

## MYTHS, LEGENDS AND OTHER WORRIES

### Some clarification about RCVS proposals for VN training

#### Background

In late September, the RCVS released proposals for a new structure for VN training for consultation. The remit of the reviewing working party is quite extensive, however, there are some key areas that are being addressed. These include a need to increase significantly the “output” of qualified VNs (there is a shortage) and reduce the paperwork burden (and cost to practices) of NVQs, whilst maintaining and improving the quality of education and training. In summary, the initial proposals included:

- One “big” Level 3 qualification (incorporating theory and practice)
- A full-time first-year course (that could also be studied part-time)
- A second year spent in employment with part-time (day- or block-release) college attendance
- Some basic experience in handling all species (including horses, small animals and farm animals)
- No NVQ-style portfolio
- Recording of clinical experience electronically

The full proposals can be found at [www.rcvs.org.uk/consultations](http://www.rcvs.org.uk/consultations).

We are aware that these proposals have attracted a great deal of interest and are pleased to be receiving very useful feedback. However, we are also aware that some folk, students in particular, may not have had time to read the consultation document themselves and are consequently confused and unduly worried about what is proposed. The Q&As below aim to dispel some myths and clarify points of potential confusion.

#### 1) Why is the RCVS proposing the changes?

There is a shortage of qualified veterinary nurses, meaning that a significant number of practices find it very hard, or impossible, to employ a VN or RVN. The RCVS believes that qualified nurses are best placed to provide supportive care for sick animals and that, in the interests of animal welfare, all practices should ideally be in a position to employ such a person. Coupled with the shortage of VNs, the current method of training (NVQ) is expensive and bureaucratic, and it relies on every student who begins training having a job in practice. This means that the number of students is naturally limited by the number of student jobs available. In order to increase student numbers, we need to free up practices to train by removing some of the current paperwork burden of NVQs.

In addition to addressing the VN shortage, it is also important that the quality of education and training is maintained, and prepares nurses for their responsibilities in clinical practice. VN education in the UK has always compared favourably with that available internationally and we want to maintain this position. In view of these factors, a course that equates to only three months of full-time college attendance over two years no longer appears adequate to support increasingly complex clinical training. For this reason an increase in the academic element of training is proposed.

## **2) Why is it happening so quickly?**

The Government is currently introducing a new “framework” for qualifications (the Qualifications and Credit Framework or QCF). This is being introduced rapidly and it is government policy that, by September 2010, funding will only be available for qualifications that are in this new structure. The RCVS therefore has to move quickly, along with many other awarding organisations, to meet this deadline. Although student nurses and veterinary practices do not see this funding directly, it covers a significant part of their course and training fees. Without it, few courses would run, and those that did would need to charge much higher fees.

## **3) Would part-time training still be available?**

Yes, students employed in veterinary practices would still be able to train on a day- (or block-) release basis as they do now. However this will take longer than before because the theoretical element of training is being extended (see Q 1). Training for an employed part-time student is therefore likely to take three years. However, the majority of students undertaking the current NVQ-based training take between two and a half and three years to complete, so this would not, in effect, be a major increase.

## **4) Why include equine and farm animal experience for everyone?**

We want to ensure that all veterinary nurses have an awareness of basic normal husbandry and animal handling across species. Whilst many practices see only small animals, a very significant number deal with a mixed caseload and we feel it is important for all nurses to have an introduction to this wider level of work. Additionally, we hope that this wider exposure will spark nurses’ interest in other areas of practice. These can be developed as post-registration CPD and/or further qualifications.

## **5) What about equine nursing?**

As now, the new VN qualification would be a generic one, covering the principles of nursing rather than specific species. Students may choose to undertake their clinical year in any type of practice (including equine or mixed), so long as it meets the criteria for a TP (or an aTP – see q 9). However, at the time of writing it is envisaged that all nurses would be designated “RVN” on registration rather than achieve a specialisation at this stage. The option to specialise in any aspect of nursing, including species-specific work, is envisaged as a post-registration option at present, paralleling the post-qualification specialisation that occurs for vets.

Those students already enrolled as EVN students will be able to complete their training and gain the relevant REVN post-nominals.

## **6) Would assessors and Internal Verifiers (IVs) lose their jobs?**

No, there would still be a need for mature and experienced nurses and vets to take responsibility for the training and supervision of student veterinary nurses. We envisage that current assessors would naturally adopt this role, as they do now. Students would still need to record their clinical experience and skills, having this checked and signed off periodically. The supervision and verification of the proposed online experience log would fall to the student's mentor. In summary, the mentor's role would, in most respects, parallel that of an assessor. The main, and significant, difference would be the absence of portfolio paperwork.

Training practices (and aTPs) would still need to be approved and students in clinical training would still need to be visited to ensure their welfare and progress, as they do now. This is a requirement for all LSC-funded candidates and will not change. Students will still be assessed, although most assessment would be managed by colleges. More emphasis is likely to be on care studies, case diaries, projects etc, in addition to some work-based observations. All of these assessments would need to be quality-assured and so IVs would still be needed, although possibly in lower numbers in the future.

Lastly, remember that students on the current NVQ awards will remain in the system until 2013. They will still need assessors and IVs. As numbers of these students decrease, current assessors and IVs will be developing their roles with the new QCF students.

## **7) Would the new qualification be funded?**

There is some uncertainty about funding at present because the criteria for a new apprenticeship have yet to be finalised. This is affecting all "industries" and not just veterinary nursing. However, the RCVS is working with the Sector Skills Council, Lantra, to ensure that the new qualification will slot into an apprenticeship and therefore qualify for work-based learning funding (as do the current qualifications). We are also aiming to ensure the full-time option (in year one) can be funded through 16–18 or Adult Learner Responsive funding. As with the current awards and apprenticeship, public funding is unlikely to cover all learners or all costs associated with training. However, we are considering funding, and the best way to ensure the maximum availability, at all stages of the development.

As now, mature students are less likely to attract funding and it will be in everyone's interests (employers, students and training providers) to get them started on training at a young age wherever possible. The lowering of the entry age to 16 would bring more students into the most generously funded bracket.

## **8) Isn't this dumbing down the VN qualification?**

No, to the contrary, the educational element of training would be increased by one third. UK student veterinary nurses undertaking vocational training currently have one of the least academic programmes internationally. The current qualifications are supported by the equivalent of a one-term full-time course. We believe that advances in clinical practice, coupled with increased expectations of veterinary nurses, mean this is no longer sufficient. Future students would have more time to study their syllabus in greater breadth and depth than they currently do.

Whilst the portfolio as such would go, students would still be required to be supervised in clinical practice and log their experience. This would be achieved electronically, along the lines of the e-portfolio and the Professional Development Phase (PDP) log that first year graduate vets use. It may even be possible for students to log experience using their mobile phones. However, unlike the old “green book,” the log would be contemporaneous (no filling it all in on the last day of training) and verifiable, ie linked to particular cases.

It is also likely that the mandatory minimum period of practical training may reduce to allow students undertaking a full-time first year to complete training in two years. This may seem like a decrease in rigour, however, the current requirements were set almost fifty years ago, when most nurses simply sat RCVS exams after a period of work in practice. There was then no requirement to go to college or for the quality of in-house training and supervision by a TP that there is now. The quality of clinical training has increased significantly in recent years and it should therefore be possible for student VNs to gain the necessary competence to register within a slightly shorter period. Any reduction in the current 70 week minimum would still provide British student VNs with considerably more clinical experience than is the case internationally.

#### **9) Would there still be the TP/VNAC relationship?**

Yes, the new qualification would deliver both education and practical training so centres (as VNACs will be called) would still need to approve, and maintain links with, affiliated training practices. The exact mechanics of how this will work in future have yet to be worked out. However it is safe to assume that centres and TPs will still be closely linked and that centres will continue to be responsible for ensuring the quality of clinical training for their students.

One of the key aims of the new qualification is to involve more practices in training (and thereby increase training places). We appreciate that there are a number of practices that do not fully meet the requirements to be a TP but, nonetheless, could provide many elements of training. These practices would be able to become auxiliary training practices (aTPs). They would be able to employ students but would have a special memorandum of agreement that commits them to releasing their students to gain “missing” experience elsewhere. This, in fact, already happens but is not widely recognised.

#### **10) Why should practices employ “interns”?**

VN intern students would provide an annually renewable pool of staff for practices, from which practices who support them would be able to select permanent qualified VNs. Where a TP doesn't have such a vacancy, interns would leave at the end of their contract and enter the employment market as qualified VNs, thus helping to ease the shortage.

One of the concerns about interns is that they would not be fully competent on day one of their internship and would need support. This is true, however, it is also true of any new Animal Nursing Assistant or VN student. Interns would have the advantage of a significant grounding in the theory and practice of veterinary nursing, along with some basic practical experience. It should not take them long to integrate within a practice and become a useful

team member. Many professions operate a similar scheme of traineeships, for example, medicine and law, and it is hoped that practices would come to view interns as a regular part of their practice “skill mix”, in time replacing some current unqualified staff positions.