

# Duty of care

Stuart Bruere  
Massey University, Palmerston North

## Introduction

For the last five years, I have taught veterinary students across all five years of the BVSc program at Massey University. My core teaching areas have been production animal medicine and parasitology, but I also help with some of the professional studies teaching.

I graduated BVSc from Massey at the end of 1979 and headed out into mixed rural practice until May 2020. When I returned to teaching, I entered the workplace correctly thinking my clinical experience would be invaluable as a real-life resource. But I hadn't prepared my mind for what was the change that had occurred at New Zealand's only veterinary school in the intervening 40 years. None of my remarks that follow is in any way to diminish the commitment and quality of the veterinary teaching staff of the 1970s but more to acknowledge that life does indeed move on. In his explanation of evolutionary theory, Darwin described the term "survival of the fittest" with the supporting comment of this being a description of only those individuals most adapted to their environment survive. The same rule applies to veterinary medicine.

It is a fact that veterinary institutions undergo a process of curriculum review every seven years or so, it is reasonable to assume that there had been five or six reviews since I left in late November 1979. The major marker in our history for the time was the Mount Erebus disaster when Air NZ Flight 901 crashed into this mountain in Antarctica on 28 November 1979 killing all 257 people on board. The words of Judge Peter Mahon, "an orchestrated litany of lies" soon became part of the summary of this tragic event that touched most of the 3.1 million people living in New Zealand at the time.

Most of the class aspired to be production animal or equine veterinarians, with a few forward thinking enough to foresee the incredible growth potential of companion animal practice on the horizon. In the late 1970s cat spays were performed in the evening when all the work associated with farm work was done. The Lange Government of 1984–1987 along with the introduction of Rogernomics and the cold turkey approach to the removal of farm subsidies rapidly changed the profitability and focus of mixed rural practices.

When I arrived on 25 May 2020, the parasitology course I help teach in was moving material around as the most recent curriculum review of the time was applied. I do recall the chaos that ensued one day when I innocently delivered a lecture on Cestodes from the old curriculum in error to a BVSc 3 class that was meant to receive the new curriculum version. The chaos was calmed when I recorded the new material and uploaded this to the Massey media site for the students to view in their own time.

While the tendency is to look back at our formative and early professional years through rose tinted glasses. The truth is that those that have embraced and managed to negotiate change over the last 40 years have survived, while the those who grimly hung on to the past by the very tips of their nails eventually perished.

## Teaching infrastructure

In the last five years, the delivery of the teaching program for BVSc students has been challenged to adapt to the Covid-19 pandemic response as directed by Government policy as well as a change in teaching philosophy. Measuring output is now the ruler used to guide how the program is constructed. In the background of all of this is the stark reality that Government funding of universities has declined in real terms and is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The Covid lockdowns did show that the traditional lecture model could be changed very rapidly, and our response was to develop a hybrid model of Zoom style recorded lectures supported by online lessons and

tutorials on our Kuracloud platform. During the period of lockdowns, a number of our international students were supported in a distance learning model for years one and two of their degree. When they were able to enter New Zealand, catch up practical classes were organised, and they got back in step with their cohort.

Most of the lectures in the old curriculum were/are broadcast in real time and recorded for later viewing on our Media site platform. This allows students to view from home. Clearly this is an attractive option on a cold winter's morning at 8am; particularly when you live one or two hours commute away from the university. The traditional 'sage on stage' lecture style now only attracts about 25% of the cohort to attend in person.

The use of online platforms is becoming increasingly dominant as universities look for ways to meet financial constraints and deliver programs to cohorts with a more diverse range of learning challenges such as study and work combined with maintenance of longstanding personal relationships. Practical classes are delivered at various sites on campus. In my teaching area, the deer unit and LATU are still used extensively across all years of the degree for handling and skill development in foundational classes such as cow clinical exam. Student attendance at these classes is high and the main opportunity for social interaction within the cohort. Almost all of the practical classes are supported by a short Kuracloud lesson outlining the learning objectives and expected outcomes of practical classes. All live animal teaching requires animal ethics approval with a caveat of students completing an instructional Kuracloud prior to attending the practical class.

A recent addition to the bricks and mortar of Massey is the clinical skills lab. This is an area devoted to the use of models as an initial introduction to such things as use of IV catheters, obstetrics models for calving cows, silicon skin models for suturing practice, a model pharmacy and many other things. This allows students to develop their muscle memory and get feedback in a lower stakes environment as a first experience before attempting the same on a loved family pet. Simulation model teaching is now the norm in most advanced veterinary schools and it not difficult to imagine that they will eventually become the main mode of 'hands on teaching' as the animal ethics approval process becomes more demanding.

The method of student assessment is changing to align with international trends and focuses on assessment as teaching units are completed rather than the high stakes end of year exams of previous times. In many cases, the barrier is set at an expectation of 75–80% before a student can move on to the next stage.

## The people

The people within the veterinary school consist of the team leaders, teaching staff, administration staff, support staff and farm staff. While we come from remarkably diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, the common thought thread present in all their minds is to work cooperatively to deliver veterinary teaching to the very highest standards possible. Our recent QR ranking of being number one in Australasia and South-East Asia and nineteenth in the world is strong evidence that we are delivering well in a range of metrics. At a personal level, I bear witness to the fact that during my employment at Massey I have only been treated with kindness and respect by my colleagues and rate my professional experience at Massey as the happiest of my long career.

The other half of the people are the students. Most are from Gen Z and without doubt in a remarkably formative period of their lives. The major marker in their lives is the Covid-19 pandemic. Their life story is indelibly etched with their experience of navigating lockdowns, on-line learning and in the case of many of our international students, international border restrictions as they attempted to re-enter New Zealand. I recently organised a class reunion and when I looked back on the makeup of my class, I realised that the biggest change since my time as a student is the significant broadening of the ethnic and cultural diversity of the student cohort. My class photo is dominated by white European faces with a gender balance of around two thirds male and one third female in our cohort of 62 students. In 2025, most classes have up to 175 students, with at least 85% being young women and 15% being young men from many cultural backgrounds around the globe. Admissions hold 125 places for New Zealand citizens and residents and 50 for international students.

## Some observations

During conversations at practical classes and tutorials a consistent aspiration for students to express when they leave Massey is to head out into mixed practice to see what discipline of veterinary medicine meets their goals.

A number also are focused on applying for internships in areas such as companion animal medicine, equine medicine and so on, often in large specialist practices. To date, I haven't seen this approach being advertised in Australasia in the field of production animal medicine and reproduction in the larger practice setting.

Staff often become the conduit in conversations during smaller group tutorial and practical sessions. We hear the perceptions of how students were treated or what they observed during externship and OWNS visits, particularly during their final year. You all play a highly valued role in educating our students, but it is also important to be aware that private groups on social media platforms are a very rapid way of sharing experiences – good and bad. If your practice doesn't have a person designated to coordinating student visits, I respectfully suggest you address this by appointing someone so that the students can be asked what they want to achieve prior to visiting you, as they are often targeting particular veterinary experiences when they visit and if you can meet these aspirations, your standing improves in that cohort.

As many will be aware, in recent years I have raised concerns about sexist and racist attitudes within the veterinary environment in New Zealand. I have addressed these issues on social media platforms and privately with individuals and stakeholder groups. While I understand there is a curiosity about the gender and ethnic makeup of our student cohorts, there are occasions when this inquiry does expand beyond the boundaries of reasonable conduct into the expression of unsolicited opinions which in not particularly helpful when spoken about in front of students. If I fail to address unhelpful remarks, I become complicit in the misunderstanding and prejudice expressed.

While our primary role is to teach the next generation of veterinarians, there is also an unwritten expectation that we are also interested in the wellbeing of the students. It doesn't take much imagination to see the huge cultural challenges many of our students face when arriving from large urban centres abroad to life in Palmerston North. They are not only challenged by the academic expectations but also the subtleties and values of Kiwi culture. I take the view that it is our responsibility to also express a genuine interest in the duty of care towards the students. It is common for international students who have had positive formative experiences as undergraduates to make a positive decision to remain in New Zealand and make their lives here.

## Our community

We live in a relatively small close knit veterinary community in New Zealand. Most practice veterinarians have an intense interest in the 'what and how' of veterinary education at Massey. Feedback platforms of various sorts are usually well subscribed and there remains a group of individuals in the wider profession that tirelessly contribute over long periods of time. It is clear that these individuals take the view that they are part of the global veterinary village. They acknowledge that they are part of the Massey education team in a generous and holistic manner.

Specifically, to the Sheep and Beef Cattle Veterinarians and the Deer Branch of the NZVA, I acknowledge the generous inputs to students interested in these species in the form of assistance with the special topics program, speaking to the cloven hoof student group and of recent times the Deer Branch scholarships. As the new curriculum is applied to the cohort starting BVSc 5 in 2027 there is some uncertainty where these will fit, and we may need to rethink how students interested in production animals get meaningful exposure to sheep, beef and deer medicine and reproduction in the context of rural life in New Zealand.

Many of us qualified at a time when the new graduate was expected to hit the ground running. Some remain scarred from arriving at their first job to be greeted with a set of clinic and vehicle keys as the exhausted practice owner waved goodbye to new graduate as he headed off on his first holiday in a very long time. Sole charge and a few mistakes considered character building. The emergence of social media has redrawn the boundaries for this type of introduction to practice and mistakes are no longer greeted with "ah well, mistakes happen" but rather, by social media shaming and online bullying.

Your role in this village is to provide safe working environments to guide and mentor new graduates as they develop their professional skills and confidence. This has to be an intentional, structured and informed process as you learn what aspirations and skills they want to grow. My concern is that failure to meet this challenge will see continued problems of recruitment and retention, particularly in less attractive locations.

