



## Snapshot of the VN profession in 2008

**E**arlier this year, we issued a survey to all listed/registered, student and recently delisted veterinary nurses to find out where they are working, how they are using their qualifications and how they are rewarded for this work.

This special issue of *RCVS News Extra* gives an overview of the findings. Whether you're a veterinary nurse or student VN, are involved in VN training or employ VNs, there should be something of interest to you.

Although we have carried out some research in the past, there has been no previous survey of the VN profession of similar size and scope. We hope that this will act as a benchmark against which future results can be reviewed and trends measured.

For the full report, visit RCVSONline:  
[www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys](http://www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys)



# High level of job satisfaction

...but greater respect, please!



**W**elcome to a special issue of *RCVS News Extra* that offers an overview of the results of our *Survey of the Veterinary Nursing Profession 2008*. More than one in three veterinary nurses responded to the survey, which was issued earlier this year. Although it's very difficult to achieve an entirely representative sample, we are confident that this gives us a good basis to work from.

The purpose of the survey was to examine the current profile of the veterinary nursing profession and anticipate future trends and changes. We aimed to find out what VNs were doing with their qualifications and where they were working. We also asked about working hours – including on-call and overtime – and how they were tackling CPD requirements. We were also keen to find out about nurses' aspirations for the short- and long-term and their current views on the profession.

***“The purpose of the survey was to examine the current profile of the veterinary nursing profession and anticipate future trends and changes.”***

We used a similar format to our *Survey of the Veterinary Profession 2006*, so that comparisons can be made where relevant.

What did we find? On the whole, veterinary nurses enjoy a high degree of job satisfaction but this seems almost to be in spite of a feeling that the role of the VN is not well appreciated and that employers do not give them enough respect.

Salary levels may be the reason for this, with the median salary being £17,000 for those working full-time in clinical practice (mean £17,104, mode £18,000), compared with the median annual pay for full-time employees in the UK of £23,764<sup>1</sup>. And this is against a backdrop of 47% of students and qualified VNs having been educated to A Level standard or above, before entry to VN training.

In terms of students, the mean salary of non-university students is £10,648 (median £11,000 and mode £10,000). For reference, an employee of the same age working a 37.5-hour week on a minimum wage would earn a salary of £10,764<sup>2</sup>.

## Career plans

We were keen to find out what the turnover in the profession is likely to be in order to help with workforce modelling. So we asked about career plans: 73% of respondents plan to stay in clinical practice for the foreseeable future, while 3% plan to leave as soon as possible. The remaining 24% plan to leave within the next one to five years.

## What next?

A survey is a costly exercise. What will we do with the information we have gleaned? It will help us in terms of workforce planning and understanding how the provision of veterinary services might be affected by various factors, including numbers of veterinary nursing trainees, career breaks, part-time working, and nurses choosing to work outside the profession. We are also hoping to raise awareness of the shortage of trained veterinary nurses so that steps might be taken to help overseas-qualified VNs to come and work in the UK more easily. Data on turnover within the profession may help us to build an argument on that front.

Finally, understanding more fully the range of tasks VNs are carrying out within the veterinary team will help us to ensure that VN training remains relevant. We plan to launch a consultation to review the VN qualification in 2009, which will take account of some of the issues raised in the survey, to ensure that relevant areas are being taught in college/university and via work experience.

Many thanks to all those of you who have participated in this important initiative.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Andrea Jeffery', written over a light blue grid background.

**Andrea Jeffery**  
VN Council Chairman

<sup>1</sup>Office for National Statistics <sup>2</sup>[www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)

# Who, why, what, where, when?

## VN survey results revealed

**F**ollowing a pilot at the end of 2007, the survey was sent to 11,156 people on the veterinary nurse (VN) database in January of this year. This included those whose listings had lapsed within the previous 12 months. Of the total, 7,490 were VNs and 3,666 were students.

The survey achieved a response rate of 35% (3,869 responses, of whom 790 were students), which made for some robust results. We offered paper and online options: 90% of VNs opted for the traditional paper version, which is interesting, given the general move toward more online communication, and the fact that 83% of respondents use email regularly.

The respondent profile closely matched the VN database as a whole, in terms of gender, ethnicity and age; however, students had a lower response rate than VNs (22% compared to 41%). See box on back page for respondent profile.



### Where are VNs working?

The List/Register of Veterinary Nurses only requires VNs to give us a contact address – so we do not know how and where they are working. The survey results have given us a snapshot of how VNs are using, or planning to use, their qualifications in 2008.

Less than half a per cent of respondents are unemployed and the majority of these are seeking work, mostly within veterinary nursing. Of those at work, 90% are currently working in clinical veterinary practice. Three per cent of respondents are on a career break, mostly because they are looking after children, typically for a 12-month period. However, as it may be unlikely that all of those unemployed longer-term would pay to retain their listed status, these figures may not give an entirely accurate picture of the employment profile of qualified VNs.

Most respondents (88%) work in England, with 7% working in Scotland, 3% in Wales, 1% in Northern Ireland and 1% abroad.

### VNs working outside clinical practice

One in ten working respondents is active outside clinical practice. These are mostly in professional (42%), managerial (12%) or sales / customer service (11%) roles. The largest group - 33% - work in VN education, 14% in public sector jobs, 11% in pharmaceutical, pet food or pet insurance companies, 18% elsewhere in the private sector, and 10% in the charity/voluntary sector. Fifty-seven per cent need a VN qualification to do their job, which may explain why they have maintained their RCVS listing/registration. The majority of VNs working outside clinical practice seem unlikely to return, as only about a quarter said they intended to seek work in clinical practice in the future. It is perhaps a concern that these VNs seem lost to clinical practice.

### VNs in clinical practice

Ninety per cent of respondents work in clinical practice of some kind. Unsurprisingly, most VNs and students have their main employment in small animal practice (68%) or mixed practice (22%). Seven per cent work in a referral practice and 3% in an equine, farm animal or other type of practice.

For those working full time in a small animal or mixed practice, the average working week is just over 41 hours, plus 11 hours on call for small animal practices and 17 hours on call for mixed practices. This compares to 37 hours reported in a survey we carried out in 2003, and 42.8 hours for a typical working week for veterinary surgeons in 2006.

Full-time respondents report that they worked an average of 10.5 hours overtime in the previous month. Of the 40% of respondents on an on-call rota, 23% are not paid any extra for being on call, while the rest are paid for each call-out and/or receive an on-call allowance. This means that some may be working a total number of weekly hours that exceeds those laid down by Working Time Regulations (48 hours). Eighty-one per cent of students and 66% of VNs take part in visits to clients.

### Daily workload

We then drilled down into more detail about activities carried out by VNs during their working week. We were surprised to find that 60% of qualified nurse respondents said they 'rarely' or 'never' scrub up to assist with surgical procedures, although this is an important aspect of VN training. Only 42% were involved with radiography on a regular basis too.

This either means that the *Veterinary Nursing Occupational Standards* need to change or that practices are not getting maximum efficiency out of the practice team. At the other end of the scale, 70% of student nurses and 50% of qualified nurses are being asked to carry out general domestic (as opposed to clinical) cleaning tasks on a daily basis which, given the cost to the profession of training veterinary nurses, seems an inefficient use of their time.

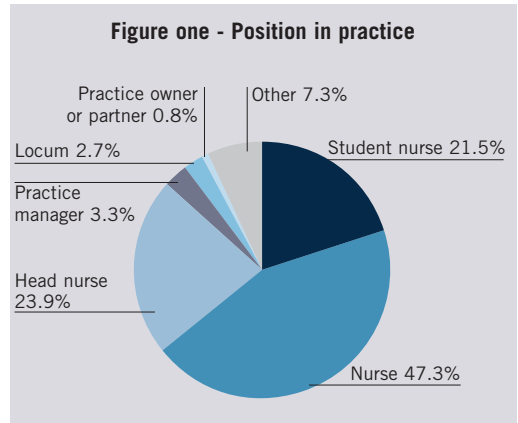
On the plus side, about a third of respondents are involved in nursing or nutritional advice clinics, or consultations, several times per week. Over half (58%) of respondents consider themselves to have particular areas of expertise.

A wide range of subjects was quoted, with the top five most frequently cited being:

- NVQ/VN assessor – 49% of those with an area of expertise
- Nutrition/diabetes – 25%
- Behaviour management – 16%
- Dentistry – 10%
- Emergency/critical care – 8%

### Position and pay

We were keen to find out what positions VNs were taking in practice - figure one gives the details. Of those who are locums, nearly half (47%) work for more than one practice, with two practices being the most frequently cited.



Salary is always a hot topic too. The average basic annual salary (excluding on-call and overtime) of full-time VN respondents is £17,104, while for students it is £10,648. As might be expected, VNs who qualified some time ago earn more than recent qualifiers; those who qualified before 1980 earn £21,708 on average, while the 2000 and later qualifiers earn £16,711. Two thirds (65%) of those who work overtime are routinely paid for doing so, while 6% are sometimes paid for overtime and 16% receive time off in lieu. The remaining 14% receive no pay or time off.

The fact that 13% of both students and qualified VNs have a second job perhaps indicates that such salaries are not sufficient.

Salary levels according to prior qualifications and by age are detailed in the full report – see [www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys](http://www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys).

### Continuing Professional Development

Registered Veterinary Nurses (RVNs) have a responsibility to keep their skills and knowledge up to date – we hope that listed VNs also take professional development seriously. The RVN continuing professional development (CPD) requirement is 15 hours a year, so we were heartened to find that VNs had received an average of 3.1 days of CPD in the previous 12 months. Seven per cent of VNs had also been involved in giving CPD. However, a quarter of respondents did not receive any CPD at all, which is not good news.

CPD is mostly funded by the employer or practice. Eighty-four per cent of respondents said this was the case. We were also pleased to find that, after books and journals, the most popular method of taking CPD was in-house sessions, which means that VNs are taking advantage of this cost-effective way of sharing knowledge.

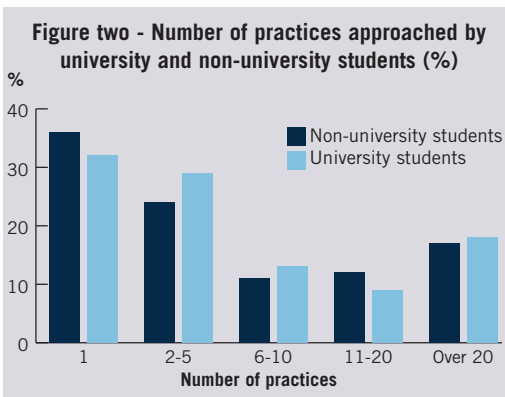
In addition to their primary VN qualification, 4% of respondents have an RCVS Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing (DipAVN) and 6% a veterinary nursing degree. A further 12% are studying for the DipAVN, or plan to do so in the next five years, while 5% are studying, or planning to study, for a veterinary nursing degree.

### Students and recent qualifiers

We asked some specific questions of students and recent (2007 or 2008) qualifiers.

Anecdotally, we often hear that practices are reluctant to train VNs as they assume they will leave immediately post-training. In fact, 57% of students intend to remain with their training practices on qualifying, while 27% intend to move to another practice, and 9% to take up their first postgraduate post. Of those who qualified recently, 68% have remained in their training practice.

Some students appear to have had considerable difficulty finding a training position or placement, which is a concern, particularly for university students, for whom a placement should be organised as part of the degree package. As can be seen in figure two, 40% of both university and NVQ students had to approach six or more practices before they could secure a placement.



Students and recent qualifiers were also asked how satisfied they were with various aspects of their training. On the whole, those who had received appraisals were more likely to be

satisfied with every aspect of their training, including salary levels. A higher percentage of those who had received appraisals, for example, were satisfied with their college/university experience than those who had not (82% compared to 74%).

Figure three shows the percentage who were satisfied or very satisfied with each aspect.



### Points of view

We asked for respondents' reactions to a series of 15 attitude statements. There weren't really any surprises here, given answers elsewhere: VNs have high levels of job satisfaction but find their work stressful; and they are dissatisfied with career progression, part-time working opportunities, family-friendliness and the extent to which they are valued by the veterinary profession.

***“VNs have high levels of job satisfaction but find their work stressful.”***

As is typical of this kind of questioning, regardless of profession, those in the middle age-band of respondents (30 to 39) are often less positive than their younger and older counterparts about different aspects of their profession. For example, those under 20 are least likely to say that VN work is stressful and most likely to say that it gives them job satisfaction. Younger VNs also agree much more strongly than their older counterparts that the VN profession offers good opportunities for career progression.

*Continued on page 6*



## Short of time? Here are the highlights

- Veterinary nursing is a very homogenised profession – nearly all are white, female and under 30
- Less than half a percent are unemployed
- 13% have second jobs
- 69% in clinical practice are in small animal practices
- Mean full-time salary is £17,104 for those in clinical practice; £19,831 for others
- Average working week of 40.3 hours for full-timers (excluding overtime and on call)
- If they had their time again, 55% would still be veterinary nurses
- Job satisfaction is high
- Many VNs feel underappreciated by employers and the public
- Those students and recently-qualified VNs who received regular appraisals were more positive about their training experience and salary levels
- 57% of students intend to stay in their training practices

### continued from page 5

Respondents were asked whether they would still opt to become a veterinary nurse if they could start their career again. Of those who answered, 55% said yes, 19% said no, and 26% were unsure. This is almost exactly the same as the response rates for vets in our 2006 survey.

Finally, respondents were asked to describe the best three things about being a VN and the three areas where improvement is needed, and to identify the three biggest challenges facing the profession. Not surprisingly, working with and caring for animals was the top positive response, with 64% of respondents seeing this as a benefit of working in the profession. Variety was also important.

Unsurprisingly, better pay and lack of recognition were challenges judged to be faced by the VN profession, together with education and training issues.

Job satisfaction was rated as a positive by 44%, but this was balanced by 81% citing 'better pay' as something that needed to be looked at, in addition to greater respect from employers and better recognition of the profession. Recently-invested President Jill Nute has stated that improving mutual recognition of the roles of vets and veterinary nurses is high on her communications agenda this year.

## Who replied?

- 98% female
- 99% white
- 56% under 30
- Average age of 30 (cf 45 years old for *Survey of the Veterinary Profession 2006*)
- 3% have a disability or limiting medical condition
- 22% have children living at home; 1.5% care for a dependent adult
- 78% qualified
- 65% registered
- 21% enrolled students
- 1% unqualified veterinary nursing assistants
- 98.5% use, or are working towards, small animal qualification
- 98.5% qualified in the UK
- 62% qualified from 2000 onwards

For the full report, visit RCVSonline at [www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys](http://www.rcvs.org.uk/surveys) or, for a hard copy, contact Lizzie Lockett on 020 7202 0725 or [l.lockett@rcvs.org.uk](mailto:l.lockett@rcvs.org.uk)

Our thanks go to the Institute for Employment Studies who undertook the survey on our behalf, particularly to Dilys Robinson and Miranda Munro. And, of course, many thanks to all of you who took the time to answer our questionnaire.



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