

The Battle of the Sexes in the Veterinary World

By Charlotte Heath, Surrey

Animal Husbandry placements, we've all been there, right? The variety of placements are really the joy of it. With the good days - a new exciting thing you haven't seen, people around you supporting and helping you, the kind farmer who wants you to get involved. Then there's the bad days, where something happens, and leaves you so taken aback it's hard to know what to do or say!

On one such placement in the Summer of my first year, I had just finished a gruelling morning of mucking out stables, poo picking etc etc (you know the drill!). I was having a cup of tea, and a much-needed break, when the yard owner came over for a chat. She asked me what it was that I wanted to specialise in. A question, much like "Why do you want to be a vet," is one that I've never really had a definitive answer for, it changes daily! Given that I have spent a large proportion of my life around horses, in varying shapes and sizes, it seemed more than logical to tell her I wished to pursue a career in the Equine field. You can imagine my surprise when she turned and laughed in my face! On questioning her reaction, she told me "you can't possibly be an equine vet, you're much too short!" Naturally, I went home and cried to my Mum, but it led to me questioning - was this event in isolation? Had other people also received comments for being female? And, just what, and how, had the role of women in Veterinary medicine changed over time?

The first female vet, Aleen Cust, qualified in the 1890s and worked for 20 years to gain her accreditation in 1922, to the present, where 77% of graduating vets are female, it is no surprise we have come a long way in a short time. The early developments were due to changes in legislation, largely the right for women to vote! And in the celebration of its centenary, it couldn't be a better time to discuss the progress, and the issues that still exist, with the position of women in Veterinary Medicine. Aleen Cust wasn't even permitted to take exams, having to rely on recommendations from the University to secure her first job. Throughout her career, she and the female vets who followed in her footsteps, were consistently rejected, or told they weren't as good as the male vets they were working with. When you consider now that some people prefer a female vet, even as farm vets, it could be argued that equality is beginning to be reached. The rapid changes can be seen to outweigh the antiquated views of some, but with a large gender pay gap still present, the industry still does not seem to have caught up with the expectations of the modern day. This seems to be a large problem faced by Vets, especially for new graduates where females on average, can be expected to earn £3000 less than male graduates (The Guardian, 2017) and males are far more likely to progress to managerial roles, or specialist careers. (Vet Futures survey)

My case, unsurprisingly, isn't in isolation, and equally isn't the worst example. Simply googling "sexism in the Veterinary career" brings up multiple accounts of women experiencing negative comments for their gender, by clients or even colleagues, simply being told they aren't good enough/qualified enough/strong enough/dedicated enough, compared to their male counterparts. Of course, this isn't in isolation to the Veterinary profession, being equally common to both males and females in other careers.

The difference between the attitudes towards vets of either gender might be for many reasons - women are expected to remain in the profession for a lesser amount of time, instead choosing to have children and a family, or work part time to maintain this. Of course, this isn't true for all female vets but could be a deciding factor for future employers.

The view that many members of the public hold is of the idealistic "James Herriot" veterinary view, where they expect a male to come along to see their dog, right after finishing up on a dairy farm! This just isn't the way the Veterinary world operates any more, and the rise in female graduates and female vets being seen, especially in areas such as the farming

industry, should, in time, allow antiquated views towards women held by some individuals to be changed. In a career where both males and females are equally qualified, undertaking the same level of training, and working equally as hard to get where they are, more should be done to both change people's perceptions, and encourage an equal wage for the same amount of effort and dedication. In Veterinary science, unlike some other careers, both women and men sacrifice their personal lives for work to get to the position they are in, and both should be rewarded equally for this. For the same quality of work, shouldn't we all be paid the same? Isn't this just discrimination?

It's up to us, and our generation, to do something to make a difference. For every person who makes a negative comment, we need to represent ourselves in the best light, ignoring and rising above what they might say, continuing to pursue the careers we wish. Being told I was too short to be an equine vet isn't something that I can change, but it hasn't stopped me following my dreams!

REFERENCES:

- <https://www.vetfutures.org.uk/download/factsheets/Gender%20statistics%20about%20veterinary%20surgeons%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>.
- <http://www.veterinarywoman.co.uk/2015/02/veterinary-women-past-present-and-future>)
- <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jun/14/women-face-pay-gap-just-one-year-after-graduation>
- <https://www.vettimes.co.uk/news/disappointing-gender-pay-gap-revealed-in-spvs-survey>
- <https://www.vetfutures.org.uk/download/factsheets/Gender%20statistics%20about%20veterinary%20surgeons%20in%20the%20UK.pdf>