

Hijabi in the headlights

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Stepping into the veterinary industry

At the end of year 13, I applied to the University of Otago planning to study Zoology; however, I realised that I wanted to do something more hands-on and practical, so at the last minute, I applied for the Veterinary Nursing Course at Otago Polytechnic. Although I had an interest in applying for the Bachelor of Veterinary Science at Massey University, I did not yet want to leave Dunedin and hence opted for the veterinary nursing course at Otago Polytechnic. After waiting with bated breath, I fortunately got in for the on-campus intake and began my journey as a Veterinary Nurse.

A bit of context as to why this was a particularly unusual career choice for a Muslim; working with animals, specifically dogs is quite controversial. In Islam, dogs are considered impure and dirty; we are not allowed to have them as pets but can have them solely as guard dogs that reside outside the house. After dealing with dogs and their bodily excretions, including saliva, we have to rinse our hands and any body parts that have come in contact with their bodily excretions with a special soap. However, a large proportion of the population is not aware that we as Muslims have a responsibility to help out animals as well, and that also includes canines; there is a way to make that possible, as long as we follow the rules of the religion. I strongly believe the stigma that the faith has regarding dogs shouldn't be a hindrance for any Muslims wanting to work within the veterinary industry. Even though I previously held this stigmatised belief regarding handling canine patients, after much reading and consulting, I was able to take the step to work with dogs comfortably.

Student life

Monday morning, the first day of class, one of the last ones to arrive, and there I was, standing by the door, definitely a hijabi in the headlights. All heads turned to me, and I awkwardly smiled and briskly walked to an available chair. First days are always challenging, but introductions went along in my table group and smiles and small conversations were shared. I remember that during those first few weeks of class, I was highly self-conscious of my appearance, and each morning before class or before getting ready to go to the library to study, I made sure that my hijab was all in place and looked nice. That was before I realised that I didn't need to try so hard to look good. I made a close friend in my first year, and we hit it off immediately and we are still friends to this day. So that was the first obstacle out of the way.

The second obstacle was notifying my lecturers and placement supervisors of my prayer times. As Muslims, we have to pray five times a day, and during school hours or placement hours, there are two to three prayers that we need to do. During study days, it was easy to go and pray as prayer times were usually during lunch break. There were times during the year when I did have to leave class for a bit to pray. Unlike my expectations, when I informed my lecturers that I needed to take time to do my prayers, they were kind and considerate and didn't question my intentions. This was also the case when I had to tell my friends about this, and I am highly grateful for their open-mindedness and kind manner. When it came to telling placement supervisors that I had to pray, I informed them on my first day, and again, they were kind and open-minded about it and didn't question it. They even asked me what sort of area I would need and were able to provide me with a safe space to do my prayers. Praying is a vital part of my life, and the fact that tertiary providers and supporters have been able to cater to my needs means the world to me.

By speaking up about this fact, I can spread awareness about Islam and hopefully eradicate the misconceptions that the community has about it. When tertiary providers and supporters can cater to someone with specific needs, it improves my experience with them and allows me to have a positive experience, which is what we want in this day and age for my fellow Muslim students and aspiring veterinarians, veterinary nurses, technicians, assistants, and anyone else working in the veterinary industry.

As the second year rolled around, I had created a good rapport with my classmates and lecturers, involved myself with dog photography and ultimately was voted Class Representative by my classmates. That was my first leadership role in the veterinary industry. Being a Class Rep meant representing the veterinary student body for Otago Polytechnic which is significant for a Muslim woman. To have a Muslim woman represent a class in tertiary for a course that is not known to have Muslim students is one of the first steps they took toward diversity.

This was the first opportunity that I had to showcase to my fellow Muslim friends that, despite being in a Western society, as a Muslim woman you can go up the ranks, you can be the face of an evolving industry, and your faith and hijab should not stop you from achieving your dreams. My heart swelled when I was voted to be the class rep and I felt very proud to carry that role. It showed that a Muslim woman was acknowledged by her classmates, they were able to put their trust in someone who they believed was a competent and responsible member of the class to be the face of veterinary nursing.

Nothing is smooth sailing in life. I had my ups and downs. I failed a paper, I struggled to complete my clinical skills because of COVID-19, and I rushed and stressed about completing assignments in a format that I was not familiar with. But my motivation stemmed from my love for wanting to be a veterinary nurse, I was striving for that, no matter what got in the way. You fall seven times but get up eight.

I had great experiences during my time studying at Otago Polytechnic and going to placements, and this made me look forward to being a fully-fledged veterinary nurse. As the end of the year was slowly rolling around, I began to look for jobs, but at the time it was difficult to find a job. I was busy looking at job ads and emailing clinics, applying for jobs, and had no success until one day when I was in Christchurch, I received an email from a Dunedin clinic where I was doing weekly placements with an offer for a three-month internship. I immediately seized the opportunity without much thought and so my veterinary nursing journey began.

Thrown into the deep end

Doing placements and being hired were two completely different things. Being an employee means that you have a responsibility, you have to own up to your mistakes, you are actually in charge of the health and welfare of an animal, you have to communicate with clients and your actions will have consequences. As a student, you had the space to make mistakes and the staff would never blame you. So that fear was instilled in me starting on the first day of work. I was scared, I went to the toilet often because of nerves and stayed up late each night thinking about whether I did well or not at work. Fortunately, I had a head nurse when I was starting work there whom I will always be grateful for and whom I will always remember. For two months, she worked closely with me, teaching me the way to become the best veterinary nurse that I could be.

The clinic was a bustling place. There was always something new that I learned each day there, even until my last day. Because it was such a busy clinic, there were times when I had to put my big girl pants on and take charge by myself. This was when I was thrown into the deep end.

Having to learn things on the job, relying on myself and my knowledge. It was in these situations I was able to learn the most. A lot of it was mostly done by having clear communication with the veterinarians and the nurses. Asking questions was the most effective way to learn. I believe this is what made me resilient, disciplined, and proactive in an industry that is tough on the physical and mental aspects of human nature. It was so easy for me to give up and quit because of how difficult it was, but my drive to be a veterinary nurse and be involved in saving animals was greater than my inclination to give up.

I would come home tired, complaining, crying, doubting myself, and starving, but despite all the negatives, I continued to look at the positive aspects: learning so much, nursing my patients, building client relationships, polishing my clinical skills, gaining confidence and moving closer and closer to becoming the best veterinary nurse that I could be. Every day, that was all I prayed for - I would ask God to make me the best veterinary nurse that I could be. I had so much self-doubt, I didn't believe in myself, both at work and at home I was overly conscious of myself, always thinking: what is a head-scarf-wearing Muslim doing in the veterinary industry, what is this outcast doing, will I ever be good enough? But I persevered, I pushed through, and I woke up every morning, looking forward to a new day. And I am so thankful that I kept going.

There were a lot of experiences in my first year that I remember to this day. My first on-call (a labrador c-section at midnight) only two months into working, overdosing my first patient on NSAIDs (she recovered within 48 hours!), first overnight shift, first table death only 1.5 months into work (traumatised to this day, but learnt so much from it), after hours ex-lap (exploratory laparotomy), first nurse consult, first orthopaedic surgery, first intensive care patient, taking a patient home and blood transfusions, the list is endless. There were heaps of patient-related firsts, and thinking back on it makes me feel excited about all the lessons I learned. On the client side of it, I developed client rapport, discovering that I love having client interactions, but also experienced racism and backlash due to the headscarf and my skin colour. Some of the negative client interactions were subtle, such as discreet looks, doing a double take, or sometimes it was just not wanting to be served by me at the reception counter and some were direct verbal abuse, which I will never forget, but only laugh looking back on it. The positives overcome the negatives, always, as long as you remember to focus on the good rather than the bad - good experiences such as clients requesting to be served by me, or clients wanting to specifically see me for their consult; those mattered the most to me. Being accepted by the community, and also accepting myself for who I was in the veterinary industry.

As my second year of nursing rolled around, that was when I began exploring CPD (continuing professional development) courses. I hadn't found out what area of nursing I particularly liked at that point yet, and even now, there are so many areas to choose from, and they are all too great to pick and choose. However, I began to go to courses like emergency and critical care, anaesthesia and analgesia, low-stress handling certification, and clinical coach certification (after I realised that I enjoyed working with and teaching students). At this point, I began being more involved with the clinic, being responsible for the maintenance of machines and certain parts of the clinic. Having that responsibility contributed to me building up my leadership skills, especially when I was working closely with the students. And I did not take any notice any more of the differences that I had with the rest of the staff, I considered myself to be just another staff member of a veterinary clinic, and I stopped looking at my differences as an obstacle but instead as a blessing.

Highs and lows

My third year rolled around, and this was when it got busy to the point that everyone and everything was going to collapse. The lack of veterinarians was one of the major negative effects of COVID-19. Two other clinics had to merge with our clinic, and before and during this

merge, many staff members had left, and we were without a head nurse for a while. By that point I had begun doing head nurse tasks for several months to help with the clinic, mainly doing administrative tasks, I hadn't yet become involved in the leadership part of the clinic.

After some time, I realised that I was ready to take on the head nurse role properly. My manager had already mentioned it to me multiple times and my answer at the time was mainly I wasn't ready, and at the same time, it was too busy for any of us to think about the logistics of it all. Once the chaos was at a more manageable level, I sent an email to my manager saying that I was ready to step up and take on the role more seriously.

I spread the good news to my family and friends, and it was all a very exciting phase of my career. After coming back from holiday, it was the full swing of being the Head Veterinary Nurse. Rosters, nurse meetings, clinical leads meetings, coming up with solutions for problems, managing people, managing students, and a lot of administrative work. The downside of this, however, resulted in me using less and less of my nursing skills. I was mainly occupied with sitting in front of the computer and tending to people instead of tending to animals.

I loved every aspect of it. I enjoy working with people and making a team and workplace work well. I loved being able to contribute to something significant in my workplace. It was a role that was just as important as tending to the animals. Teaching and empowering students, new veterinarians and nurses is a passion of mine, and during this process, I discovered more things about myself - my style of teaching, communicating with different types of people and how much I thrived working with people.

But the highs always come with the lows. As I busied myself with other people, I forgot about my own needs, with enough pushing from the people close to me, I took a break, had my responsibilities delegated, saw a counsellor and gave time to myself rather than to other people. What I will always be grateful for to this day is how supportive and loving my colleagues were. I was upset at myself for letting them down, but I also knew that I needed to take the right steps to build myself back up. The recovery was slow, as was the build-up to my mental distress, but I was slowly but surely gaining myself back.

After this turbulent time, I realised it was time for me to move on. A fact difficult for me to accept. However, I knew that I needed to put myself first, I knew that I should no longer risk losing myself and my love for veterinary nursing by staying in an environment that was no longer uplifting me. It was with a heavy heart and burdened shoulders that I went into my practice manager's office and told her the news verbally, and a week later, I handed in my resignation letter. The last six months of my time at my first workplace were full of laughter, sadness, prepping to handover my duties, assisting as much as I could with my practice manager, training up the nurses as much as I could and teaching my heart to slowly let go of these people that had been by my side for the past three years. I could not have done it without them. I will always and forever remember them.

Moving forward

As you close one door, another one opens. I was a confused Hijabi for a while because I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do. I didn't know whether I needed a break from veterinary nursing, whether I needed to do nothing for a few months, whether I should stay with my parents, or whether I should find another veterinary nursing job. I simply did not know. I was in limbo, and I hated the idea of not knowing what I was doing with my life.

Fortunately, after much time, prayer and guidance, I landed myself a veterinary nursing job in Christchurch with assistance from my regional manager. A place that I have always wanted to

go to. A place with a large Muslim-Malaysian community, a place close to my parents, and a place that has vast veterinary nursing career opportunities.

Leaving is hard. Change is hard. Letting go is hard. Leaving Dunedin meant not just leaving my first workplace, it meant leaving my sister and my closest friends. But what's harder is not spreading your wings and missing out on the exciting opportunities that life has waiting for you and regretting the steps not taken, even if it's just one more step forward.

To my readers

To aspiring veterinary nurses, assistants and veterinarians, to those wearing a Hijab and wanting to work in the veterinary industry, to those who are currently in practice and seeking inspiration, to those wanting to step up and become a leader and to whoever else is reading this story, I hope that I was able to touch your heart.

To my fellow brothers and sisters in Islam, God has gifted us animals and given us the responsibility to care for and tend to them. Don't let the stigma of dealing with canines be an obstacle towards your path of working in the veterinary industry. To my hijabis, the hijab is your power, it is not something that will hinder your path of going into the veterinary industry, wear it with utmost pride and joy. God is always with you.

I hope that I was able to get across the message that no matter who you are, no matter where you're from, no matter your race and religion, you can be someone who can inspire the lives of humans and their beloved animals, big and small, that come in all types of shapes and sizes.

I hope that I get across the message that we are human beings and there will be times that we trip and fall, but because we are human beings, we are also able to get back up and continue the race.

I hope that none of you lose your faith and love for the veterinary industry and that you continue to fight for our patients, because who else is going to tend to patients who are unable to speak for themselves if not us?

