

Thirty years in practice

Pete Wedderburn is one of the best-known vets in Ireland. He's probably done as much as anyone to raise the profile of the profession in this country, by communicating key messages on animal health to the public and by advocating for animal welfare in the media. He shares his thoughts on the changing landscape for veterinary practice in Ireland with Kennas Fitzsimons



Pete Wedderburn. Photo: Wet Nose Studio.

It's a year of anniversaries for Pete Wedderburn. The year 2015 marks 30 years since his graduation from the University of Edinburgh, and 20 years since he became a partner at Brayvet, a busy companion animal practice in Bray, Co Wicklow. Pete joined the practice four years previously when he moved from Scotland to Ireland in 1991. The three decades since Pete joined the ranks of the profession have seen significant changes to veterinary practice in Ireland.

"There are far more rules and regulations than when I started out," Pete says. "Our working arena has been 'regularised' which, largely, is a good thing.

"The profession has become feminised, with new challenges as we all become accustomed to the change in our gender roles. While some women choose to take career breaks to have children, some men choose to become stay-at-home dads to allow their partners to continue working."

THE MODERN LANDSCAPE

With the increasing trend to recognise pets as part of the family, people are prepared to go the extra mile to care for them when they are unwell, Pete says. "Pet insurance has become almost 'normal', allowing pet owners to afford better care for those cases that deserve it. And there is more use of technology in practice, such as digital imaging, in-house laboratories, computerised veterinary records and microchips."

Not to mention the steady raft of veterinary-related legislation over the past decade. How has this legislation impacted upon companion animal veterinary practice? "While it is true that a level of annoying bureaucracy has been added to veterinary practice, I see it as a necessary part of being involved in business in the 21st century," Pete says. "We need to comply, and be seen to comply, with a wide range of rules and restrictions. We have seen the alternative in the past; although people may have largely meant well, there were temptations for corners to be cut in ways that could have negative consequences. When you need to stick to strict rules, it keeps everyone on the straight and narrow, and it does work for the general betterment of society."

The increased recognition that vets need to maintain regular professional development led to continuing veterinary education (CVE) becoming mandatory in Ireland in 2012. "This used to be the realm of the few dedicated and passionate practitioners among us: it has now become normal. This has been a positive, effective change," Pete says. "The days of 'garage vets' have been consigned to the past, and we can now stand over a profession that is genuinely up to date with advances in our spheres of professional work." The pharmaceutical landscape for veterinary practice has also altered significantly over the years. The number of companies supplying veterinary products and medicines has reduced dramatically, with a small number now having a large market share. What impact has this had on veterinary practice?

"I yearn for the days when vets could decide on the medicine needed, get hold of it from wherever (manufacturer, wholesaler, local pharmacy) and supply it for the patient under their care," Pete says. "I can see that the increased regulation of medicines was needed, for various reasons (including food safety, return of investment for manufacturers getting licences for dogs/cats) but it limits flexibility in treatment options for vets. I envy the US approach where compounding pharmacists can put anything the vet chooses into a capsule."

“The current situation favours mass production of a small number of products. This seems more commercially effective for the bigger manufacturers, but it is not as helpful for less common individual cases that would benefit from a more nuanced approach to their treatment.”

WORK/LIFE BALANCE

The advent of shared after-hours rotas or, in some urban areas (eg. Dublin), dedicated emergency clinics, has been the single most important change in companion animal veterinary practice over the past 30 years, Pete says. “Farm animal practice has a bigger challenge to find an effective way to manage the stress of after-hours work for vets, but in the companion animal world, co-operation between practices has meant that we are now far more efficient at carrying this burden on many shoulders rather than each having to do it on our own.”

With the number of hours involved in practice, work/life balance is undoubtedly a major issue for vets throughout the country.

“Many vet clinics seem to be open from 8am to 8pm. If vets are not careful about how they schedule their lives, this can mean working almost 12 hours a day, or over 60 hours a week. My own clinic has always been disciplined about insisting that each vet has a full half day, at least once a week. It is just not sustainable to work long hours for months and years.

“For myself, I have reduced my working hours at the clinic from 50 hours a week to less than 20. Previously, I was trying to work full time as well as completing my media commitments, but the stress began to affect my mental health in small ways (tiredness, lack of enthusiasm, etc.). When my doctor threatened to put me onto antidepressant medication if I didn’t alter my schedule, I had a radical rethink. When I started to work a more balanced life, my normal energy returned, thank goodness.”

Mental health is a huge issue that is often not recognised, Pete says.

“Major stressors are long working hours, the challenge of emotional pet owners and difficult cases, and the burden of carrying out euthanasias, with all that they entail. Every arm of our profession needs to be sensitive to our colleagues’ daily stresses, and aware of the need to look after this aspect of our health as a profession.”

Pete says his media work has, over time, become his main professional calling. He highlights the importance of engaging responsibly with the media, and ensuring the voice of the profession is heard.

“As vets, we still command automatic respect as ‘animal experts’, and people listen to what we say,” Pete says. “Our training and professional ethics mean that our voice is listened to, and we are still seen as reasonably independent and objective. We can make a difference by engaging

responsibly with the media. For me, the commitment to care for animals has moved from just the consulting room (which I now do only three to four hours a day) to the media, which now means TV, radio, print, but also social media. It is not always easy to earn a living from the world of mass communications, but it’s what I enjoy doing, and I have always lived by the maxim, ‘do what you love and the money will follow.’ It usually does (but more slowly and less predictably than you’d like!).

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Pete identifies the bright, intelligent and energetic individuals who work in veterinary medicine as a key strength of the profession, but says he worries about the future, largely because he foresees increasing commodification of the veterinary profession.

“The trend is towards coporatisation, with shareholders owning vet clinics, and the focus being towards profits and away from the traditional vocational calling. The changing profile of the profession, combined with 21st-century attitudes to work, means that there is an increased tendency for vets to want to take career breaks (eg. to care for children) and perhaps to work part time. There’s nothing wrong with this, but it creates a bias away from the traditional ‘young vet becomes a partner’ towards ‘vet working as a long-term employee’. When this happens, there is a risk of vets losing power in the workplace, and having to work to sales targets, perhaps using products and procedures that they would not choose. For me, the sense of control that I have in my own workplace is a major factor in my own job satisfaction. I fear that many vets in the future will lose this sense of control, becoming cogs in a bigger machine.”

What critical piece of advice would Pete give to a young veterinary graduate just setting out on their veterinary career? “Go ahead and get good quality experience of life in practice, but work at the same time to get yourself a special skill, such as an extra qualification in an aspect of your profession (be it imaging, dermatology, or whatever). And focus on a balanced life from the start. It is tempting to dive in to work with all of your time and energy, but your career is a marathon, not a sprint.

“Veterinary Ireland is a key part of our profession, nationally and internationally. Much of the work done by VI happens behind the scenes, but it makes a big difference. My extra piece of advice to all young vets would be: become a member, and as well as that, become a volunteer for the organisation. Our profession is us, and if we don’t use our individual voices via our professional body, we will not be heard, and we cannot make a difference.”

If he had his time over again, would Pete still follow a veterinary career?

“Yes. It’s my calling. I knew I wanted to be a vet by the age of five years. I cannot imagine doing anything else.”