



*Taking charge  
of our future  
together*

## Message from the RCVS VN Council Chair and BVNA President

In early 2015, with the granting of the new Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS) Royal Charter, veterinary nurses became recognised as true professionals in their own right. By November 2015 *Vet Futures – Taking charge of our future* challenged the veterinary nursing profession to develop its own clear vision and ambitions – now is the time to take charge and shape our own future.

VN Futures was launched in October 2015 following a joint meeting with the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) and the RCVS Veterinary Nurses Council. While considering the need and desire to work together on this project using our combined skills and knowledge, it was very clear we also needed to get out and about and talk to veterinary nurses. This project needed to address today's nurses' concerns, while also looking to secure our future. Veterinary nurses are the quiet voice of the veterinary world, and historically known for not engaging widely with initiatives and organisations. A series of five meetings across the country was started and word began to spread. One event had to have additional places added to accommodate everyone. The format was always interactive, with VNs arriving with ideas, the desire and, more importantly, the belief that change can happen. The ideas began to flow and, reassuringly, some common themes and ideas became apparent.

This report sets out the ambitions and, more importantly, the action needed to make the changes the profession asked us for. Inevitably there will be areas we have missed, or those with which readers disagree: planning for the future is always a challenge, but that does not mean we should not try.

We are very aware that difficulty in recruiting registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) is a key issue. Throughout the project we always had the three Rs in mind: recruitment, retention and returners. We believe that, by addressing some of these key concerns, the situation will improve, while accepting that such change will take time.

This is just the beginning. The vast amount of work to follow publication of this report will need all members of the veterinary team, and their organisations, to work together alongside other stakeholders. We look forward to you joining us on the journey.



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RCVS VN Council Chair



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# Summary of ambitions and recommendations



1. Improve careers materials for schools
2. Encourage more males into the profession via targeted marketing of the demographic
3. Develop VN Careers Ambassadors
4. Review the syllabus (species focused/level/guided learning hours/evidence base)
5. Increase the number of training practices
6. Develop a VN Schools Council

7. Establish a working party through the RCVS to further canvas opinion on the scope, level and delivery of post-qualification awards for veterinary nurses
8. Develop advanced practitioner qualifications and/or status
9. Encourage maximising individual nurses' strengths; provide progression for all
10. Develop lifelong learning in leadership; mentoring and targeted leadership programmes
11. Actively promote performance review and evaluation across the profession
12. Explore ways to develop the next generation of veterinary nurse leaders; identify and nurture talent, providing the skills and opportunities to succeed

13. Deliver a coordinated, well-funded and evidenced-based approach to mental health and wellbeing for the veterinary team
14. Review the approach to recruiting and selecting veterinary nurse students to ensure adequate support, improve wellbeing and manage expectations
15. Develop peer support and/or mentoring mechanisms in all UK veterinary nursing schools and improve support for veterinary nurses post-registration
16. Develop support for overseas-graduated veterinary nurses working in the UK, who may not have benefitted from the same support as UK student nurses
17. Help veterinary professionals to work with uncertainties, and develop reflective practice

18. Develop links with human-centred nurses in practice, to establish the potential benefits to each profession, share resources and work collaboratively on pilot projects under the One Health umbrella
19. Explore the development of a cross-profession committee and the organisation of regional One Health events and research partnerships
20. Through the use of shared resources, work to empower veterinary nurses to become more involved with, and lead on, public health campaigns
21. Develop an evidence-based resource for veterinary nurses

22. Explore utilisation of a social media and television campaign to promote the role of the veterinary nurse, focusing on the training and development undertaken
23. Provide material for practices to use on their websites and elsewhere to promote veterinary nurses within their practice
24. Research and develop the district nurse role
25. Encourage charging for nurse time and skills by providing case studies/models to demonstrate increased practice revenue
26. Encourage flexible working
27. Establish inter-professional education and training for veterinary students and veterinary nurses along with inter-professional CPD
28. Provide opportunities for overseas veterinary nurses and vets registering with the RCVS to be educated on the role and responsibilities of veterinary nurses in the UK

29. Establish a formal Working Party that will review the evidence assembled by the VN Futures project, and consider possible reforms to Schedule 3 and related guidance
30. The Working Party may also consider proposals to separate the delegation rights of VNs from those of farmers
31. The Working Party will aim to report its recommendations to RCVS Council by March 2017



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# Introduction

Following publication of *Vet Futures – Taking charge of our future* in November 2015, and the recommendation that veterinary nurse leaders should develop a report and actions that are directly relevant to veterinary nurses and their future, RCVS VN Council and the BVNA Council have been busy with an unprecedented level of engagement with the veterinary nursing profession, to try and gauge the issues facing the profession and how these might be tackled within the next five years.

Through a programme of research and engagement, along with consideration of those issues already impacting the profession, the overarching aim of VN Futures has been to develop a vision and ambitions for 2020, and a way forward to achieving them.

The ambitions outlined in this report contain the necessary seeds for change that could lead to a dramatically improved and more coherent future for veterinary nurses, to the benefit of animals, their owners, the veterinary team and society at large.

## 1.1 Key objectives

As with *Vet Futures*, we recognise that there is little value in setting our sights on the future without addressing the current challenges, so one of the project's aims has been to develop an understanding of the key issues facing veterinary nurses today.

**The main objectives for VN Futures are summed up as follows:**

1. To identify challenges and opportunities the veterinary nursing profession will need to face – and rise to – if it is to shape a coherent future. What will help, what are the potential barriers?
2. To consider how these issues might be addressed and how the profession can prepare (including what support might be needed)
3. To agree a plan of action, to enable the profession to prepare for challenges and exploit future opportunities

## 1.2 Scope

While the *Vet Futures* project has focused on a vision for the veterinary profession for 2030, it was felt that with veterinary nursing being a relatively young

profession (55 years' old), and the length of training being shorter and retention rates lower, a focus of five years would be more appropriate.

Wherever they work, veterinary nurses operate in a multidisciplinary team alongside veterinary surgeons, practice managers, non-veterinary owners, animal care assistants, receptionists, technical and animal health officers and a whole host of professionals delivering animal healthcare services who all have a crucial part to play. This list is not exhaustive but seeks to demonstrate that a successful future for the veterinary nursing profession depends on the success of a wide range of allied professionals.

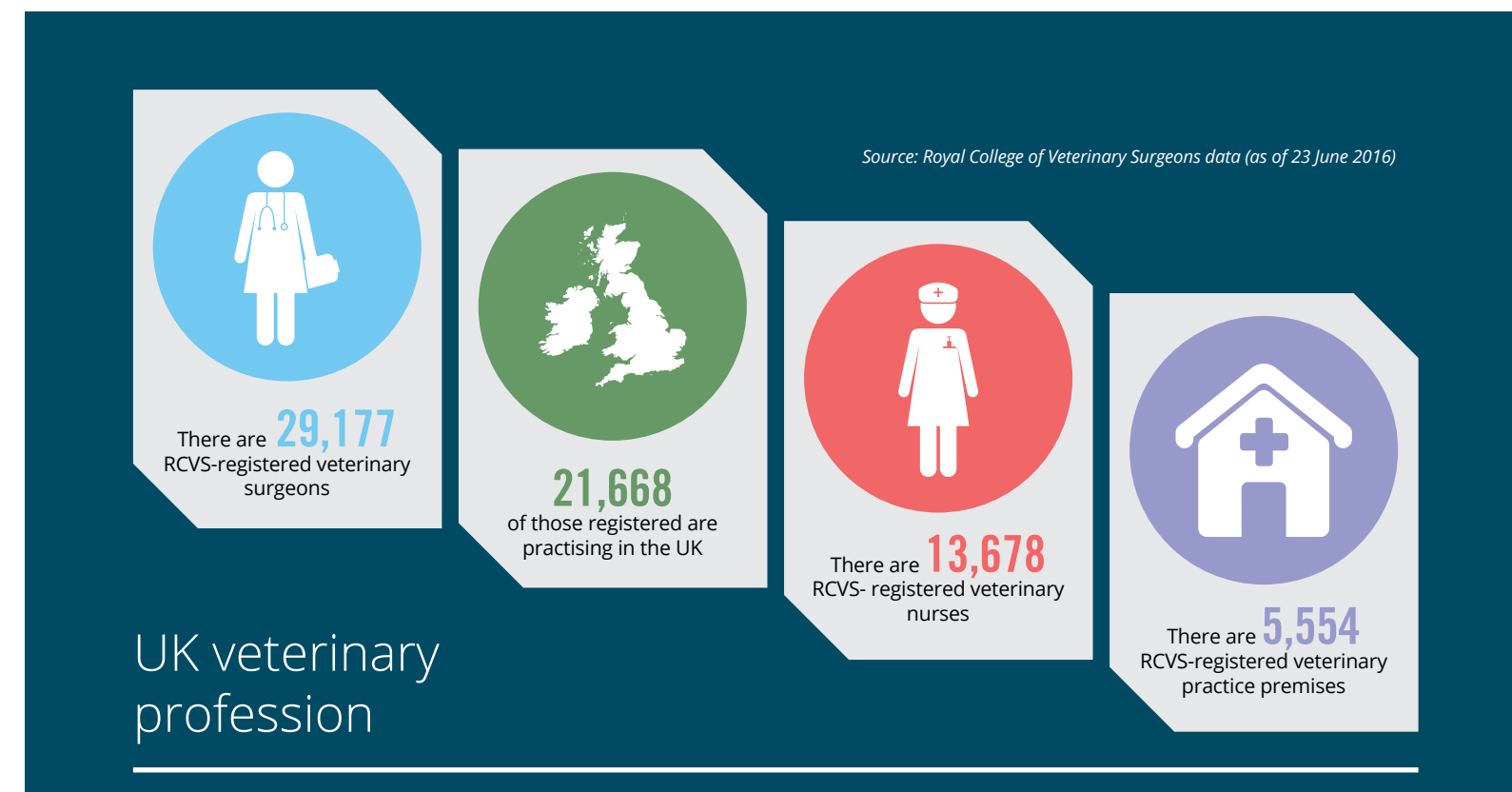
As the VN Futures Action Group (see Appendix A) we found it helpful to review the ambitions and recommendations identified within the *Vet Futures* report as many of the challenges and opportunities identified resonate for veterinary nurses. We have built upon the *Vet Futures* work and developed a clear vision with ambitions and actions directly applicable to veterinary nurses. Many of the themes overlap with, and closely link to, the *Vet Futures* report. It is envisaged that action plans from both professions may lead to jointly-run projects.

## 1.3 Approach

VN Futures has sought to initiate momentum across the profession, debate the key issues and explore how these may develop in five years' time. BVNA and RCVS have together stimulated and facilitated discussions regionally. The emerging ambitions come from the profession, and its partners.

Vet Futures had three main phases of activity: research, engagement and development of the November 2015 report, which took place over a twelve-month period with a further six months to clarify the actions. VN Futures has compressed this down to six months, with a focus on the following objectives:

- To place a strong emphasis on engagement with the profession; providing opportunity to air views, thoughts and comments on the future of the profession
- To maintain momentum and interest by releasing outputs along the way; maintaining links with those



- contributing to the events
- To ensure relevance and a robust evidence base for key issues, with challenge provided by the VN Futures Action Group.

A VN Futures web presence was set up ([www.vetfutures.org.uk/vnfutures](http://www.vetfutures.org.uk/vnfutures)) to provide an interactive focal point for the project. The website provides a platform for members of the veterinary team and other interested parties to air their opinions and views through blogs and polls.

The engagement activities have generated a wealth of intelligence. There has been a genuine agreement of views about the issues facing the profession, and a vast array of responses have been offered and absorbed. Our task then has been to refine, test and hone these

into a coherent vision for the future, and a way of turning this into our reality.

## 1.4 Engagement

Engagement with the profession and other stakeholders has taken place through a variety of activities:

- Lively stimulating interactive discussion sessions with veterinary nurses, veterinary surgeons and other interested parties at a roadshow of three dedicated meetings, alongside sessions at other meetings and congresses
- Three meetings of the VN Futures Action Group
- Two focus groups with VN Council and BVNA Council members
- Dedicated meetings with VN educationalists



The project has taken place over three distinct phases:

**PHASE 1**

Identifying the key strategic issues  
October 2015 – May 2016

**PHASE 2**

Refining  
April 2016 – July 2016

**PHASE 3**

Action phase  
July 2016 onwards

**- Project launch**

- Stakeholder meetings
- Research**
- Regional meetings

**- Preparing the VN Futures report**

- Developing the action plan
- Launch at Vet Futures summit**

**- Consultation and engagement with partners on actions**

- Deliver agreed action plan





## 2. Our vision





## 3. Ambition one: creating a sustainable workforce



### 3.1 What this ambition means

- School children have access to up-to-date relevant information on entry requirements and career pathways/progression
- Pre-registration training continues to offer multiple entry points (further education, higher education, apprenticeship)
- Opportunities for encouraging male veterinary nurses are explored; challenging and breaking stereotypes; considering more technical roles
- Veterinary nurses are equipped with a breadth of skills that enables them to pursue any number of career paths and are supported in taking these from 'Day-one' to 'Year-one' competences
- Opportunities for research, evaluation and analysis are commonplace across all pre-registration training
- Veterinary nursing schools are encouraged to liaise with the regulator
- Veterinary practices are encouraged to train student veterinary nurses

### 3.2 Why it's important

The veterinary nursing profession has many special qualities unique to its role, though not all of these are recognised until a potential candidate goes through work experience or visits a veterinary environment to see the contributions of the veterinary nurse within practice. Some people know exactly what they want to do with their professional life from a very young age, but for others they discover the job later on in life.

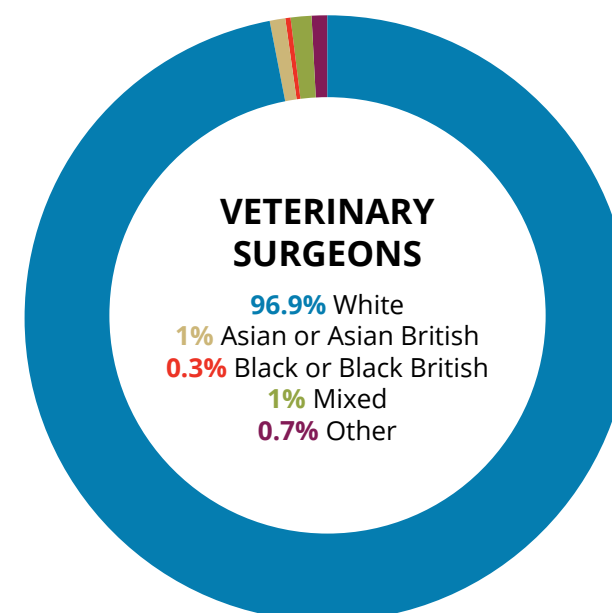
The demand for RVNs is increasing. Year on year the RCVS registers, more nurses, however, numbers need to increase to produce a sustainable workforce. Without new veterinary nurses entering the profession, it can't continue, but potential nurses need to be well informed about their future career paths. With only 5% of veterinary nurses returning to full time work after maternity leave (Shine, 2015), flexible working, job share schemes and consideration of annualised hours seek to address this. Veterinary nurses working within out-of-hours provision have stated that this has allowed them to spend time with the children and avoided or reduced child-care costs.

### 3.3 Careers materials

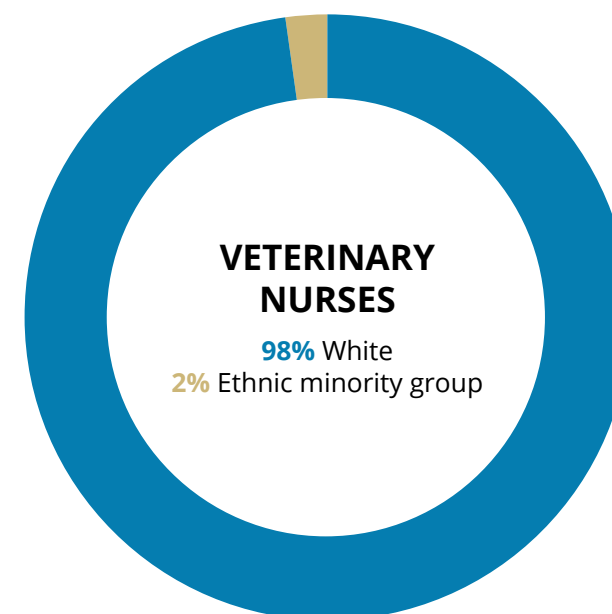
Many veterinary nursing schools and career/recruitment agencies provide careers materials. However, these are very much tailored by the individual organisation and do not always contain the most up-to-date or relevant information. Discussions with many educators clearly demonstrated that careers events are well attended, however, animal management staff attending these events don't always have the necessary knowledge of the veterinary nursing profession and therefore are unable to advise appropriately. Careers materials should also be aimed at parents, who are often instrumental in assisting with career choices.

### 3.4 Careers Ambassadors

Careers Ambassadors are highly motivated nurses recruited and trained to spread the word about the exciting, varied and real career opportunities available for registered veterinary nurses to potential recruits and career recruitment agencies. Once trained, these bright, progressive advocates would be linked with their local education establishments to ensure that their newly



Source: RCVS Survey of the Veterinary Profession 2014



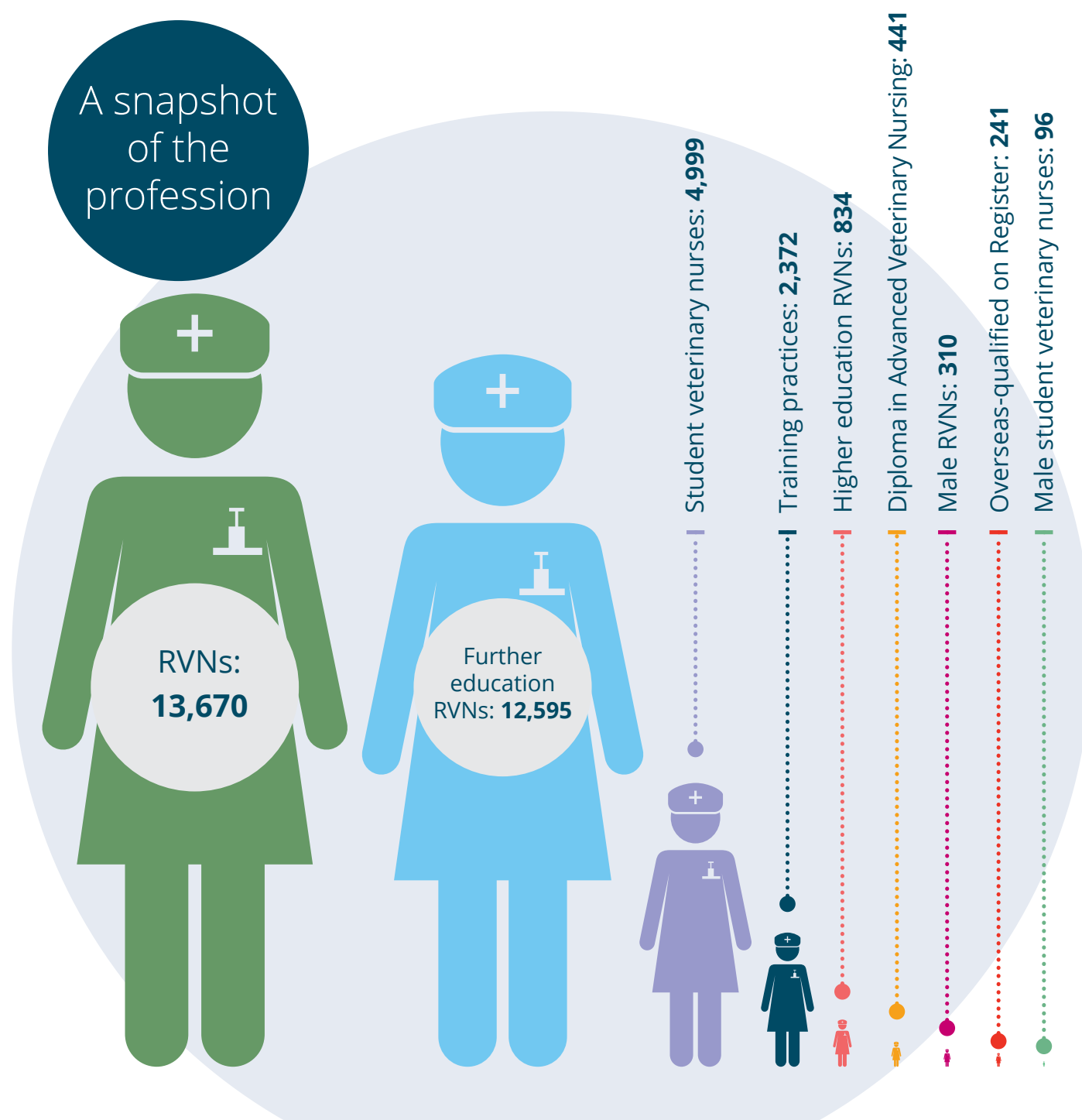
Source: RCVS Survey of the Veterinary Nursing Profession 2014

acquired skills are used effectively discussing career progression and opportunities based on their own, often amusing experiences.

### 3.5 Entry routes

There are established training programmes for the pre-registration qualification. There are two awarding organisations for the Further Education (FE) route, Level 3 Diploma (RCVS, November 2015), with around fifty-seven training providers delivering this qualification. Veterinary





nursing training in Higher Education (HE) is also well established, with seventeen universities (RCVS, April 2016) delivering FdSc and/or BSc degrees. The RCVS, as the regulatory body, sets required standards that must be met by all awarding institutions, so that on completion of their course students are eligible to join the Register of Veterinary Nurses and practise in the UK.

Veterinary nursing is a practical vocation. There was a strong indication from those attending the engagement events that young people from diverse backgrounds who aspire to join the profession are able to do so and that

entry to the profession should remain accessible via both the further and higher educational routes.

### 3.6 Male veterinary nurses

Men are the most under-represented group in veterinary nursing. The percentage of men in the profession stands at just 2% (RCVS Register data, November 2015). Reasons for this significant deficit of male participation in the profession could include gender discrimination, salary or the attraction to other professions and career choices. As already mentioned, the role itself is very practical,

ranging from restraining animals and placing IV catheters, to monitoring anaesthesia, taking diagnostic images and processing laboratory samples. As with human-centred nursing, it might be that greater emphasis is needed on those more technical aspects in order to increase the number of males entering the profession.

### 3.7 Training practice numbers

A significant barrier to training veterinary nurses in both Further and Higher Education is the number of training practices (TPs) and placements available. The number is far less than the number of students who wish to train as veterinary nurses. It is widely agreed that more TPs are needed, while continuing to ensure both quality and opportunity for the development of skills and professional competency is maintained.

It should be emphasised that being a TP gives practices the opportunity to grow their own RVNs, while helping young people take their first steps in employment. Training student veterinary nurses is an incentive for qualified VNs to keep their knowledge current and develop their skills, and for the practice to enhance and review facilities and working practices to maintain their currency.

The reasons why practices do not become TPs requires exploration. Innovative approaches and increased flexibility could be considered, such as encouraging students to move between practices to gain experience. There are very different requirements for monitoring the quality of veterinary nurse TPs compared to those for practices offering extramural studies to veterinary students and perhaps the current stringent requirements of VN TPs should be reviewed.

### 3.8 VN syllabus

The RCVS has already undertaken a review of the competences that are required by a 'Day-one' registered veterinary nurse and will soon develop 'Year-one skills'. The number of clinical hours required during student veterinary nurse training has recently been adjusted to ensure the expected time in placement for both FE and HE is realistic and conforms to current employment law.

The findings of the various evening meetings were that both VN educators and those working in a clinical setting would like to see some species-focused content within the

pre-registration qualification.

For the future it was considered that all veterinary nursing students should be prepared for evidence-based practice. They should be taught how to search and find evidence and how to evaluate information. The RCVS will need to work with the Level 3 Diploma Awarding Organisations and VN training providers to encourage these higher order skills.

Changes in technology and practice have resulted in some aspects of the traditional veterinary nursing syllabus becoming outdated and a review of the didactic curriculum is also encouraged.

### 3.9 VN Schools Council

The Veterinary Schools Council (VSC) was formed in 2014 and is made up of the heads of seven veterinary schools across the UK and two associate schools based in Ireland and Holland. They provide a source of informed opinion on matters concerning veterinary education, from the welfare of the students and academic researches to its links with government and industry. The VSC engages in representative and policy work to ensure the voice of UK veterinary schools is recognised for its experience and will to innovate. Their vision is to promote the international recognition of the UK veterinary schools for their excellence in education, research and clinical service.

Currently there is no such organisation for veterinary nursing educators and therefore VN schools do not have any input into decisions affecting veterinary nurse training and education. A Veterinary Nursing Schools Council would encourage collaborative working with the regulator and enable sharing of experience and knowledge of educators and effective and efficient use of their resources.

### 3.10 Actions

1. Improve careers materials for schools
2. Encourage more males into the profession via targeted marketing of the demographic
3. Develop VN Careers Ambassadors
4. Review the syllabus (species focused/level/guided learning hours/evidence base)
5. Increase the number of training practices
6. Develop a VN Schools Council

## 4. Ambition two: structured and rewarding career paths



### 4.1 What this ambition means

- Opportunities for career development are clearly defined across a diverse range of roles
- Post-registration training and qualifications reflect the diversity of careers and promote leadership, management and research skills, and are fit for purpose
- Management and leadership roles are clearly defined and the routes into these roles are clearly understood; the head nurse role maximises the strengths of individual veterinary nurses across the team
- VNs are encouraged to take leadership and management roles via established training routes
- Performance reviews and evaluations, along with career development, is based on systematic and periodic assessments (appraisals) of individuals
- We have strong influential leaders empowered to speak on behalf of veterinary nurses

### 4.2 Why it's important

Training and development begins from the first day in practice and continues until the end of our career so it is a very important theme for VN Futures to consider. During the roadshows a repeated concern was the perception of resistance to change; 'to do it like we have always done it'. This is why training and development are so important as they open the mind to new ideas and possibilities, and facilitate progress. We hope that current student veterinary nurses will have a long career ahead of them and during that time they will need to be prepared for many changes that will affect both clinical and non-clinical aspects of their role. We envisage veterinary nurses of the future being receptive to constant, incremental change based on available evidence and being the creators of new evidence that will direct best practice and the development of their profession.

### 4.3 Career development

We recognise that newly-qualified veterinary nurses, regardless of their training route, are at the beginning of a lifelong educational journey. Continuing professional development (CPD) is a mandatory requirement for all RVNs; not only does this help ensure the best possible patient care, it also facilitates career progression. Veterinary nursing is a young profession that is rapidly evolving; veterinary nurses now have career opportunities available to them that several decades ago would have been considered dreams. We already have a number of post-qualification veterinary nursing awards of varying length and level, which include the RCVS Diploma in Advanced Veterinary Nursing, specialist Certificates in Anaesthesia (Vets Now) and Exotic Species (City and Guilds), a Graduate Diploma (RVC) and an MSc in Veterinary Nursing (Harper Adams).

In an ever-changing and fast-paced world we consider it essential that all veterinary nurses have opportunities and are encouraged to develop their clinical, professional and academic skills. We consider that awards attained should conform to accepted educational frameworks and, where possible, allow 'transferability' in the event of a change in direction or leaving the profession.

### 4.4 Post-registration training and qualifications

Throughout the roadshow meetings the need for further post-registration qualifications was strongly expressed. The profession is seeing the value of focused postqualification awards to help the development of specialist areas of interest. Using the North American Veterinary Technicians (NAVTA) academies as an example, further specialist qualifications could be established that cover areas such as anaesthesia, nutrition, behaviour, diagnostic imaging and laboratory medicine, and emergency and critical care.

These advanced pathways could be used to promote excellence and allow recognition of knowledge, skills, competency and experience in a specialist field. They could also facilitate the extension of Schedule 3, with currency being ensured by compulsory revalidation, possibly every five years.

In addition to specialist clinical pathways, other areas for post-qualification awards must include leadership

and management, advanced first opinion and advanced practitioner nursing.

It was considered important that further qualifications be recognised by the RCVS as the regulatory body, are robust, conform to educational frameworks and be acceptable to both the veterinary profession and public.

### 4.5 Maximising individuals' skills

The role of a head nurse is a key position within the practice. It is challenging and varied and comes with a great deal of responsibility; it isn't a role to be taken lightly. Head nurses can be dealing with anything from people management and staff training to resource maintenance and health and safety. A good head nurse must be able to balance the needs of the employer, the

"Perhaps then, devolving the traditional head nurse responsibilities across the team to those nurses most suitable should be considered"

staff and the clients along with their patients. Head nurses must be excellent communicators, be able to delegate effectively to their team and hold good leadership and management qualities. They are often responsible for appraisals, disciplinary and grievance procedures, absence management, performance management and motivating and managing the veterinary team.

Why is it, then, that many nurses find themselves in this key role with little or no management and/or leadership training?

A head nurse should be experienced, competent and confident in their knowledge and skills, however, with retention in the profession being low, many nurses find themselves in a head nurse role fairly soon after registration. For some, the role provides little or no





opportunity for clinical work. Perhaps then, devolving the traditional head nurse responsibilities across the team to those nurses most suitable should be considered.

#### 4.6 Performance reviews and career development

The purpose of performance reviews and evaluations (appraisals) is to increase an employee's performance and efficiency. They are also intended to increase motivation, ensure that people are kept up to date with latest developments and inform them of the skills they require in order to address change positively. Research suggests (Field, 2011) that regular appraisals are a proactive approach to managing workplace stress.

It's important that those carrying out performance reviews understand their role in managing performance and are able to conduct positive, valuable assessments that lead to maximum staff performance. They should also encourage the appraisee in achievement of both personal goals and organisational objectives.

#### 4.7 Leadership

The veterinary industry is losing veterinary nurses from the profession as many see a lack of progression or opportunities for development. Many nurses lack the confidence to take on a leadership or managerial role. There is a need within the veterinary industry to move away from the traditional employment hierarchy that can often leave members of the senior veterinary team feeling isolated and unsupported with no clear lines of management or communication.

We have identified that there is a need to provide better, more effective training for nurses moving into managerial

positions to ensure they have the knowledge and skillset required to meet the challenges this may bring.

Practices need to be encouraged to value this type of CPD and training, and so make provision of it within their CPD budget. Often the CPD allowance for veterinary nurses does not allow for both clinical and non-clinical training, however, if veterinary nurses are to develop into senior roles and be retained by the profession it is vital that they be encouraged to do both.

Concerns have been articulated about the number and profile of veterinary nurses stepping forward for leadership roles. Leaders need to be confident and resilient and be able to galvanise the profession into embracing change.

#### 4.8 Actions

- 7. Establish a working party through the RCVS to further canvas opinion on the scope, level and delivery of post-qualification awards for veterinary nurses**
- 8. Develop advanced practitioner qualifications and/or status**
- 9. Encourage maximising individual nurses' strengths; provide progression for all**
- 10. Develop lifelong learning in leadership; mentoring and targeted leadership programmes**
- 11. Actively promote performance review and evaluation across the profession**
- 12. Explore ways to develop the next generation of veterinary nurse leaders; identify and nurture talent, providing the skills and opportunities to succeed**

## 5. Ambition three: confident, resilient, healthy and well supported

### 5.1 What this ambition means

- Veterinary and veterinary nursing professions offer a good quality of life so people aspire to join them and stay in them
- Our focus is on safety, health and wellbeing and achieving a good work-life balance, including being flexible enough to let those who wish to work part time or develop so-called 'portfolio' careers
- Vets and veterinary nurses work in supportive environments as a matter of course – they are regularly appraised and have learning and development opportunities, which enable them to reflect as they go, adapt and weigh up future options
- Support starts early – with any vulnerable students identified at the start, and supported throughout their careers – and continues with appropriate help for those who need it, throughout their lifetime
- Occupational and mental health support is available to anyone working anywhere in the veterinary professions, and there are no barriers to access

Although this report is focussed on the veterinary nursing profession, the issues concerning health and wellbeing are common across both professions. Therefore this section is largely based on the information contained in ambition 3 of the Vet Futures report.

### 5.2 Why it's important

There can be no doubt that the stresses of veterinary work come high on the agenda for vets, veterinary nurses and others in the veterinary team. A survey of British Veterinary Association (BVA) members found that reducing stress was the single highest priority for many.

The RCVS 2014 Survey of the Veterinary Nursing Profession found dissatisfaction with stress levels in the job (Robinson et al, 2014). Compared with the 2010 Survey, veterinary nurses reported feeling more useful, thinking more clearly and dealing with problems better, but at the same time they felt less relaxed and 'less loved' (*Ibid*, 2014).

Yet there is also a danger of the profession allowing itself to become over-identified with the single issue of stress. Moreover, stress is not always a problem in itself; it's only where stress impacts negatively on individuals that we need to tackle it.

We know that vets and veterinary nurses are not alone in feeling workplace pressure. A number of studies published in 2015 shine a light on how a range of other professionals feel about their respective workplaces. One study reported that 46% of nursing staff said they had work-related stress (Royal College of Nursing, 2015). More than half of teachers in England plan to quit their jobs

**"It is 'opportunities for career progression' that are the biggest determinant of whether career expectations when entering the profession are met or not"**

within the next two years (National Union of Teachers, 2015). More than 80% of hospital doctors may retire early because of work-related stress (Hospital Consultants and Specialists Association, 2015). Dentists are also reported to be at high risk of work-related stress (British Dental Association, 2015).

Further, our survey work suggests that it is 'opportunities for career progression' – not levels of stress – that are the biggest determinant of whether career expectations when entering the profession are met or not. This is one reason why ambition two is focused on veterinary nursing careers.

This is not to say that tackling stress should not be a priority. It certainly needs to be – and that's reflected in Vet Futures. We do, however, counsel caution around allowing the professions to become defined solely in terms of the stress that nurses and vets in clinical practice in particular, report experiencing.

It was also felt important to consider not so much 'worklife balance' as 'life balance'. So rather than the



The Mind Matters Initiative was launched to help address mental health and wellbeing issues across the veterinary team. It sets out to encourage a culture where people are able to talk about, and deal with, stress and related mental-health issues.

It is supported by a group comprising Vetlife, the British Veterinary Association, the British Veterinary Nursing Association, the Veterinary Practice Management Association, the Veterinary Schools Council, the Veterinary Defence Society, the Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons and the Association of Veterinary Students.

It has five streams of activity:

- 1. Learning and understanding best practice** – research within the veterinary profession, for example, into occupational stress factors, and among other related professions and private and public sector organisations that have successfully tackled similar issues
- 2. Changing the culture** – a programme of communications activities to help generate a positive environment for discussion, to reduce stigma, and to increase awareness and the ability to identify risks, and encourage help-seeking behaviour
- 3. Intervention: personal level** – financial and other support for existing services, such as Vetlife Helpline and Vetlife Health Support, together with an investigation into what more may be required to support those in need
- 4. Intervention: supporting the supporters** – training and guidance for those who may be working or living with someone who needs assistance, in order to help supporters spot and understand signs of stress and mental illness, and help the person seek expert help
- 5. Making changes** – working closely with the Vet and VN Futures projects to identify aspects of how the profession is structured and run (from student to retirement) that exacerbate stress and mental health problems – and consider how they may be addressed

[vetmindmatters.org](http://vetmindmatters.org)

difficulties of work needing to be balanced by the positivity of 'other life', work can and should be an enjoyable and rewarding part of living, particularly for those, who are following a vocation.

We therefore believe it is important to affirm the fundamental positive qualities that should be associated with being a vet or veterinary nurse. These roles should be compatible with healthy, happy, fulfilled lives, and we believe the profession should actively promote these qualities.

We also need to understand better how to build resilience within veterinary nursing professionals, so that we are sufficiently agile to adapt to all manner of challenges.

### 5.3 Targeted action

Proactive approaches to managing workplace stress in veterinary practice suggested by the literature include regular appraisals for all members of the veterinary team, as well as the importance of personal and development plans (Field, 2011). Many of the actions needed to tackle stress fall to employers to deliver. Any investment employers make here should reap rewards in the long term.

Ultimately, providing for supportive and happy professional lives is something that the profession as a whole needs to grasp. We each need to play a part in delivering this, whether that be stepping forward to mentor members of the team, establishing networks for peer support, or simply adopting a more compassionate approach around the stresses inherent in the job. And we must equip veterinary nurses and vets with the tools to deal with uncertainty, and the skills to undertake reflective practice.

### 5.4 Head start already made

Crucially, we do not start from a blank sheet. While the qualitative research found that some believe the profession has been slow to acknowledge and respond to the pressures on vets, Vetlife (formerly the Veterinary Benevolent Fund) has been working hard in this area for many years, and, with the launch of the Mind Matters Initiative by the RCVS in December 2014 (see box), activity in this area has stepped up yet further.



## How stressed are we?

Many vets in practice, and veterinary nurses, emphasised stress in the telephone interviews and focus groups we conducted. Some of the causal factors they cited were:

- Long working hours
- Out-of-hours work
- Increasing public expectations
- Professional isolation
- Insufficient earnings
- A lack of preparedness for the emotional side of interacting with animal owners

### 5.5 Actions

- 13. Deliver a coordinated, well-funded and evidenced-based approach to mental health and wellbeing for the veterinary team**
- 14. Review the approach to recruiting and selecting veterinary nurse students to ensure adequate support, improve wellbeing and manage expectations**
- 15. Develop peer support and/or mentoring mechanisms in all UK veterinary nursing schools and improve support for veterinary nurses post-registration**
- 16. Develop support for overseas-graduated veterinary nurses working in the UK, who may not have benefitted from the same support as UK student nurses**
- 17. Help veterinary professionals to work with uncertainties, and develop reflective practice**



## 6. Ambition four: proactive role in one health

### 6.1 What this ambition means

- Working in partnership with medical professionals
- Educating and supporting owners (elderly, hospitalised, homeless, children) with issues such as MSRA, dog-bite prevention, animal behaviour, general hand-washing and emerging infectious diseases, prevention initiatives
- Developing evidence-based resources relevant for veterinary nurses to use when discussing One Health
- We are central to national responses to major animal health and welfare incidents in the UK; involved in government policy decision-making
- All veterinary nurses have a good level of knowledge in this area

### 6.2 Why it's important

The One Health concept is described as 'a worldwide strategy for expanding interdisciplinary collaborations and communications in all aspects of health care for humans, animals and the environment' ([www.onehealthinitiative.com](http://www.onehealthinitiative.com)).

The recent Vet Futures Report (Vet Futures Project Board 2015) described the topic of One Health as one that did not resonate with many members of the veterinary profession. This finding was echoed in the VN Futures project. While many veterinary nurses could identify with the definition of One Health, and could cite examples of potential collaboration, few could demonstrate active projects or multi-disciplinary working between the medical and veterinary professions. It was agreed that while there was less engagement with this theme than with the others, it is a topic that needs to stay in the focus of VN Futures. It was decided that the general emphasis of any future projects related to One Health should aim to increase awareness and understanding of the topic through published case studies and pilot projects, combined with increased education.

### 6.3 Collaboration with medical professionals

There was clear acknowledgement during discussions that veterinary nurses felt they could learn from human-centred nurses. Equally there were examples proposed of where human-centred nurses may learn from veterinary nurses, particularly relating to zoonosis. There was



enthusiastic agreement that working collaboratively, considering a household as a whole, including animals and people, may be of benefit to all involved.

Veterinary nurses were aware of One Health topics, citing examples such as antibiotic resistance, infection control issues, and the potential for harm to be caused to pets by passive smoking. Issues surrounding the human/animal bond were frequently mooted, as nursing staff described feeling concerned for owners after a bereavement, but not necessarily knowing how to support that client. Further discussion surrounding the pet travel scheme, and the benefits of pet ownership for human physical and mental health, showed that despite not being familiar with the terminology 'One Health', many VNs were able to give examples of cross-species issues.

Initial steps have been taken by the RCVS to develop a pilot project with a human-centred respiratory nurse specialist who works in the community and has developed an interest in working collaboratively with veterinary nurses to facilitate improvements in the health of patients and their pets. Potential projects include investigating the hypothesis that training human-centred community nurses to understand when animals are obese could lead

to positive shared interventions, such as diet change and increased physical exercise with benefits to both animal and human patients.

Second, it is proposed that working closely with human-centred nursing could facilitate the access to smoking cessation resources to enable vet nurses to signpost owners of animals being exposed to passive smoking.

Finally, taking steps to try and develop a working relationship based on the exchange of ideas with human-centred nurses could result in access to a large range of shared resources. While each profession would continue to work within their own scope of practice, the ability to be able to signpost patients between the two professions could be beneficial. There is the potential to develop links with human-centred nurses caring for other groups of patients, such as those who are severely immuno-compromised, in heart failure, or suffering from poor mental health.

### 6.4 Education and resources

Veterinary nurses discussed a wide range of One Health resources. This included a recent TED (Technology, entertainment and design 2014) talk by Barbara Natterson-Horowitz who outlined how a species-spanning approach to healthcare could improve human medical care, particularly in mental health. Some veterinary nurses had used NHS mental health information to support owners.

Many clinical resources contain useful and interesting information but they are often designed for veterinary surgeons. Many VNs felt that they were ideally placed to discuss One Health concepts with owners and that VN-specific resources to facilitate such conversations would be useful. It was also suggested that due to a lack of knowledge, many VNs would routinely defer One Health subjects to the veterinary surgeon and in fact they needed to engage more and contribute to this valuable area of work.

### 6.5 Evidence-based practice

From discussions it was clear that defining evidence-based practice was a struggle for some within the profession, furthermore due to the young and inexperienced nature of the veterinary nursing profession, VN-specific research is limited, although increasing.

Evidence-based practice in nursing can be defined as "nursing that integrates the best evidence from research with clinical expertise and existing resources into decision making about the health care of individual patients" (DiCenso and Cullum 1998).

Veterinary nurses need to be encouraged to embrace research more both to develop the One Health approach and to begin to accumulate a discrete body of knowledge, which is the very foundation of any profession.

The prevailing emphasis of all these action points is on long term improvement of awareness, knowledge and understanding of One Health issues and projects. It is acknowledged that this ambition may not be a priority for the profession as a whole, but it is an area where veterinary nurses are ideally placed to contribute. Stakeholders cited VNs having more time to spend with owners discussing these concepts; the fact that owners will often more readily confide in vet nurses; and the role that vet nurses often have in explaining complex concepts to owners once they have left the vet's consulting room, as key reasons that VNs are well placed to develop their role in this area.

There is a need for formal support and collaboration as well as consistent and regular updates for the profession citing case studies and evaluation of any pilot projects. This in turn may encourage more nurses to develop links with their local medical teams and make further positive contributions beyond the health of their patients to the wider community.

### 6.6 Actions

- 18. Develop links with human-centred nurses in practice, to establish the potential benefits to each profession, share resources and work collaboratively on pilot projects under the One Health umbrella**
- 19. Explore the development of a cross-profession committee and the organisation of regional One Health events and research partnerships**
- 20. Through the use of shared resources, work to empower veterinary nurses to become more involved with, and lead on, public health campaigns**
- 21. Develop an evidence-based resource for veterinary nurses**

## 7. Ambition five: maximising nurses' potential

### 7.1 What this ambition means

- There is increased public awareness of the role of the veterinary nurse and our professional status
- All practice team members understand the role and remit of the veterinary nurse; the importance of delegation is understood and executed appropriately
- Veterinary nurses are valued for their skills and time and charging for services is transparent and fair
- District veterinary nursing is commonplace across the UK, providing veterinary nursing care, advice and guidance directly in the community

### 7.2 Why it's important

Our evidence-gathering sessions gave a clear indication that many nurses in practice feel their skills are underutilised and their role undervalued. There was also a definite requirement for a more structured career progression (discussed in ambition two) and the need for flexible working. Could these be the reasons we have such a low retention rate or why many nurses do not return to the profession following a career break?

With the new RCVS Royal Charter (which came into effect on 17 February 2015) formally underpinning the regulation of veterinary nurses and empowering VN Council to set standards for training and continued professional development, now is the time to galvanise the veterinary professions to value, respect and utilise the many skills a registered veterinary nurse can provide.

The roadshow events indicated that there is a general desire and willingness to change and a belief that it can happen. In the main, it was agreed that this must start from within the profession. Raising awareness and educating both the practice team and the public were seen as key areas of importance.

### 7.3 Increasing awareness

In order to raise awareness and gain better recognition of the training and development of veterinary nurses, there is a need to overcome both the apathy and lack of engagement within the veterinary nursing profession

itself, along with the apparent reluctance at times to engage with RCVS and BVNA initiatives. Action is also needed to promote the role of the RVN to the public.

This promotion needs to encompass the whole role of the veterinary nurse, especially the way that a veterinary nurse can carry out tasks that benefit the business, clients and ultimately animals. The way that the veterinary nurse is currently portrayed to the public, particularly in the media, is not truly representative of the veterinary nurse role. RVNs are professionals who have undergone training and gained a qualification covering multiple aspects of veterinary medicine and surgery and this should be recognised.

For RVNs to feel empowered and appreciated their role must be communicated clearly to the other members of the practice. This includes vets, receptionists, practice managers and nursing assistants. More time, effort and resource needs to be allocated to inter-professional education. We also need to empower RVNs to communicate their role themselves to other members of staff in their practice and to the general public. This can be done by a variety of means for example, face-to-face communication, a presentation to the practice team, posters and leaflets to give out to clients and contribution to the media.

### 7.4 Valuing skills and time

There is scope for veterinary nurses to provide services both in celebration of the general practice nurse carrying out general nursing tasks, and also for services that can be developed as nurses progress their careers and start to specialise. Another area that has been identified for development is the veterinary nurse in an 'outreach' or community nursing role (see below). Whatever the skills and services provided, the VN Futures Action Group has identified that, to increase the value of RVNs, these services should be properly charged for.

Practices need to use their nurses to better effect and in a way that adds value. Some of this can be addressed by a better understanding of the types of tasks they can undertake, but there is also a need to provide some evidence-based business management models. This can be achieved using case studies of practices already utilising their nurses effectively and charging



“For RVNs to feel empowered and appreciated their role must be communicated clearly to the other members of the practice”





for their services. If we can provide some new ideas and examples of how teams have managed the change in culture we would hope to motivate and inspire others. There is a perception that clients would be reluctant to pay for services provided by a nurse, but in reality this is not the case. There is, however, a reluctance from nurses themselves to charge for their services, and we need to overcome this by increasing their confidence and, as already discussed, the value they place on themselves. This is probably the biggest hurdle we need to overcome.

### 7.5 District nursing

In order to meet the needs of communities we have to change the way we provide care. The district veterinary nurse role is already being carried out by a very small number of RVNs and is something that should be developed. Already established in human healthcare, a district nursing role would see RVNs go out and treat patients in their homes.

As well as providing direct patient care, district nurses also have a teaching role, educating owners and other family members; teaching them how to care for their animals.

District RVNs will work within the guidelines of Schedule 3 and continue to work under the direction of a veterinary surgeon.

### 7.6 Actions

22. **Explore utilisation of a social media and television campaign to promote the role of the veterinary nurse, focusing on the training and development undertaken**
23. **Provide material for practices to use on their websites and elsewhere to promote veterinary nurses within their practice**
24. **Research and develop the district nurse role**
25. **Encourage charging for nurse time and skills by providing case studies/models to demonstrate increased practice revenue**
26. **Encourage flexible working**
27. **Establish inter-professional education and training for veterinary students and veterinary nurses along with inter-professional CPD**
28. **Provide opportunities for overseas veterinary nurses and vets registering with the RCVS to be educated on the role and responsibilities of veterinary nurses in the UK**



“Practices need to use their nurses to better effect and in a way that adds value”



## 8. Ambition six: a clarified and bolstered VN role via a reformed Schedule 3

### 8.1 What this ambition means

- The role of veterinary nurses will be bolstered and clarified with regards to delegated tasks

### 8.2 Why it's important

'Schedule 3' may be a somewhat technical term, but it is an extremely important one. A schedule is a supplement to an Act of Parliament which contains the finer details about how a particular law should work. In the case of Schedule 3 (which can be found at the end of the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966) those details include a provision giving veterinary nurses the privilege of undertaking any medical treatment or carrying out minor surgery (not involving entry into a body cavity) if delegated to by a veterinary surgeon (who must be the VN's employer and have the animal under his or her care). Though the role of the veterinary nurse is not limited to Schedule 3 tasks, it is these tasks which distinguish veterinary nurses from 'lay' members of staff in a veterinary practice.

### 8.3 History

The provision allowing the delegation of certain tasks to veterinary nurses was introduced in 1991 when the veterinary nursing role was less well defined than it is today. At that time there was no formal register of veterinary nurses, just a list of VNs held by the RCVS. Since that time veterinary nursing has become a fully-fledged profession recognised by Royal Charter, with its own *Code of Professional Conduct*, compulsory registration, and governance via the Veterinary Nurses Council. Proposals to reform RCVS governance mean that VNs are also expected to gain formal representation on RCVS Council.

### 8.4 The review

Veterinary nursing is still a young profession, but it now has firm foundations upon which to build its future. The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) recently suggested that the RCVS reviews Schedule 3 and make proposals for changing or simplifying the language to bolster and clarify the role of veterinary nurses. While Defra made no promise of an outcome, this is an exciting and timely offer,

and Schedule 3 has inevitably been a big part of our discussions during the VN Futures project.

Our evidence-gathering sessions across the country have revealed an appetite to increase the number of tasks that VNs are allowed to do. RCVS Council has already agreed to proposals to increase the role of VNs in anaesthesia, but other suggestions have also been made which will have to be carefully considered, including allowing VNs to undertake cat castrations, and increasing the VN role in dentistry and large animal work.

It has also been suggested that the delegation of certain specialised tasks to veterinary nurses could be linked to new VN Advanced Practitioner or Specialist status, rather than being 'Day-one Competences' that any registered VN could undertake.

Considerable thought will need to be given to how exactly Schedule 3 should be amended. One way would be to expand the definition of 'minor surgery' and/or 'medical treatment'. However, at present, Schedule 3 refers not only to veterinary nurses but also to farmers, and so changing the definitions in this way would automatically expand the role of farmers too. It is therefore possible that the current link between VNs and farmers in Schedule 3 ought to be a target of reform.

Alternatively the Schedule could be amended to list certain tasks that VNs could undertake in addition to minor surgery and medical treatment, but such a list could become quickly out-of-date and would therefore be a short-term reform.

A great deal of discussion has been devoted to the existing RCVS guidance on Schedule 3, which is deliberately worded so as to leave the decision on which surgical tasks (not involving entry into a body cavity) can be delegated to the professional judgment of the veterinary surgeon and veterinary nurse. There has been a lively debate between those who argued in favour of some sort of list of Schedule 3 tasks (in order to give vets and VNs confidence about what exactly could be delegated) and those who felt that would be too restrictive or (as discussed above in relation to amending Schedule 3 itself) tricky to keep updated. A sizeable group also argued for a middle ground where



the RCVS gave examples of tasks which could or could not be delegated (with detailed explanations) to help vets and VNs to form their own judgments about appropriate delegation.

The RCVS has also undertaken research including a comparison with the veterinary nursing profession abroad, examining VN student theses on the role of the veterinary nurse, and historic research into the evolution of Schedule 3. This evidence base will provide a useful foundation for the next stage of the Schedule 3 review.

### 8.5 Actions

29. Establish a formal Working Party that will review the evidence assembled by the VN Futures project, and consider possible reforms to Schedule 3 and related guidance
30. The Working Party may also consider proposals to separate the delegation rights of VNs from those of farmers
31. The Working Party will aim to report its recommendations to RCVS Council by March 2017



## 9. Next steps

As mentioned in the message from the Chair of VN Council and the President of BVNA, this is the beginning of a new chapter for the UK veterinary nursing profession. It is important to remember that many of the issues raised closely link to the Vet Futures project – such as careers, workforce planning and mental health – and that actions arising from the Vet Futures project will also address these cross-cutting themes.

We want to harness the expertise and energy that veterinary nurses and others have demonstrated throughout this project – and to maintain the momentum that has been generated. As with Vet Futures, we want to tackle the long-standing challenges that have arisen as well as seize opportunities for moving forward in areas where there are live opportunities.

### 9.1 VN Futures Action Group

Arising from the six ambitions are 31 actions; some of which will be easily addressed in the short term, while

others will take longer to come to fruition. We will be identifying stakeholders and other organisations and inviting members of the veterinary nursing profession to step forward and help drive these actions forward.

Whether you are in clinical practice, education, industry, government or research, please join us to celebrate the profession and help BVNA and RCVS shape its next chapter. If you are interested in participating with this exciting project, please contact Julie Dugmore at the RCVS on [j.dugmore@rcvs.org.uk](mailto:j.dugmore@rcvs.org.uk) or 020 7202 0775.

### 9.2 Vet Futures Summit

Delivering lasting change is a responsibility for the whole profession. Together, we must share it. With this in mind, we will be launching the VN Futures actions at the Vet Futures Summit on 4 July 2016 at the Royal Veterinary College, Camden, in London.



“We want to harness the expertise and energy that veterinary nurses and others have demonstrated throughout this project”

# Appendix A: VN Futures Action Group

## Membership of the Action Group:

<b>Helen Ballantyne RN RVN</b>	Registered veterinary nurse and registered nurse
<b>Elizabeth Cox RVN</b>	Chair, RCVS Veterinary Nurses Council
<b>Julie Dugmore RVN</b>	Head of Veterinary Nursing, RCVS
<b>Daniel Hogan RVN</b>	Vet Futures Action Group, VN lead
<b>Sue Gregory MRCVS</b>	Professor of Veterinary Nursing, Royal Veterinary College
<b>Samantha Morgan RVN</b>	President, British Veterinary Nursing Association
<b>Ben Myring</b>	Senior Policy and Public Affairs Officer, RCVS
<b>Renay Rickard RVN</b>	President, Veterinary Practice Management Association
<b>Marie Rippingale REVN</b>	RCVS Veterinary Nurses Council member
<b>Nimisha Patel RVN</b>	British Association of Veterinary Nursing Students representative
<b>Stephanie Writer-Davies MRCVS</b>	President, Society of Practising Veterinary Surgeons

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