

Extramural studies - making the most of student placements

EXTRAMURAL studies is an established part of veterinary undergraduate education and plays a key role in allowing students to develop the skills and confidence they will need in practice. In this article, Christine Latham discusses the broad aims of EMS and ways of ensuring that students derive maximum benefit from each placement.

BY CHRISTINE LATHAM

EXTRAMURAL studies (EMS), formerly known as ‘seeing practice’, has been a key element of veterinary education since 1932, and is part of the RCVS approval criteria for veterinary degrees. Over the years, this voluntary provision of placement learning by the veterinary profession has become greatly admired by colleagues overseas and other professional groups within the UK.

As an essential part of their learning experience, all UK veterinary students must perform at least 12 weeks of preclinical and 26 weeks of clinical EMS during their university courses before they may qualify as veterinary surgeons. In their preclinical years, students are encouraged to undertake a range of placements working with livestock and companion animals to gain experience in farming methods, animal husbandry and handling. Since most of these placements are in non-veterinary environments, this article will be confined to clinical EMS.

Although all UK-trained vets currently working will have ‘seen practice’ themselves, changes in the veterinary courses and educational philosophy have prompted this article with a view to maximising the benefits of EMS for all involved. The article will concentrate on general practice, although EMS may also include other placements, for example, within laboratories, the State Veterinary Services, the food hygiene sector and specialist practices.

All the veterinary schools are acutely aware that this essential and unique component of veterinary undergraduate training relies on the continued goodwill of the profession and are actively cooperating in attempts to support both the students and their placement providers. As a result, there have been regular meetings of the EMS coordinators from all the schools over the past three years and a joint EMS Manual for Practices was published in 1999 through the RCVS, in association with the RCVS Trust. This manual is now also available in electronic form on the RCVS website (at www.rcvs.org.uk), and is in the process of being updated.

PREPARATION FOR EMS

The stage that students have reached in the veterinary course will obviously influence their academic knowledge and practical abilities. Furthermore, each school differs in its course arrangements, though most now have few or no lectures in the final year. It is worth pointing out that, although clinical EMS is performed during the last three years of a student’s course, at Cambridge that means the fourth, fifth and sixth years; elsewhere it will be years 3 to 5. Many practices will have received summaries of the clinical teaching at the various veterinary schools and these are also included in the RCVS
### SUMMARY OF SUGGESTED CLINICAL OBJECTIVES FOR VETERINARY STUDENTS

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<td>– 24-hour cover</td>
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<td>Further radiological/ultrasound interpretation</td>
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<td>All aspects of practice management</td>
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Manual. The schools have also produced lists of suggested objectives and practical skills that students should be aiming to achieve as they progress through their clinical careers. These are summarised briefly in the table above. Practices are encouraged to nominate a member of their professional staff to be responsible for coordinating each student’s EMS placement. The SILVER report into veterinary EMS (Taylor and Barnes 1998) recommended that students take responsibility for their own learning and identify what they hope to achieve before embarking on each placement. Whenever possible, students should discuss their individual objectives with their placement supervisors at the start of their EMS placement, who can then judge what is appropriate and feasible in each case. Depending on the school, the students may also have their own comprehensive checklist of procedures that they are recommended to observe or perform during their training. In some cases, these will require self-certification by the student, in others, practitioners may be asked to sign and comment on the task being performed.

### AIMS OF EMS

EMS should primarily provide students with practical veterinary experience, so that they can put their academic studies into context and further develop their abilities to identify and treat a range of diseases. In addition, it should expose them to the ethical, financial, business and interpersonal realities of professional practice and help develop each individual’s communication skills. Although students are advised to experience a range of different practices, they are encouraged to make repeated visits to a “base” practice or practices to help build mutual familiarity and confidence. Whenever possible, students should spend a minimum of two weeks at each placement.

### PRACTICAL VETERINARY EXPERIENCE

While much of the day-to-day work of veterinary practice may seem routine to an experienced practitioner, it is worth remembering that it involves many complex skills and the practical application of extensive theoretical knowledge. Veterinary students have to learn what for many of us has become automatic. These skills can be broadly divided into:

- Problem solving;
- Technical proficiency.

### Problem solving

Students should be encouraged to develop their observational skills. They should become familiar with the appearance of normal individuals or groups of animals and observe how this alters with disease. They benefit from not only observing history taking but, if possible, practising this themselves. Analysis of farm records is also helpful. They will need to learn how to plan, justify and interpret diagnostic tests.

Involvement in case management during EMS provides excellent experience. Many students will learn more easily if they feel directly involved in a case and setting them tasks to research a disease, or interpret laboratory results, will often result in better retention of a topic than if they simply observe someone else. Providing opportunities for the discussion of cases is invaluable. Explaining how experience, as well as scientific knowledge, has led to a particular diagnosis or treatment plan, or, as students progress, challenging them with questions, are all enormously helpful.

### Technical proficiency

Probably the biggest concern facing both host practices and students is how much the students should be allowed to ‘do’ during their EMS placements. Practices vary enormously in their willingness to allow students to perform practical tasks and often the members of individual practices vary almost as much as the practices themselves!
The acquisition of new skills should be an evolving process, and requires repeated practice. Students will need to become familiar not only with clinical examination of the common species, but also their handling and restraint and basic nursing requirements. The more they do, the better they will become at recognising the normal and abnormal state. Busy consultation periods may not always allow sufficient time, but students can be encouraged to use their spare time to examine and care for hospitalised animals. Giving students responsibility for monitoring individual in-patients provides them with invaluable opportunities for practice and can free nursing staff’s time. Similarly, asking them to monitor anaesthetics means that they will get opportunities to examine the animal, will become more active participants in the procedure and so are likely to gain more from it.

Perhaps more contentiously, students also look to EMS as an important means of improving their treatment skills, particularly surgical, and it is probably in this area that practices differ most. With the best will in the world, the veterinary schools are not able to provide sufficient clinical material and supervision for every student to have practised every technique on every species before qualifying. Once new graduates start working, however, it is in everyone’s best interest, including the patients’ and employers’, that they are as ‘competent’ as possible. By performing procedures under qualified supervision while training, future veterinary surgeons are more likely to be able and confident employees.

While it is recognised that practices will vary in how much they are willing to let students do, it is worth bearing in mind that the most routine injection, blood sampling, intubation, neutering and so on, can be a valuable (and exciting!) experience for someone who is keen to learn. Practising handling instruments and suture patterns in quiet periods, using time-expired materials and towels, can be a useful way of giving students (and the veterinary surgeon) enough confidence in their abilities to enable them to move on to wound closure in a patient. Students vary enormously in terms of their natural manual flair, but helping the less dextrous and confident to improve can be a rewarding experience for the practitioner. The RCVS Guide to Professional Conduct specifies the level of supervision required for clinical veterinary students undertaking practical tasks. This is summarised in the box on the right.

**COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS**

Not only do students need to develop the ability to communicate effectively with clients and other members of the practice, they also have to appreciate the need to be able to work as a member of a small team. Again, learning these skills as students will hopefully help both them and their employers in the future. The Veterinary Defence Society estimates that 80 per cent of all claims contain some element of communication breakdown and many involve recent graduates. On a more positive note, good communication has been shown to lead to better case management, client satisfaction and loyalty. Many students are naturally good communicators; others are more reticent and shy.

Encouraging students to talk to clients at appropriate times can be helpful (all will have been warned at their respective schools to be tactful and not to offer contradictory opinions). On a more formal basis with suitable clients, students may be able to take histories or telephone owners with laboratory results or progress reports. Students will also have been advised by their schools to be helpful within the practice and should be encouraged to assist and be aware of the duties of lay staff where appropriate.

**RCVS recommendations for the level of veterinary supervision of students**

Under the current regulations (Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966 and the Amendments of 1981 and 1993), veterinary students embarking upon their clinical studies are entitled to perform the following:

- Examine animals
- Carry out tests upon animals under the direction of a registered veterinary surgeon
- Administer treatment (other than by way of surgical operations) to animals under the supervision of a registered veterinary surgeon, and
- Perform surgical operations upon animals in accordance with the directions and under the direct and continuous personal supervision of a registered veterinary surgeon

The Council of the Royal College offers the following interpretation of terms:

- **Direction**: The veterinary surgeon gives the student directions with regard to the tests to be carried out but is not necessarily present when they are performed
- **Supervision**: The veterinary surgeon is present and in a position to respond to a request for assistance, but is not necessarily standing by the student’s side or even in the same room
- **Direct and continuous personal supervision**: The veterinary surgeon is present and giving the student (and the animal) his or her undivided attention

**PROFESSIONAL LIFE**

EMS is the ideal opportunity for exposing students to the realities of practice life. They are encouraged

![Explaining how a particular diagnosis has been arrived at helps students to develop observational and problem-solving skills](image-url)
by the schools to work full practice hours and, where possible, to make themselves available out of hours. As a result, they are more likely to be involved in interesting cases, may provide useful additional assistance, and will also gain an insight into what is likely to be required of them once qualified.

Discussions and observation of ethical, legal and welfare issues are also important benefits that can be gained from EMS, as is an appreciation of future career opportunities. Final-year students are encouraged to attend the SPVS/BVA/RCVS Student Seminar, which also covers many of these areas.

### ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS

All the schools ask practices for some sort of formal assessment of the student’s performance during his/her EMS placement. In some cases, this takes the form of a ‘tick box’ assessment of various criteria, whereas others request a more subjective judgement of the need for further practice by the student in various areas. These assessment forms not only help identify problem areas for individual students, but can help flag up more general issues for the schools. Wherever possible, the assessment form should be completed by the vet who has had responsibility for the student during the placement. Additional comments are always welcomed. It is also helpful if the practitioner is able to discuss the assessment with the student directly.

### BENEFITS OF EMS TO THE PRACTITIONER

An informal survey by the author of practitioners providing EMS placements found that almost all derived some benefits from student visits. Among those quoted were:

- Satisfaction from helping develop students’ skills and observing the improvement in confidence and ability;
- The presence of another person acting as an impetus for self-audit and a review of one’s methods;
- The chance to influence the training of potential future colleagues;
- The opportunity to pick up on recent developments in ideas and techniques from the teaching centres, particularly when hosting final-year students;
- The possibility of recruiting future assistants;
- The pleasure of having the company of intelligent young people in the practice!

### FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has recently funded a new initiative, the Veterinary Business Liaison Unit (VBLU). Although based at the Potters Bar campus of the Royal Veterinary College, this unit works on behalf of all the UK veterinary schools to facilitate communication between the schools and veterinary businesses. In particular, it will be responsible for coordinating the flow of information and teaching materials between all relevant parties.

In practical terms this will involve setting up a new national database of practices willing to accept students for EMS. The database, which will be electronic in form and available on the Internet, will mean that the same information about practices is available to students from all the schools. From the practices’ perspective, the unit will try to unify the paperwork from the schools to produce standardised versions and so reduce duplication. In the longer term, it is hoped that the VBLU will be a source of EMS teaching material and general support for practices taking students and that it will facilitate further collaborative ventures between the schools and veterinary businesses.

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**FMD and EMS**

At the time of writing, the UK is still experiencing outbreaks of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD). This has already had an effect on EMS, and although some students have had temporary vacation placements with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, many have experienced difficulties finding large animal practice placements. This situation may well continue for some time, with the additional decline in referral large animal work also having serious longer term implications for teaching in the veterinary schools.

The schools and the RCVS are aware of these potential consequences of FMD and will be looking at ways to address future difficulties. In the meantime, practices are to be congratulated for the cooperation and active support they have given to student education over the years. Veterinary EMS is an area in which the profession should feel justifiable pride.
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*In Practice* 2001 23: 487-490
doi: 10.1136/inpract.23.8.487

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