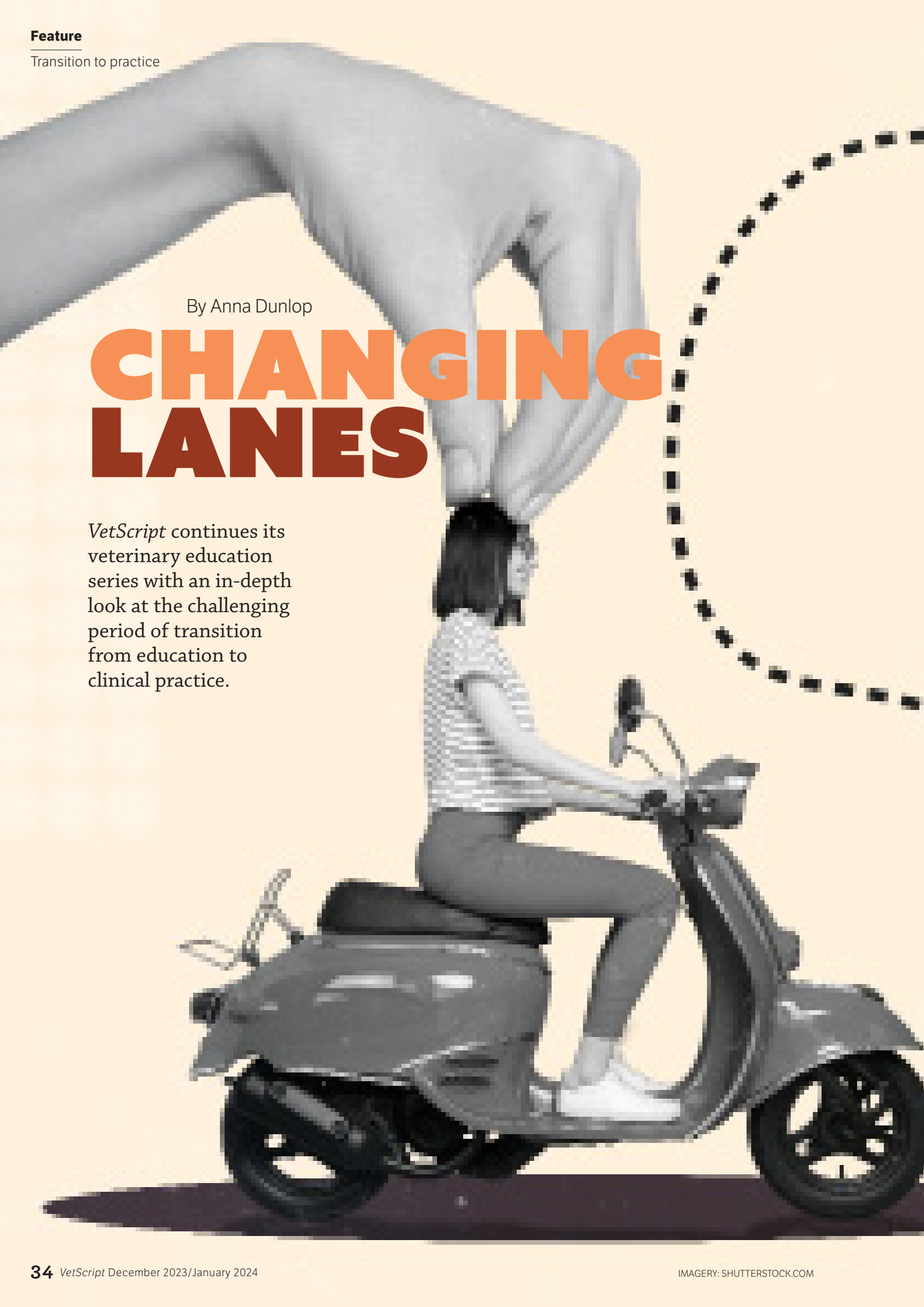


By Anna Dunlop

CHANGING LANES

VetScript continues its veterinary education series with an in-depth look at the challenging period of transition from education to clinical practice.





Transition to practice is a critical period for both new veterinary graduates and the practices hiring them. A survey conducted by VCNZ in 2020 found that, while most new veterinary graduates in New Zealand stayed in their first employment positions for three years or more, a significant proportion (44.4%) left within one or two years of starting, with the most common reasons being toxic practice cultures and lack of support (Gates et al., 2020).

Several studies have investigated the importance of the transition time to practice, including a follow-up to the above-mentioned VCNZ survey, which considered the experiences of employers, work colleagues and mentors with new veterinary graduates (Gates et al., 2021).



“OVERALL, THE MOST IMPORTANT THING FOR THE NEW GRADUATES IN THE [VETERINARY TRANSITION] STUDY WAS SUPPORT.”

A key finding was a disconnect between the expectations of new graduates and those of their employers – that while new graduates met (and often exceeded) their employers’ expectations in certain areas, including communicating with colleagues and clients, researching diagnoses and designing treatment plans, they did not meet expectations (in some cases possibly unrealistic) for time management, commercial and financial acumen and coping with the volume of work. On the other hand, free-text answers revealed that new graduates had unrealistic expectations of “what is possible, both clinically and financially, in first-opinion practice”.

This expectation mismatch was also illustrated in a 2011 UK study of final-year veterinary students’ and recent graduates’ opinions of the attributes that ease the transition to practice (Rhind et al., 2011). Both students and graduates rated research skills, business acumen and knowledge of veterinary practice management as the least important attributes, despite the increased focus in veterinary curricula on financial and practice management (including in the new curriculum at Massey University’s School of Veterinary Science).

These studies highlight the importance of both

employers and their new employees having realistic expectations of what the new graduates can and should accomplish in the first few years of practice.

Another important piece of research on the topic is veterinarian Rosie Allister’s *Veterinary Transition Study*, completed at the University of Edinburgh in 2019. The cohort study followed 35 veterinary students from their final year of university education to their second year in practice, with a focus on their mental health, experiences of support and development of professional identity.

Among Rosie’s wide range of findings are two key points:

- » Veterinary graduates who had not experienced mental health problems before transitioning to practice could go on to develop difficulties if they were in the wrong work environment.
- » Conversely, graduates who had experienced adversity and mental health difficulties at or before veterinary school had not struggled that much at transition if they had good support.

“Overall, the most important thing for the new

graduates in the study was support,” says Rosie.

Other findings pointed to problems with workplace culture:

- » Stigma and fear of discrimination were prevalent: “There were real fears about disclosure and access to help – it didn’t always feel safe for people to disclose.”
- » Nearly all graduates in the study reported feeling they were a burden in their first practice, which had led to difficulties in asking for help.

Rosie also highlights the so-called ‘responsibility mismatch’.

“Putting people in situations that are wildly unsafe in terms of the level of experience that they have has been a feature of veterinary medicine for a long time,” she says. “Yes you can learn from that sink-or-swim approach, but you will also make mistakes, and we are not in a society that tolerates that for our animals anymore.” She adds that the “I had to go through it, so you do too” attitude was not confined to the older generation of veterinarians. “In the study, some graduates who had been through a horrible time in their first jobs were already recreating that and doing it to others within two years of graduation,” she says. “That really alarmed me.”

Rosie also considered new graduates’ beliefs in relation to professional identity and the point at which they thought they were ‘real’ veterinarians. “You might think it would be when they pass their finals, graduate, sign on to the register or start working, but it wasn’t any of those. Almost universally it was when they could do very difficult things, completely unsupported, usually in slightly extreme situations – a caesarean on a cow on a hill in the snow, for example.” She points out that this belief of what it means to be a ‘real’ veterinarian is not necessarily good for graduates’ wellbeing. “It’s just one more thing that makes it very difficult to ask for and accept help.”

So how can we smooth the transition process for both new veterinary graduates and their employers? The first article in this education series, which featured in the October/November issue of *VetScript*, focused on the extensive changes underway at the School of Veterinary Science, with upgraded facilities, a new admissions process and a new curriculum with a greater emphasis on non-technical skills and ‘Day One Competencies’ (the knowledge, skills and abilities that veterinarians must possess on ‘Day One’ of practice).

While most in the veterinary profession agree that these changes will better prepare veterinary students for practice, they don’t provide a complete solution. According to the Australasian Veterinary Boards Council’s standards (the list of requirements with which the School of Veterinary Science must comply), veterinarians are not expected to practise alone from Day One, meaning veterinary businesses, regulators and professional associations must support veterinary graduates once they enter the workforce.

For NZVA Chair Grant Guilford, clinical mentoring is key. Grant was one of three people commissioned by the Veterinary Schools of Australia and New Zealand to review the profession’s education in the region. The findings were published in July in *Rethinking Veterinary Education* (Scott-Orr H et al., 2023), along with 25 recommendations for Australasia’s veterinary schools, employers, regulators and professional associations.

“Ethically, in-clinic mentoring is the most important of the recommended measures,” says Grant, “because there’s no point doing anything else

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if you’re just going to burn up new graduates when they arrive and lose them from the profession.” He adds that there needs to be consistency in the mentoring provided. “The differences were significant; some graduates were looked after very well by their employers and others were faced with the sink-or-swim approach, because that’s what their employers had experienced themselves.”

Research has shown that good mentorship is important to new graduates. In one study (Reinhard et al., 2021) new veterinary graduates described a ‘good mentor’ as someone who advocates for and supports them, empathises with them regarding their challenges, is willing to answer questions and seeks graduates’ feedback. The study also recommended that students be taught how to find good mentorship during the transition to practice.

Rethinking Veterinary Education goes as far as

recommending that the NZVA and VCNZ consider making new graduate mentoring compulsory, but Iain McLachlan, VCNZ CEO, is in two minds about it. “I don’t think you can force people to do it. You have to want to mentor and be mentored, and making that kind of thing mandatory doesn’t necessarily help.” Rosie agrees. “Successful mentoring depends on how much a person wants to be a mentor, the skills they have and the time they have to put into it. Their own wellbeing is also a factor – are they overwhelmed themselves?”

New veterinary graduates in Aotearoa can also access professional and personal mentoring through the NZVA’s NZVET Mentoring Support programme, which is offered in partnership with VCNZ, the School of Veterinary Science and the Veterinary Professional Insurance Society. The programme uses the mentoring software platform Mentorloop to match graduates with experienced professionals.

The review also recommends that “veterinary professional associations assist employers in taking charge of the workplace issues that affect recruitment, retention and wellbeing, and in developing their members’ business and management experience to help hone veterinary business models”. Again, Grant says this is critical. “The system won’t work if the practice models can’t provide graduates with decent salaries and decent support, and develop them into competent practitioners.”

He highlights Franklin Vets (the winner of this year’s NZVA Veterinary Business Excellence Award) as a practice that puts its staff at the core of its business strategy, with a strong focus on wellbeing and work-life balance. Additionally, its structured three-year graduate programme addresses specific

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areas in which new graduates need support, and the practice also offers clinic rotations, bi-monthly case-review sessions, a resilience programme and external professional support from health specialists and financial experts.

NZVA CEO Kevin Bryant says helping practices to improve their business models was the driving force behind the NZVA Veterinary Business Branch’s (VBB’s) inaugural business symposium in November 2022 (a second was held this year). “The symposium



VETERINARIANS RETURNING TO PRACTICE

Those transitioning to practice are not only new graduates; many veterinarians re-enter the profession, often after parental leave. In supporting their return to work, practices offer them opportunities to make a smooth transition and also help to alleviate the workforce shortage.

An NZVA survey of working parents revealed some common concerns for returning veterinarians, including issues with maintaining professional respect and equity in the eyes of the team, being offered opportunities for progression, and getting time for retraining and upskilling

to rebuild confidence after time away from clinical practice. In addition, and in response to a question on their actions following pregnancy or parental leave, 23% of respondents had moved to or sought jobs with flexible hours, and 8% had left the veterinary profession.

NZVA CEO Kevin Bryant says work is underway to offer support. “Refresher/returning-to-work schemes are being created and we have a small working group charged with identifying solutions to some of the challenges faced by working parents.”

took a practical, workshop-based approach to helping to ensure the sustainability of veterinary businesses and improved workplace culture, retention and recruitment outcomes,” he says.

Kevin points to two other useful tools for creating and maintaining great workplaces: Workplace Workup, which helps business leaders to self-evaluate their workplaces; and the VBB’s benchmarking surveys (see page 40 for more), which collect data on fees, remuneration and, more recently, business key performance indicators.

Rosie says employers should think carefully about new graduates’ inductions. “The first year is crucial to whether people stay in the profession or not,” she says. “A gradual transition to sole responsibility is really important; they have to do it at some point, but the first week or month is not the time.” She adds that validation and positive feedback from colleagues go a long way to alleviating the impacts of difficult clients on new graduates. “If people’s core needs at work are being met by their peers, it won’t matter as much if a client is being unreasonable.”

Addressing these core needs is also fundamental to preparing new graduates for the realities of the workplace. An Australian study of graduates’ selection for employment (Schull et al., 2021) found that ‘cultural fit’ – the way a person fits into a pre-existing culture – is of high importance to veterinary employers. Its authors suggest that educational institutions help students to develop “self-awareness of their own personal and professional skill set, including strengths and weaknesses” and “an ability to effectively appraise the needs of a specific job, employer and workplace to determine if the union is likely to be suitable for all parties involved”.

In other words, if a new graduate knows their core needs, they can assess whether a practice’s culture will meet them and choose a role that is suited to them as an individual.

Finally, Rosie suggests that professional organisations promote the idea that a good veterinarian is one who is confident in asking for help. “There’s this attitude in the veterinary world that you have to be strong and resilient all the time, and this is unhelpful in a profession where a lot of people struggle with their mental health,” she says. “One thing that can help young veterinarians is seeing senior people in the profession talking about difficult times they’ve had, and that it’s good to get help and support.”

Look out for the final article in our veterinary education series in the February/March issue of *VetScript*. 

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