

# Vet Record Careers

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## Driven to caring for cats at home

Jo Lewis says she has always been one to go the extra mile. Five years ago, she took this literally and set up the Cat Vet Home Visiting Clinic. As she explains, it was her love and understanding of all things feline, mixed with frustration about the status quo, that led to her 'light bulb moment'



AS a young girl I remember feeling helpless when we found that our 18-month-old cat Jemima had been poisoned. She suffered terribly before she died. I had so many unanswered questions and wished I could have prevented her suffering. This sowed the seeds of my choice to become a vet.

I was born in Gloucestershire, but my family emigrated to Perth, Australia, when I was four. Being the eldest of six children, my priority was always to help my family ahead of studying. Finding the right balance was a constant struggle. Consequently, getting accepted to study veterinary science at Murdoch university was far from simple.

Keen to set myself apart from the crowd of other applicants I embarked on 'alternative' voluntary work to impress the selection panel. I also took a paid job working for VetPath, a local vet clinical pathology laboratory, and was lucky enough to work at a marine sanctuary with dolphins rescued from a theme park. At the other end of the spectrum I somehow found myself fitting radio trackers to pythons and tiger snakes

on local Garden Island. Looking back, these were some of the happiest times of my life.

My first job after graduating from vet school was in an area of Perth where many clients had little money. I quickly learned the value of observation and a thorough physical examination. These skills cost nothing and built solid foundations that I still rely on. After a few years I had the confidence to fulfil my dream to return to England. For the next eight years I worked in various small animal practices around Berkshire and Surrey, and also enjoyed several years as a consultant for a clinical pathology laboratory.

As a cat lover, I had always felt constricted by traditional practice. For me there was more to treating cats than simply addressing their physical health. It's as important to establish what makes them tick, but that's not easy in a busy practice with limited consultation time. It was frustrating to see stressed cats brought in by equally anxious owners. I felt that there had to be a better way.

After a particularly difficult day at work, I explained my frustration to my husband. As

we talked, the penny dropped. I'd been really impressed with International Cat Care's 'Cat Friendly Clinic' scheme, and had been fortunate enough to work at the gold standard Oxford Cat Clinic, but I wanted to take this concept further. We know many cats hate going to the vets, so why couldn't I go to them? That evening, the Cat Vet Home Visiting Clinic was born.

That was five years ago, and the clinic has gone from strength to strength, proving popular with local cat owners. Besides the obvious convenience, many clients feel as I do, that there's a strong connection between physical and mental health. I can't think of a single condition where consideration of a cat's psychological needs isn't integral to the management of its physical needs. Immersing myself in a cat's habitat gives me an extra insight into its lifestyle and behaviour. I can study the way they move, what resources they enjoy (or lack), and even how they interact with their owners – subtleties that are missed in a consulting room. From this, I can tailor a plan to look after those needs.

I'm a strong advocate of 'predicting and preventing' ahead of 'prescribing and curing' so home visiting is perfect for this. Many cats arrive on my books with long overdue check-ups and vaccinations, their owners having

reluctantly abandoned stressful, unsuccessful visits to their local practice. It is so satisfying to examine and treat these 'feline outcasts' at home, knowing that they would have otherwise missed out.

Many of these cats come to me with warnings in their medical records and mentions of gauntlets and crush-cages. I find with minimal restraint I can achieve far more than I ever did in a practice consulting room and the cats seem so much happier. Reduced stress also means more accurate heart rates, blood pressure and glucose readings.

I see as many young cats as old ones, many of which are rescued from nearby Battersea Dogs and Cats Home. It's amazing what you can pick up in apparently well cats too, particularly undiagnosed, significant dental disease. The difference I can make in palliative care and euthanasia is palpable.

So far I've not needed to employ a VN and I have a great working relationship with a lovely local practice when further investigation or surgery is required. I am personally on standby for my clients, but also have a back-up emergency service in place in case I'm with another cat or away from my phone. That's one drawback of being a 'one-woman band', but my clients understand this from the outset. On the flipside, I can schedule routine appointments around my personal life, CPD and holidays.

As any practice owner will tell you, the effort involved in setting up can be all-consuming. I started slowly and on a limited budget. Without a partnership or corporate umbrella I spent ages researching regulations and writing practice protocols. Like every practice I have RCVS-registered premises and was relieved to pass my first Veterinary Medicines Directorate inspection. I've been impressed by how supportive local practices are, and it's encouraging that I receive plenty of enquiries from cat-loving colleagues wanting advice on establishing their own clinic.

I'm as much a businesswoman now as I am a vet. Looking back, that was my biggest challenge as I had never thought of myself as naturally business-minded. Initially, it was just an essential part of putting my idea into practice but now I really enjoy that side of things. I have learnt quickly what works and what doesn't. I created my own website and have found social media, particularly Facebook, to be invaluable. Feedback's always been really positive, which is important as 'word of mouth' and online reviews are worth their weight in gold.

I loved being able to design and livery my van (aptly named the Purrgeot). It had to have real impact as I knew I would spend so much time on the road. Quite clearly it's working as I've had to master the art of flicking business cards through open car windows

at traffic lights when people stop alongside me and ask for contact details. Of course it had to be practical too – something economical, small and easy to park, but big enough to carry everything I might need to take with me into people's homes.

I decided to start with a relatively small catchment area to avoid driving all day and, so far, that's worked well. With web-based practice software I can write-up my clinical notes on the go and I'd be lost without my smart phone. It allows me to keep in touch when I'm stuck in traffic, and to take photos of cats, update social media, etc. It even links to my portable card payment machine.

Just like cats, I think small animal vets are creatures of habit. Our career choices seem geared towards either traditional practice or formal studies and specialism. I guess I'm just reflecting a changing world. Home-visiting is not for every vet but for me it's allowed my vision of how all cats should be treated to be put into practice. Running my own business has been rewarding and satisfying and made me feel empowered as both a vet and a woman. For me the success of my business will never be measured by how many practices I have. I'm just content to know that I'm making a difference to the quality of life of the cats and owners that I see in my rather alternative consulting room.

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