

## International Women's Day: Our Clinical Leads share their experiences of working in the veterinary professions

**Pam Mosedale BVetMed FRCVS, Sally Everitt BVSc PhD MRCVS and Fiona Lovatt BVSc DSHP PhD DipECSRHM FHEA FRCVS**

RCVS Knowledge:

Hello, and welcome to For The Record, a podcast series from RCVS Knowledge. For The Record features conversations between current and former members of the veterinary professions, highlighting voices and experiences historically underrepresented in our official archive. In this episode in celebration of International Women's Day, we speak to our Clinical Leads Pam Mosedale, Sally Everitt and Fiona Lovatt about their careers in the veterinary professions.

Pam Mosedale:

It's great today that in recognition of International Women's Day, I'm really excited to be talking to two of my other colleagues from RCVS Knowledge about women in the veterinary profession and our experiences. Sally, would you like to introduce yourself first of all?

Sally Everitt:

Hi, I'm Sally Everitt. I qualified from Bristol University in 1981 and spent most of my time in predominantly small animal practice. But later in my career I've done a range of things including getting a PhD, looking at clinical decision making in the veterinary profession, working as the head of scientific policy at BSAVA and now doing some work providing clinical support to RCVS Knowledge on the library and information services.

Pam Mosedale:

Lovely. Fiona?

Fiona Lovatt:

I'm Fiona Lovatt. I graduated also from Bristol in 1995. I came up north to Teesdale, worked in mixed practice for just a couple of years and then went solely farm work. I mainly worked with cattle and sheep and then I specialized in sheep in 2012 and I've worked for myself since then doing second opinion stuff. And I do a bit at the university as well.

Pam Mosedale:

And me, I'm Pam Mosedale. I qualified in 1979 from RVC, not from Bristol, and I worked in mixed practice in Yorkshire and in Cheshire for quite a few years. And then I moved into

small animal practice and then I moved back to mixed practice again briefly when I became a partner in a practice. But that practice then became a small animal practice. My career has been predominantly small animal practice. I've also worked in New Zealand doing embryo transfer in angora goats briefly. And I was lead assessor for RCVS practice standard scheme for a while. And now I too help out at RCVS Knowledge with some of the quality improvement work. What we're going to talk about I think is our experiences of being a woman in the veterinary profession, whether they be good, bad, or indifferent really. Sally, do you want to start the ball rolling?

Sally Everitt:

Yes. I suppose my time in the veterinary profession has been quite related along the changes in terms of feminization of the profession because I went to Bristol in 1976, just after the Sex Discrimination Act had come in. And at that time, Bristol and Cambridge were under threat of closure. They were looking at increasing the numbers and the Sex Discrimination Act meant that they couldn't discriminate against women theoretically. And I was told by several of our lecturers that the women were there to make up the numbers because that way the university could stay open, but we wouldn't take the jobs from the boys. Having said that, I've worked almost, apart from two years when my daughter was born, I've worked in the veterinary profession ever since. I'm not sure that quite worked out as they were expecting.

Pam Mosedale:

Fiona?

Fiona Lovatt:

For me, coming up to northeast England, I was a second female vet within the practice doing farm work and Rachel, who'd worked before me, had made a good impression on the farmers. They used to arrive at farm and people go, "The lady vets here," you were never the vet, you were always the lady vet, but I think they used to call me the posh one with the curly hair. It was more that I was a southerner than I was female, I think. But they couldn't understand my accent. They didn't think that anyone came from, there weren't any southern vet schools or the previous vets up here had been from Edinburgh or Glasgow.

And they weren't totally convinced I'd done an actual degree having come from the south. But I think as you go onto a farm, even if initially there'd be some scepticism because you only have to do one job, the second visit is totally accepted. Once you've done one job, then it's like, "Actually she knows what she's doing. This is going to be fine." And I worked in the practice for over 20 years and so many of my friends are still local farmers, works really well.

Pam Mosedale:

That's a coincidence Fiona because the practice that I worked in and the mixed practice I worked in, I was actually the second woman vet there, they obviously were a little bit more, it was a little bit further south in Yorkshire, they must have been a bit more advanced. But the first lady who'd worked there, she'd only been there for a very short time. There was still a lot of farms that I went to where I was the first female vet they'd seen. And you're right, I got people going, "Have you come for some hay for your pony, dear?" At a few places. But I

have to say we had a couple of farmers who were awkward and I remember driving to one late at night to do a calving and he'd always said, "Don't send any women vets." And I was really, really stressed.

But once I'd been there, luckily it was relatively easy calving. Once I'd done that, that was fine. As you say, you were accepted as part of the community. But the funny thing for me for that practice, and it was a lovely practice, I have to say, a really lovely practice. And after four years I decided to move on and I told the partners that, and there was a farm vet partner, the main person who ran the farm side of the practice who was lovely. And he said to me, "No, we're really sad that you are leaving. If you'd been a man, we'd have offered you a partnership." And actually after the shock wore off, I decided to take it as a compliment because the fact that they actually thought that because it was so far away from their way of thinking at that time, the whole of society at that time, and this was in 1983, the whole society was much more of a male dominated society, wasn't it, Sally?

Sally Everitt:

Absolutely. And I think the fact that everybody, clients and everything had to change. And it wasn't just farmers, even within small animal practice, and I would say possibly more the female clients than the male clients were resistant to seeing a female vet. And for years, well into my thirties, if we had a male student seeing practice, they would almost always talk to the student rather than me, just because they assume they walk into the room and they see a man and a woman and they just make the assumption that he's the vet and you are the assistant. Once you get gray hair, you can get past that one but in the early stages that was.

Pam Mosedale:

You're absolutely right. And after I left there and did a few other things and then decided a few years later that I wanted to get a partnership in practice and I started to apply for some roles that involve partnerships. And I can remember one of them where they said to me, "You just want to be a salaried partner, wouldn't you?" And I went, "No, I thought this was actually a full partnership." "No, it's just a salaried partnership." I didn't get the job and a really good friend of mine got that job and I knew afterwards it was a full partnership. They just were never going to give that to a woman. And then I did become a partner in a practice and that was fine, but it was harder I think, unless for some women who were maybe married to male vets, then they would become equal partners in the practice. But it was harder. There weren't so many women who'd become partners by themselves really.

Sally Everitt:

I think that goes back to some of the other expectations and differences in society at that time. And we were mentioning about how there was an expectation you would have a spouse that would be there to answer the phone. We didn't have mobile phones initially. I can remember 1987, 88, I was in a practice and we got our first mobile phone, which was literally the size of a car battery, which you could carry around, but it did mean you could go out while you were on call or you could leave the house and take it with you to the surgery. But when we graduated, there was certainly practices, they expected somebody to answer the phone when you took your job. That tended to, there was an assumption that they might be a man with a wife who would do it because even if you had a husband, they didn't think he would stay at home and answer the phone for you.

Fiona Lovatt:

In job adverts, it was always for a married vet because a married man would have a wife and obviously that would be her role to answer the phone.

Pam Mosedale:

As for those questions, sometimes the interviews that might not be totally, they'd be slightly hidden the questions, but they were really asking you if you're intending to have children.

Sally Everitt:

They weren't hidden in my case, I can remember them being really quite explicit.

Fiona Lovatt:

Actually, to be fair, I did use that to my advantage at one stage when I was in practice, I'd worked there for a long time and I wanted to go on an expedition to the Antarctic for three months, and I approached the partners and said, "You know what? I could be asking for maternity leave and I only want three months." And it took them by surprise and they let me go. I think there's nothing wrong with using it to your advantage. Later, I had three maternity leaves off from the practice for my three children, I suppose it worked out.

Pam Mosedale:

As a partner in the practice when I had my son, I had a caesarean, I had to have six weeks off. But after that I was back part-time, and I still had to do my night duties. I started to do my fair share of the night duties.

Sally Everitt:

And I think those are things that have changed a lot in terms of flexible working out of hours, all of those things because they weren't negotiable really. That's not entirely true. There was some room for negotiation, and I did very well when my daughter was very little in terms of working part-time and those sorts of things, but you had to be the flexible one to a large extent. There weren't the same sorts of expectations that there would be part-time jobs and no out of hours and those sorts of things.

Fiona Lovatt:

My first pregnancy, there was no information on risk assessments for farm vets. In fact, I wrote an in practice article alongside someone from the HSE because I couldn't find any information and I wasn't necessarily getting good guidance from there, they weren't certain what was risky and what wasn't, and they wouldn't let me do certain jobs because I was pregnant, I couldn't, and it meant I was always the vet at the practice who had to go and do the emergency calvings or really risky things. That was in the early 2000s. That's not a long time ago.

Sally Everitt:

10 years before that, I think the idea of risk assessments in practices was not very great at all. All our anaesthesia on the small animal side was halothane and scavenging was nothing like it is now if it was there at all. Health and safety was a very different attitude really. It was not that there wasn't any, and no one was trying to be difficult. It was just not seen in the same way.

Fiona Lovatt:

There's different importance.

Pam Mosedale:

I think a positive though has been that now there is a lot more part-time working generally, and I think that's been a really good thing and it's been a really good thing for practices. When I still had the practice, it used to be great to have the flexibility of having quite a few part-time employees.

Sally Everitt:

I think one of the important things here, I just checked the RCVS survey of the professions, but it's more women, but it's not only women that take up part-time roles. I think in the last one was 2019, there was still 13% of men took up part-time roles. It can be good for everybody. It's not just a women's thing. People can have all sorts of reasons why they might want to work part-time.

Pam Mosedale:

That's so much better that that's available now. I think that's been a real positive. I suppose the other thing is we still need a little bit more diversity in the profession, I think, don't we?

Sally Everitt:

I suppose diversity is a difficult one in that we've swapped from being a predominantly male profession to a predominantly female profession. And there can be arguments that males are the minority. Although when you look at lots of the other criteria, they're still doing remarkably well within it. They're not struggling. Usually, they're the ones who are in the leadership roles who take-

Fiona Lovatt:

The business part.

Sally Everitt:

Those sorts of parts. But I suppose the big issue perhaps now for the profession is certainly from the veterinary side is how expensive it is to train and the debt that student graduates are coming out with and how that may be impacting the diversity of people entering the profession.

Pam Mosedale:

We were very lucky weren't we Sally? That we didn't have to pay any fees and we had grants.

Sally Everitt:

They weren't very much and nobody expected to be earning very much money, but you weren't coming out with debt.

Fiona Lovatt:

Even for me, I had a maintenance grant to go to university and that was in the nineties. But it's a very different picture now, isn't it? That you not only have your high living costs, but you have to pay large fees as well. For people to come out with large loans is a barrier to inclusion I think.

Sally Everitt:

And I think although we were a minority in the vet profession, I'm not saying we were the pioneers, there were generations before us that were pioneers, there were still changes going on. Society wasn't quite so accepting of women in professional roles and things like that. But I do wonder, although there have been lots of advances, mobile phones, sedation of animals, all sorts of things like that and lots of advances in terms of part-time working, health and safety. Actually, I think personally we had quite a good time in the veterinary profession and I do wonder if it's a bit harder for everybody to be a vet today than we had. Sometimes we were making up as we went along a little bit, the whole profession was. We were all learning as we went along, but I don't feel that it was a negative or a particularly difficult time to be a vet. I think we had quite a good time being vets.

Pam Mosedale:

I agree. I think, there wasn't the internet for a start off. And people, I think generally respected vets more probably than they do now and accepted, you obviously always get people who are going to be awkward, but most people, the majority accepted your view and your opinion. If you could explain and keep them in the picture of what was happening, they would be pretty happy.

Sally Everitt:

Expectations were very different. They wanted you to do your best and they were most of the time rather happy.

Fiona Lovatt:

Do you think that's a society thing that people are more respectful of others generally and of their vet as an upstanding member of the community that maybe has been lost? I don't know.

Sally Everitt:

I don't know. But I think they might be onto something there because I don't think that the changes we are seeing at the moment are just in the veterinary profession. If you look at the medical profession, teaching profession, I get the feeling that they're going through very similar changes and stresses and I think it is a difference. There are good things about shifting from a very paternalistic view of the professions to a shared decision-making type model. But there are some downsides to that that perhaps we haven't worked through fully yet and provide some challenges for the future.

Pam Mosedale:

I agree. I think it is harder now. I think it's more stressful, but I also think it's busier. Practices I've worked in, we always used to have a coffee break, we'd always stop. Everybody would stop.

Sally Everitt:

There were down times. There were times of the year when you knew that everyone was out harvesting or doing, practices were all mixed initially anyway, there were different things going on. There wasn't quite the specialisation, but I agree, I think I didn't feel, there were days when it felt pressurised, but it wasn't relentless pressure in the way that I think some people are experiencing now.

Pam Mosedale:

And if you did genuine mixed practice, you could always get out in your car and drive out to do some calls, which was always a bit of a relief. But then of course the farm vets, is it more pressured in farm veterinary practice now, Fiona, do you think?

Fiona Lovatt:

I think everyone is busy and under more pressure. There is always a lull in the summer when people are out cutting grass. But there's the paperwork thing, and that's the same in all professions, isn't it? That our teachers, our doctors have, everyone is facing more of a paperwork issue than we did maybe we winged it a bit more.

Sally Everitt:

And to remember when computers were brought in, we were all sold the idea that this will get rid of all the paperwork and all it seems to have done is created a lot more.

Pam Mosedale:

It did mean you could read the legible writing of your colleagues. Suddenly when we got the computers, that was the main difference. I do remember my very first practice, we didn't really even have proper records particularly. We had a few little cards, which if you were lucky, you might have a vague description of something that had happened. But we certainly didn't have full clinical records.

Fiona Lovatt:

And I bet you didn't have a job contract, did you, Pam, when you first?

Pam Mosedale:

No, definitely not.

Fiona Lovatt:

I worked years and years without a contract.

Sally Everitt:

You got a letter saying they were offering you a job and how much would pay you, nothing more than that.

Pam Mosedale:

And actually that's quite scary that even up until quite fairly recently, I think BVA did a survey probably, certainly maybe not more than 10 years ago when still loads of people didn't have contracts. I think that's something that's probably changed for the better. There's a lot more protection for employees, isn't there? Whether it be health and safety or other things like that.

Sally Everitt:

Working time directives. They didn't exist when we graduated.

Pam Mosedale:

That caused a lot of issues, didn't it? The other thing that didn't exist on the smaller side was out of hours providers. Everybody, every practice had to do their own out of hours. You had to do out of hours. It was normal to do out of hours. And I think there's been positives and negatives at that. I think it's great that people don't have to do out of hours. But I think a lot of the interesting cases came in as out of hours cases.

Sally Everitt:

And I think it helped you. It did build your confidence because you had to do it. There was usually a senior partner who you could ring, although you probably didn't want to ring them unless it really was an emergency because you might get not growled at, but at least asked why you were ringing them. But you did discover how much you could do on your own.

Fiona Lovatt:

There were lots of jobs that used to be night on, night off and every other weekend working. That was pretty standard.



Sally Everitt:

Yes. Going down to one in four was considered a really phenomenally good rota that everyone aspired to.

Pam Mosedale:

But that has made a huge change and obviously that change and even now in equine practices even out to our providers and may even be coming in farm practice, I think, Fiona.

Fiona Lovatt:

It's always harder with farm practice because of the distance and it's just hard to be doing a cow cesarean in one place and have to drive an hour or two or more is just not feasible I think. I think probably people end up doing out of hours for longer in farm practice.

Sally Everitt:

My impression and I haven't done farm work for a long time, is that the majority of farm animal emergency calls are emergencies that need to be seen. And that's no longer the case I would say in small animal practice. There is a move towards quite a lot of people wanting all sorts of things seen at outside normal hours.

Pam Mosedale:

We're a 24/7 society, aren't we? For so many things that people don't see any issue with wanting their dog's nails clipped at two o'clock in the morning or I remember once having someone ringed who wanted their budgies nails clipped at two o'clock in the morning because our practice was a veterinary hospital. They were like, "But you're a hospital, must be open."

Fiona Lovatt:

My best was being woken up about six in the morning with a phone and it was a farmer to say, "If I dip my sheep now, will they be dry tonight?" Which you really don't want a question like that at half past five in the morning.

Sally Everitt:

Probably depends on the weather rather or not.

Pam Mosedale:

As you said before, Sally, it's not just a veterinary world that's moved on the whole world has moved on and people are probably a lot, I think definitely more litigious, is that the word now? More likely to complain or to want something put right or want financial recompense.

Sally Everitt:

Yes. I think the expectations are very different, but I also wonder talking about we're perhaps not as close to our clients with a lot more, this is a downside of part-time working and out of hours you are not necessarily getting the case continuity, always seeing the same vet, building the relationships in the way that you do. And I'm not saying that that means that it's better outcomes for the animal, but I think it helps with the communication with the client and that can avert a proportion of the problems that arise, but at the expense of vets having to be on call, as you say every other night or something like that so that they're the one who's there to see it. Swings in roundabouts.

Fiona Lovatt:

It's that relationship that that's what's always kept me informed practice is because that the length of time, the fact that's someone's business and your part of that business, that's what I've always really enjoyed working with them, cattle and sheep farmers, definitely.

Pam Mosedale:

You develop very close relationship, don't you?

Sally Everitt:

Most of my small animal practice has been in market towns. And I think even with the small animal clients, you can build those sorts of relationships and you are seen as the vet and you do have that. And I do think that we lose those relationships at our peril a little bit.

Pam Mosedale:

It's the human side, isn't it? But I must admit, I can never remember being terrified that I might get a complaint or be struck off. It never even occurred to me I don't think for the first probably at least, maybe not 20 years, but at least the first 15 years of my career, it never occurred to me that something like that could happen.

Sally Everitt:

I think the other thing we had was senior partners who may have driven us mad and not necessarily done very much, but there was somebody there who was quietly overseeing things and potentially sending things off before they reached you because they had the relationship with the client. And I do think that now there are many people working, there may be a senior vet in the practice, but they might not be in that surgery with them at that time. And I think that can be a downside as well. And that's not just for women, but for all vets. I think that can make things a little bit more difficult where things can escalate more quickly than perhaps they did in our day.

Pam Mosedale:

Someone with experience and common sense in the background saying, "No, I wouldn't do that or why don't you just give them a ring and explain that to them now?" And all those kind of things. "Don't take the lump off if you haven't got permission." All those kinds of things that just keep people on the straight and narrow. And I think you're absolutely right, Sally, because remembering the same farm vet who I said earlier, said to me about a partnership

when I first started the practice, as I say, there'd only been one female vet briefly before me, when I went on farms, they all knew who I was because he'd gone round there and said, "We've got this new lady vet and she's lovely and she'll be coming to see you soon." And that makes such a huge difference. Things move on. But I think we are definitely more of a female dominated profession now, aren't we?

Sally Everitt:

I'd say the profession's been very good to me in my career. I don't feel that being a woman in the veterinary profession has been a negative. There have been some challenges along the way, but I don't think they've been greater than they would've been doing any other jobs. And I feel it's been a very good profession.

Fiona Lovatt:

Yes, I'd concur with that. Definitely.

Pam Mosedale:

I agree. I think the problems or any issues we might have had were the societal issues of that time. Not particularly because we are vets and I have to say, I think it's been very good to me and if I had my time again, I would do it again.

Fiona Lovatt:

Likewise.

Pam Mosedale:

Thank you so much for chatting. I think we've enjoyed it anyway, haven't we?

Sally Everitt:

We have.

Pam Mosedale:

Gives us a chance to air these things. Lovely to talk to you. Bye.

Fiona Lovatt:

Thanks, bye.

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