

I Came to Animal Technology by Chance

I left school at 16 with 8 O levels and a determination to work with animals. Back then (1968) there was the youth employment office in most areas and I went along to the nearest to my home for advice and hopefully, to get a job.

They had no animal related jobs on their books (I'd already written to 32 vets throughout Britain) and suggested office work.

The next day a small pharmaceutical firm asked if they had a well spoken, young person of reasonable intelligence who could look after their small lab animals. What luck! I attended an interview, accepted the job and started work the following Monday at 9am. I was so excited that I never asked about pay working hours or holidays and I've never lost the feeling of joy about the work.

In that first job I worked alone. At first I was guided by the chaps in the research lab but soon I was left to get on by myself and also I joined them in the lab where they were kind enough to explain their work and the reasons behind it. We made "bespoke" drugs for individuals who either by accident or genetics had none or too little of various endocrine hormones. These were made up for each "customer" in small batches, tested for efficacy on the rats and mice then delivered to the patient. At times they'd come to collect their drugs and would pop up to my tiny animal house to have a chat. So from the very start of my career I could see how much our work meant to some very ill people.

We would also research the reproductive hormones and the whole firm celebrated when one of our ladies gave birth to twins after a course of treatment using our drugs. My desire to know more led me to study (in the evenings in those days) to get the IAT exams, then at day release to get the ONC in microbiology and an HNC in physiology/pharmacology. I moved jobs to gain more experience each time enjoying the challenges and embracing the changes. Although I was frequently asked to move permanently into lab work my joy was always the animal work (and, to a lesser extent, the lab work) so I continued expanding the species I worked with.

I married a shepherd and spent some years herding in the remote glens of Argyll; so now I could add sheep, sheep dogs, cattle, hens and other farm related species to my C.V. It was whilst in the remote highlands that I started working for Agenda –they would ask when I could be free and I'd travel down south by way of sleeper service and eagerly arrive at each assignment bursting with enthusiasm.

Now I work permanently with Agenda and I enjoy the "not quite knowing" how long I'm to be in a post. At some sites I've turned

up to work with one species and as soon as the managers realise what I can do they move me about their units. I have worked in the past with primates for 10 years (marmosets and tamarins) I've now gone from dogs, to rabbits to sheep, to primates and to mice all in the space of 1 week on 1 site alone.

As in all walks of life the people are varied – but mostly they are all happy to see me and great to work with. Clearly we are at the site because they are short staffed so I try to be cheerful and helpful at all times (usually this comes naturally)but I've come to realise that if I feel under the weather then most people will accept that I need to slow down for a day or two until I'm back to normal.

I have friends who work with animals in non-research areas i.e. farms, stables and whilst they all agree that animal research is necessary, they all say they couldn't do it. But they are surprised to hear that we have the vets to advise us on treatments for sick animals and that the tech's, vets, NACWO'S and academics all list animal welfare as a top priority. When I explain that a sick animal isn't likely to yield useful data they see the point; I also say that we are always trying to improve the living quarters so that all animals can fulfil their natural behaviours – many of the farmers are amazed that I had to spend all afternoon playing with groups of dogs. This is not the usual picture painted of research animals!

I see my role as someone who can and must speak up for the animal as necessary (I feel we owe the animal our respect and care at all times even if we have to stay late or work at weekends in order to achieve this). I like to ask (gently so as not to offend) why an animal is used in a certain way, what's to be gained by it, suggest improvements when I can think of them; always remembering the researchers are "deep" into what they are doing and too much questioning can feel to them as if I am criticising rather than trying to improve or help or simply learn. Even managers designing new units have asked me to talk over my experiences with them. One changed some of the layout of a new unit when I pointed out that I'd been in one place where we couldn't get an IVC change station out of a room for repair. He also revised his thoughts on how many IVC's the average tech could clean out in one day – he had based his estimate on conventional open top cages so you see our experiences are not confined to just animal welfare. I encourage anyone who is both keen on animals and science to enter our work; most of the people I know have grown up around farm animals so they are aware of rearing animals for eating and they see our work as similar. If I think a person would not suit our industry I suggest they follow an animal career along a different route such as a vet, nurse, dog walker, racing stables etc.