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Veterinary Migration. Why do UK vets move abroad?

In the last year, dramatic political changes have reminded us about the role of veterinary migration to and from the United Kingdom, and its importance to the profession.

On the one hand, the referendum to leave the European Union has highlighted the significance of overseas-qualified vets in the UK. In 2015-16, 56% of all new veterinary registrations were from vets qualifying outside of the UK, with 48% coming from the EU or EAA countries. The total number of EU/EAA vets registering in the UK has also increased from 362 in 2004/5 to 890 in 2015/16. When it comes to the total veterinary population in the UK, 24.6% qualified in EU/EAA countries and a further 6.7% from other countries. These proportions are significantly higher than other countries – for example Ireland (10%), France (9%), Netherlands (5%), and Italy (1%) ([FVE, 2015](#)).

On the other hand, one response to Brexit has been for people to seriously consider leaving the UK for another country. For example, following the referendum, the immigration website for New Zealand recorded a huge spike in the number of queries from Britons: more than double the number of enquiries were made compared to the same time in 2015 ([Ainge Roy, 2016](#)). Some of these were likely to have been vets. Indeed, just like the UK the New Zealand veterinary profession is heavily reliant on overseas labour – it always has been. Its first chief vet – J.A. Gilruth - arrived from Scotland in 1893 on the invitation of the New Zealand Government. Later, in the 1950s, another Scottish vet – Dr Sam Jamieson – emigrated to New Zealand looking for a quiet life, only to end up designing and managing its eradication programme for bovine Tuberculosis. These days, 30% of New Zealand's veterinary profession comes from overseas, with 11% coming from the UK – twice the amount from Australia.

But if veterinary migration is, and always has been so important to the profession, it is surprising that we know so little about it. In surveys, 13% of veterinary students and 9% of graduates say they want to work overseas ([Vet Futures., 2015](#)). Other surveys show that the main reason given amongst non-British nationals for moving to the UK in the was to 'work abroad' (48.7%), whilst 38% said to 'gain experience', 32% due to 'better pay and conditions', and 23% (up from 7.2% in 2010) due to 'lack of work in home country' ([Buzzeo et al., 2014](#)).

These surveys give only a glimpse into veterinary migration. The same is not true for other professions. The medical profession, for instance, has spent time analysing the reasons for the migration of doctors and nurses, and its effects upon medical practice ([Withers and Snowball, 2003](#); [Bidwell et al., 2013](#); [Gauld and Horsburgh, 2015](#); [Robinson and Carey, 2000](#); [Quantin et al., 2012](#); [Humphries et al., 2015a](#); [Humphries et al., 2015b](#); [Kangasniemi et al.,](#)

[2007](#); [Priebe et al., 2011](#); [Taylor et al., 2015](#); [Daniel et al., 2001](#)). Moreover, these surveys tend to provide only simplistic soundbite reasons for migration. For example, frequently we hear that migration occurs because of 'lifestyle' and 'quality of life'. It is difficult, however, to reduce migration to single reasons like this. Individual factors – like referenda – may act as important turning points, but migration decisions are rarely single factors and more often a culmination of multiple events affecting individuals, couples and families. Without this context, it is difficult to know what these reasons mean. Indeed, the danger of focusing on migration *reasons* is that it obscures migration *decisions* and avoid diagnosing underlying social problems.

Narratives of Veterinary Migration

One way of fully understanding the reasons for veterinary migration is by using biographical life-history interviews. Widely used in migration research, the purpose of this methodology is for participants to narrate in full their life and career, covering the significant events that lead them to migrate ([Wengraf, 2001](#)). Using this biographical approach with 50 UK vets in New Zealand – in the north and south islands, and in farm and small animal practice – it has been possible to identify key storylines and events that have led them to move to and stay in NZ. In doing so these narratives of migration also point to wider challenges facing the veterinary profession. These narratives are briefly described below.

The First Job

Perhaps the most common storyline to vets' migration to NZ is the 'first job narrative'. Common to the first job narrative are stories of substandard working practices, long hours, overwork, lack of a social life and mundane work with little intellectual challenge. Loss of self-esteem and personal well-being is also a feature of this narrative. The consequence is an insecurity that leads young vets to questions such as 'is this it?' and 'what else is there?' The first job narrative describes UK vets feelings of frustration and disillusionment with the veterinary profession following graduation.

The Anti-Vet

The first job narrative leads to a questioning and rejection of accepted ideas of the very idea of a vet and what they do. The idea that there is an ideal veterinary career or the mixed practice ideal – instilled in vets through their training – is rejected in favour of veterinary subjectivities that had been silenced by veterinary cultural norms. This "anti-vet" identity may lead to complete exit from the profession, but it can also lead to an active or passive search for different veterinary careers in different places. What are seen as 'non-traditional' veterinary roles in, for example, locum work, public health and/or research, become increasingly attractive.

Poverty Farming and Practice

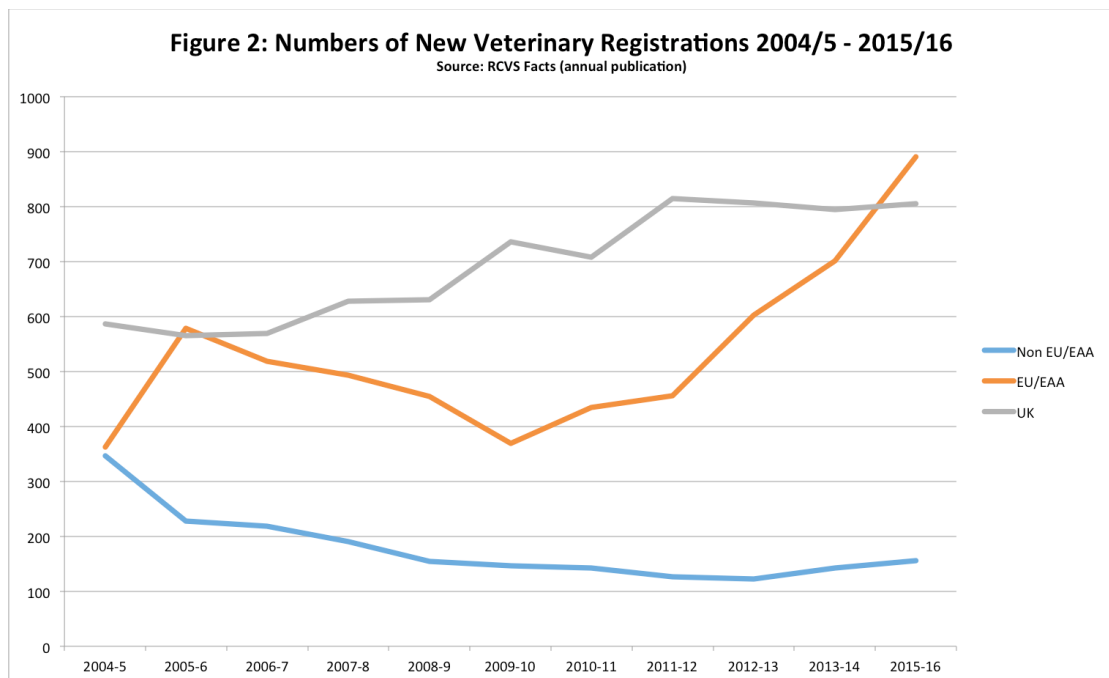
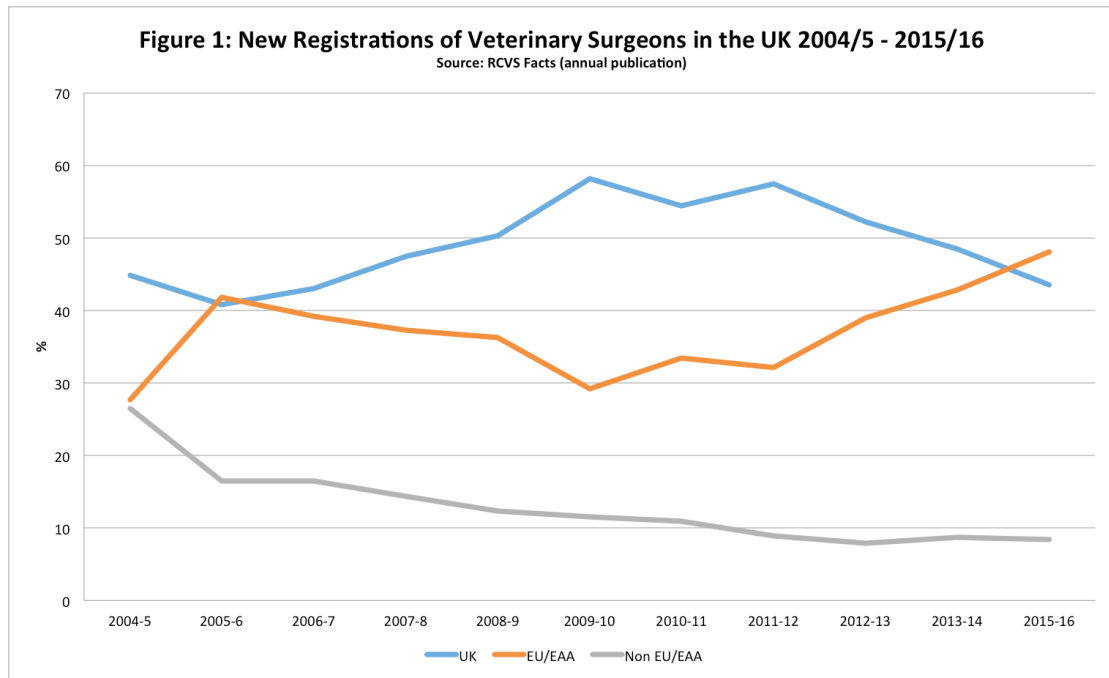
Another narrative relates to the opportunities for progressive practice and intellectual challenge. This includes declines in agricultural and veterinary practices following the impacts of diseases like Foot and Mouth and bovine Tuberculosis; a perceived rise in bureaucracy and red tape; and the realization that the kind of progressive farming that demands developing new and challenging veterinary skills is not going to happen.

Therapy and Social Security

Once in New Zealand, narratives of veterinary life change and revolve around work-life balance: hours were shorter, rotas less demanding, and out of hours – for most of the year – almost non-existent. Work was for work, and working late frowned upon. The contrast with UK, and NZ's culture of outdoor living, meant that veterinary migrants were soon taking part in activities that they had had no time for before. Participation in sports was revived, and regular hours meant that routines could be established allowing them to play matches on a weekly rather than haphazard basis. This way of living was connected to a broader sense of social security – or what sociologists refer to as ontological security – a sense of order, tradition, and community, also reflected in 'realistic' attitudes to animal welfare and treatment.

As much as these narratives can help describe how vets come to leave the UK and migrate to other countries, they also identify a range of challenges facing the veterinary profession as a whole. The 'first job narrative' is a significant challenge for the profession, accounting for disillusionment and exit from veterinary careers as well as migration ([Vet Futures Project Board, 2015](#)). These narratives may also open up other questions, such as what kind of animal welfare practices are appropriate, how can other veterinary careers be normalised beyond 'mixed practice'. Other research may focus on the contribution and knowledge transfer activities veterinary may bring to veterinary practice. So, whilst Brexit may have highlighted how veterinary migration is important for animal welfare and disease control, broader research can help identify and address wider problems within the veterinary profession.

Figures



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