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## The case of veterinary interprofessional practice: From one health to a world of its own



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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Research regarding the veterinary professions' involvement in interprofessional practice and education (IPE), either with health care professionals as part of One Health, or specifically within the veterinary health care team, is sparse.

**Purpose:** To investigate veterinary interprofessional working and learning in veterinary practices; then ultimately to make recommendations for IPE.

**Method:** Two case studies in typical but contrasting practices were conducted. The study consisted of three sequential and complementary weeks: 1) observing the whole team, 2) shadowing selected focus individuals from each profession and 3) interviewing focus individuals regarding teamwork. Triangulation was achieved by synthesis of emergent themes from observational field notes and interview transcripts.

**Discussion:** Facilitators to interprofessional practices included hierarchy, trust and value, different perspectives, formal infrastructure and professionalization. Challenges included hierarchy, spatial and temporal work patterns, professional motivations, and error and blame.

**Conclusion:** The veterinary and human health care fields face similar interprofessional challenges. Real life observations, as described here, can provide important insight relevant to the design of IPE initiatives.

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### Introduction

Fostering the ethos of interprofessionalism, health care practitioners and educators have learned from interprofessional research regarding other professions. Initial advances in interprofessional research have often been attributed to aviation. Aspects of this research have helped to shape advances in health care interprofessional education (IPE).<sup>1</sup> However, specific issues relating to different groups should not be overlooked.<sup>2</sup> This paper introduces another, closely related group, the veterinary professions.

Human health care is a substantial topic in its own right, with interprofessional research focussed on doctors and nurses<sup>3</sup> as well as dentists,<sup>4</sup> pharmacists and psychologists.<sup>5</sup> Interprofessional work can also be extended, from the notion of general practice or hospitals, to include “One Health” dimensions. The aim of One Health; “to improve health and well-being through the prevention of risks and the mitigation of effects of crises that originate at the

interface between humans, animals and their various environments”,<sup>6</sup> naturally also involves members of the veterinary profession.

Research focussed on medical students learning with veterinary students has included for example: attitudes toward collaborative learning, where veterinary students taught medical students basic surgical skills<sup>7</sup>; attitudes toward learning together on a small group activity regarding risk factors of a zoonotic disease<sup>8</sup>; the importance of veterinarians in the context of interprofessional problem solving in disease prevention<sup>9</sup>; and a scoping review of existing IPE one health initiatives, citing nine articles and six university websites.<sup>10</sup> The results of these studies are largely positive, suggesting changing attitudes and awareness of the importance of veterinarians and physicians working together. However, they tend to recommend further research of this substantial topic, particularly regarding validation of concepts and development of outcomes measures to evaluate the effectiveness of IPE.<sup>10</sup>

While acknowledging One Health style IPE research<sup>11</sup> and development, with the inclusion of veterinary professions as central members of the team, differentiation of individual roles within the veterinary health care team has emphasized the

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importance of not only looking outwards beyond the veterinary professions, but also looking inwards toward the veterinary field as its own world, just as human health care has done.

Within the veterinary field, day-to-day work involves teamwork between members of different occupational groups. However, real-life veterinary interprofessional working and veterinary IPE have rarely been studied. The veterinary, and allied, professions continue to be taught almost exclusively in isolation, which may heighten differences in cultures and amplify boundaries between the professions, as suggested for health care.<sup>12,13</sup> One study in the UK has evaluated two IPE resources which aimed to aid understanding of roles between the two biggest groups: veterinary surgeons/veterinarians and veterinary nurses. However, it was relatively small scale and, although it suggested a positive change in attitude, it did not demonstrate a lasting change for all measures.<sup>14</sup>

Veterinary nurses are not unique to the UK, but in this country their professionalization has developed significantly. To understand the relationships within the veterinary field, it is important to first compare the evolution of these professions. This has been reported in-depth in a previous publication<sup>15</sup> and in brief below. Veterinary surgeons' professional status dates back to a Royal Charter in 1844. In contrast, the first UK veterinary nursing training scheme was introduced in 1961 and Registered veterinary nurses are only recently (2011) accountable for their own actions; previously veterinary surgeons were accountable for all acts within the practice. In 2015, a new Royal Charter recognized veterinary nurses as a profession.<sup>16</sup> The traditional hierarchical relationships that existed between the veterinary surgeons and their assistants, veterinary nurses, may eventually be replaced by a more horizontal structure between the two professions. Understanding this evolving relationship and the outcomes for the practice, team, clients and patients will require continuing research.<sup>15</sup>

There are also a growing number of professions and occupations working alongside veterinary surgeons and veterinary nurses, both employed by, and external to, the core practice team. These groups, including practice managers, receptionists, animal physiotherapists and equine dentists, have received even less consideration in research.

The potential for working relationships to be in flux due to the rise of new occupations, increasing status of old occupations and challenges to the historically dominant single profession, makes the present an ideal time to investigate veterinary interprofessional practice. The current study looks at this modern day phenomenon, with the aim of better understanding veterinary interprofessional practice as a precursor to the development of evidence-informed veterinary IPE.

## Methods

The methods and results reported in this paper are part of a wider study into veterinary interprofessional practice, as part of a PhD funded by the Bloomsbury Colleges Studentships. The overarching study utilized mixed methods with Social Network Analysis (SNA) as the first stage. The results from the SNA have been published as two articles within a veterinary journal<sup>17,18</sup> and are revisited in the discussion section of this article, as they are interwoven in the outcomes of the overarching research purpose. This paper details the outcomes of two case studies, which formed the second part of the study.

### Background

Eleven practices participated in the first part of the overarching study, the SNA. Of these, two were chosen to become case study sites for the second part of the study. The choice was based on team

composition, evidence of interprofessional interactions (through the SNA), diversity of attributes (e.g. species treated and independent/corporate) and availability.

### Case study sites

Table 1 provides details of the two contrasting case study sites.

### Methodology

Each embedded study consisted of three separate weeks. The weeks built on each other, and the data from each was triangulated with the other weeks (the discussion also includes triangulation with the previously conducted SNA). The first week consisted of general observations of the team as a whole. Observations were location dependent, for example, focussed on the interactions in reception, operating rooms or prep rooms. This methodology was ideal for general teamwork observations, but failed to appreciate the continuity of interactions. The second week therefore was designed to understand the flow of an individual's day. Six focus individuals were shadowed in each practice by continuously following them for one day. Focus individuals were chosen based on their profession (representatives of all were chosen) and SNA results (individuals involved in many and few interactions were chosen equally).

Observations in both practices totaled 220 h. Field notes were taken throughout the observations of ad libitum speech, summaries of conversations, actions and interpretations. The notes were iteratively read and analyzed according to the nature of the interaction.

The third week involved interviewing the focus individuals regarding teamwork to gain an understanding of the thoughts and feelings of the participants, which is difficult to consider through observations. Participants were asked how they perceive the veterinary team in which they work and what they thought were the impacts of the changing times of practices, professions and occupations. The 12 interviews (totaling 8 h) were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was performed on the transcripts in accordance with Braun and Clarke's six stages.<sup>19</sup> Participant checking was conducted and demonstrated agreement with the transcripts.

In addition to these three sequential stages, artefacts such as photos were also collected throughout the observation period.

### Analysis

A Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framework pioneered by Vygostky and extended by Engeström<sup>20</sup> was used. This promotes the consideration of subjects with different objects of activity (motivations) even when the ultimate outcome is the same (such as improving health of patients). Each activity system of

**Table 1**  
The Case Study sites.

	Case 1	Case 2
Animals treated:	Small animal	Mixed (small, farm, equine)
Location:	Urban	Rural
Size:	Medium, 30	Large, 60
Veterinary surgeons	7	26
Veterinary nurses	6	14
Administrators	6	4
Receptionists	10	14
Branches:	5	4
Status:	Independent	Part of a larger group

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