equally demanding and very competitive, there is a clear post-graduation career structure in their UCD Medicine Degree course, which is something that we as a profession should reflect upon.

"In this regard, there have been two very important reports published recently, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe (FVE) survey of the veterinary profession in Europe, which was published in 2015 and the *British Veterinary Association (BVA)/RCVS Vet Futures Action Plan 2016-2020*. The FVE study provides invaluable data regarding the employment situation of almost 250,000 veterinarians working in 24 European countries.

"*Vet Futures* addresses key issues around 'one health' – the sustainability of the veterinary profession; dealing with animal welfare; the wider role of vets in society; mental health and wellbeing; and leadership."

### THREAD OF CONTINUITY AND SUPPORT

The school vision includes a supportive thread of continuity between the undergraduate programme and a successful, satisfying career post-graduation. "The introduction by my predecessor, Professor Grace Mulcahy of the Alumni Mentoring Programme for new veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing graduates in 2016/2017, has been a very positive development.

"Our successful online graduate certificate programmes in dairy herd health, small animal medicine and equine sports medicine also contribute to the creation of a sustainable community of learning after graduation. This contributes to the continuing theme of mentoring and supporting one and other, a theme which begins in the very first year of the veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing programmes," he said.

### CONNECTED COMMUNITIES

"We are also working to integrate, as closely as possible, the vet hospital community with the preclinical community at the School. We have started an informal lunchtime clinical club, 'vet hospital to vet sciences', where hospital clinicians deliver interesting case reports.

"This allows our early-stage students of veterinary medicine and veterinary nursing exposure to clinical cases, as well as to our excellent young clinical team as role models; it also facilitates important research connections between clinicians in the hospital and researchers in the veterinary science building."

### MIND OVER MATTER

Michael says the openness about mental health is also a very significant societal development and the vet school places great emphasis on 'mind matters' and supporting one and other.

The School's student adviser, Dr Niamh Nestor, works closely with the student groups to improve social interaction and provide guidance when needed.

"For me, I am looking forward to building on our existing connections at the School and encourage my colleagues and students to continue to create solid connections throughout their UCD Veterinary School experience!"

