■ SARAH
WHITTAKER
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Nursing pets in practice

Richard Hill looks at a career that involves working with people, pets and other animals – veterinary nursing.

CARING for animals is a challenging but highly rewarding career. Veterinary nurses are an essential element of the caring team, working closely with veterinary surgeons to provide care and treatment for a wide range of animals, from domestic pets to exotic species.

To train as a veterinary nurse, applicants need to be at least 17 and have five GCSEs at grade C or above. An alternative is to take the British Veterinary Nursing Association (BVNA) Pre-Veterinary Nursing Course. Applicants will also need to be employed at a veterinary practice which is an approved training and assessment centre.

A leading centre for veterinary nurse training is at the Berkshire College of Agriculture (BCA) near Maidenhead.

Marketing manager Sarah Ferrige summarised the course and centre.

"The qualification takes two years, studying here by block release. It's a good course because they get the practical side at their place of work and training here at an academic level," she said.

"We have a small animal unit – rabbits, guinea pigs, cats and dogs and we have horses and farm animals here. We have a reptile house, we have lamas and we have six pygmy goats. They get quite a range of experience of animals which of course, is good for them."

Sarah Whittaker trained as a veterinary nurse at the BCA and has been qualifed for 11 years.

Today she is head nurse at the Forest House Veterinary Surgery in Windsor.

"It's very rewarding, very satisfying," she said, "The days are never the same. You could be very quiet one minute and have an emergency in the next."

Unfortunately, equating a natural love of animals to making a good veterinary nurse does not always follow. A good nurse needs to be able to maintain a certain level of detachment, otherwise the work may be too difficult to cope with.

Animals at a veterinary hospital are generally, by definition, at a low ebb, often frightened, in distress. This can lead to emotions that can be overwhelming if not kept in check.

Sarah believes that the right sort of person is able to maintain the strength necessary to deal with such cases.

"I think you learn to harden yourself off to that side of things," she said. "There are always one or two that affect you and it can be difficult to cope with that. But when you've got an animal that's been very sick for two or three weeks and then it goes home, that's really good."

Further information:
British Veterinary Nursing Association: www.bvna.org.uk
Berkshire College of Agriculture: www.berks-coll-ag.ac.uk