Mobile Work, Veterinary Subjectivity and Brexit: Understanding the Migration of Veterinary Surgeons to the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This paper extends studies of ‘global work’ by considering the mobility of veterinary surgeons in the global countryside. The paper develops the concept of ‘disease ecology’: an assemblage of heterogenous actors and relations that inscribe and normalise mobility within professional subjectivities. Disruptions to these disease ecologies can contribute to new patterns of mobility. Drawing on biographical narrative interviews with 35 vets who have migrated to the United Kingdom to work, the paper shows how veterinary mobility is shaped by and emerges in response to these disease ecologies. Specifically, the paper describes how four narratives – ‘the first job’, ‘escape and adventure’, ‘the lucky break’ and ‘staying mobilities’ – contribute to veterinary migration to the UK, and how the lived experiences of work and inscriptions of mobile veterinary subjectivities within disease ecologies lead vets to stay in the UK. However, the paper also considers the role of Brexit in disrupting established disease ecologies and creating new patterns of veterinary mobilities. In identifying how Brexit challenges vets’ sense of place, the paper concludes by exploring Brexit’s potential impact to the future of veterinary services in the UK.

Keywords: Brexit; mobility; globalisation; global-rural; migration; disease ecology; veterinary services; biographical narrative interviews; biosecurity; animal disease; neoliberalism.
1. Introduction

A central element of the globalisation of the countryside has been migration to and from rural areas (Woods, 2007). In the spaces of the global rural, migration reshapes rural practices, communities and environments as the local combines with the global to produce new identities for the countryside and those that live and work within it. Understandings of the global countryside have largely focused on amenity migration (Perkins et al., 2015; Woods, 2011). However, other forms of international migration are significant, such as the migration required to fill low skilled, poorly paid, and precarious ‘occupational niches’ within the neoliberal agri-food system (Hoggart and Mendoza, 1999; Sporton, 2013). Not only does this global migration transform the agricultural workforce, but migrants also reshape local communities through their engagement or isolation from local social and political structures (Lever and Milbourne, 2015; Woods, 2016).

In these studies of the global-rural, however, there has been less consideration of the migration of highly skilled professions associated with countryside management and agriculture. This is surprising in two ways. Firstly, the globalisation of agriculture has always relied upon circulations of experts and expertise, developing and carrying new practices, technologies and natures from place to place (Brooking and Pawson, 2011). Secondly, recent work on globalisation has highlighted how the professions responsible for globalisation are themselves highly transient and mobile. Accompanying the rise of ‘global work’ (Jones, 2008), practices and processes normalise mobility by creating and inscribing it within professional subjectivities (Cranston, 2016a). However, whilst
some studies have considered the global mobility of farmers (Cheshire and Woods, 2013), studies of ‘global work’ have focused on migration between international cities (Beaverstock and Smith, 1996).

This paper extends examinations of ‘global work’ into the global countryside by considering the role of veterinary surgeons (hereafter: vets). Vets play a central role in the management of farm animal health, disease control, and the regulation of public health and food safety. However, these roles increasingly represent global work: in the United Kingdom (UK), over 50% of all new vets qualify outside of the UK, and these vets are disproportionately employed within public health roles (BVA, 2017). The questions the paper seeks to address are: why are there so many overseas vets in the UK? Why have they moved there? And how might the UK’s decision to leave the European Union (EU) – commonly referred to as ‘Brexit’ – affect the lives of overseas vets in the UK?

To answer these questions, the paper conceptualises veterinary mobility within a ‘disease ecology’. Focusing on the complex assemblage of human and nonhuman actors that represent ‘veterinary worlds of work’, the paper argues that some veterinary mobilities are inscribed within these disease ecologies, whilst biological and political disruptions to disease ecologies may lead to new patterns of mobility. The paper therefore begins by introducing and describing the relationship between disease ecologies and veterinary mobility, focusing on the normalisation of mobility within professional subjectivities by international regulations and neoliberal forms of animal health governance. Subsequently, the paper presents a narrative analysis from 35 interviews with overseas vets
working in the UK to show how veterinary mobility emerges from the lived experience of disease ecologies and its inscriptions of veterinary subjectivity. Finally, the paper considers the potential disruption to these disease ecologies arising from Brexit and the future mobility of vets working in the UK.

2. Veterinary Mobilities

2.1 Conceptualising Veterinary Mobility and Migration

In this paper, the concept of a ‘disease ecology’ comprised of heterogeneous (i.e. social, natural, technological) relations and actors, is used to help explain veterinary mobility and migration. The idea of ‘disease ecology’ is developed from historical studies of the veterinary profession that analysed how place-specific veterinary cultures have developed. Focusing on colonial expansion, these studies show how the veterinary profession and its practices travel to, and become established in new countries (Mishra, 2011). These processes create a topology of veterinary professionalism, drawing distant places together through a shared veterinary vision, and facilitating movement between them. Central to these understandings of the global movement of vets is the creation of idealised professional subjectivities, based on the kind of work vets saw as normal. In practice, however, a range of different professional subjectivities emerged in relation to place specific social (e.g. forms of colonial rule), biological (e.g. disease severity and environmental factors) and technological actors and relations (Gilfoyle, 2003; Mishra, 2011).
Davis (2008) sees these spatial variations in veterinary practice as emergent from a social and biological relational field which orders disease management in a localised ‘disease ecology’. As a result, differences in the presence/absence of animals and diseases contribute to the creation of different roles for veterinary medicine in environmental policy in colonial India and North Africa. But what is also clear from Davis’ work (2008) is that local disease ecologies and veterinary roles are configured by more than disease itself. Rather, Davis shows how the contribution of veterinary medicine to environmental policy is shaped by the relationships between pathogens, animals, approaches to veterinary education and styles of colonial administration.

In this historical work of the veterinary profession, disease ecology is less a theoretical and more a descriptive device. Outwardly, its emphasis on heterogeneous relations may appear broadly similar to assemblage thinking and the kind of relational theory found within post-structural analyses of animal health (Latour, 1988; Hinchliffe et al., 2016; Law and Mol, 2011). However, these similarities are coincidental, and there has been no attempt to link disease ecology to these perspectives in order to give it a firmer theoretical footing. Doing so, however, allows veterinary professionalism to be conceived of as a relational achievement, emergent from and produced by a range of human actors, animals, technologies and institutions that are held to together in a ‘veterinary world of work’ (cf. Becker, 1982). The focus becomes one of understanding the processes and practices in which heterogeneous actors cohere. As Wilkinson (2011) describes, human and nonhuman actors configure different veterinary subjectivities which vary between times of disease crisis and ‘peacetime’.
Assembling this veterinary world of work attends to the multiplicity of different forms of veterinary knowledge and subjectivity, the contests between them, and the characteristics and capabilities of different actors (Enticott, 2017).

It is also the case that mobility may be inscribed within these professional subjectivities. Studies of ‘global work’ (Jones, 2008) – in which professional labour flows routinely between world cities (Smith, 2003; Faulconbridge et al., 2009) – show how spatial discourses of ‘mobile professionalism’ and of 'being on the move' are central to its creation (Findlay et al., 2013; Cranston, 2017a). For example, expectations of mobility have become normalised within scientific work (Akers, 2005). Mobility is enabled through institutional infrastructure, such as sabbatical programmes and exchanges (Heffernan and Jöns, 2013), which inscribe mobility as a sign of ‘good science’ through the circulation of ideas (Jöns, 2015).

Thus, mobility is essential not just to the process of science but of being a 'good scientist' (Mahroum, 2000). Similarly, Cranston (2016a) shows how the processes and practices of human resources management have transformed mobility and distance from a place of hardship to an opportunity. Not only does the infrastructure of global work inscribe mobility into professionalism through conferences and trade shows, it also contributes to the characterisation of what counts as a ‘good migrant’ (Cranston, 2017b; Cranston, 2016b). This mobilities perspective therefore assumes that migrants are produced relationally through their mobility, and the practices and process which inform their move (Cranston, 2016a).
These processes are also relevant to the veterinary profession. Enticott (2018a) shows how heterogeneous actors shape present-day veterinary subjectivities, and inscribe different forms of veterinary mobility within disease ecologies. A central element is the role of professional ‘master narratives’ (Nelson, 2001) of veterinary subjectivity. The veterinary master narrative emphasises how conduct extends beyond technical expertise (Grey, 1998) and is constructed through cultural and institutional ‘discursive regimes’ (Gill, 2015) that prescribe the limits of professional identity, regulate professional behaviour and determine professional status. By reinforcing certain professional subjectivities, those on the margins are not recognised as legitimate and fail to fit within the dominant disease ecology. At the same time, however, Enticott (2018a) shows how these established orders are disrupted by biological incursions – disease outbreaks – resulting in forms of existential ‘status anxiety’ (Burke, 1991; Thomson and Jones, 2016). This can inscribe new mobile veterinary subjectivities in which migration emerges as a professional survival strategy.

2.2 Veterinary Mobility Across Europe

Across Europe, 10% of vets do not share the nationality of the country in which they are registered to practice (FVE, 2015). However, there are significant variations between countries. Data from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS., 2017) shows that annually, 48% of all newly registered veterinary surgeons in the UK qualified in other countries in the EU or EEA (European Economic Area). A further 8.4% qualified in third countries (e.g. New Zealand, Australia and South Africa). Registrations by UK qualified vets have been in
decline since 2010 when less than a third of newly qualified vets came from the EU. At the same time, there has been a slow decline in registrations from ‘third’ countries: in 2004 they comprised 26.4% of all new vets and 8.4% in 2016. The total number of EU/EEA vets registering in the UK has also increased from 362 in 2004/5 to 890 in 2015/16. Overall, 24.6% of all vets in the UK qualified in EU/EEA countries and a further 6.7% from other countries. The UK currently attracts most of its non-UK vets from Spain (7.3%), Ireland (5.8%) and Italy (3.9%).

Recent surveys of the UK veterinary workforce suggest that most overseas qualified vets are female (59%) and qualified in the last 8 years (IES., 2017). Most (77%) of overseas-qualified vets work in clinical practice with the remainder in non-clinical practice such as government agencies (Food Standards Agency [FSA], Animal and Plant Health Agency [APHA], Defra, Welsh Government), academia, charities or industry. Between 90-95% of all official veterinarians working in abattoirs are not from the UK (BVA, 2017).

2.3 Inscribing Mobility in the Governance of Animal Health

Over the last 30 years, reforms to the governance of animal health in the UK have fundamentally changed who and how veterinary work is completed. Forms of neoliberal managerialism are central to these reforms, but they also inscribe mobility as a key practice of the modern veterinary labour force. Shifting the nature of veterinary work from local and static to global and mobile has been achieved through a mix of reorganisation and restructuring the delivery of
veterinary public health services, in response to the spread of old and new animals
diseases.

Established in 1938, the State Veterinary Service (SVS) was a government
department responsible for the management of animal health in the UK. Its
activities included disease surveillance and meat inspection. These activities and
the vets that worked for the SVS, were seen as distinct from the traditional and
stereotypical role of a mixed practice vet popularised by the James Herriot ‘master
narrative’ of veterinary subjectivity (Enticott, 2018a). Instead, the ‘man from the
ministry’ was imagined as overly bureaucratic, representative of urban rather
than rural life, distant and officious, and not a ‘real’ vet.

Although public and private veterinary sectors may have appeared distinct, there
were areas of overlap. Private vets have long acted as an ad hoc surveillance army
at times of crisis (such as outbreaks of infectious diseases like Foot and Mouth),
or endemic diseases such as bovine tuberculosis (TB). Moreover, veterinary
inspection of abattoirs was contracted to local veterinary practices at a local level
by SVS offices. Importantly, these relationships were very much informal: no
formal contract existed, for example, between the SVS and private veterinary
practices to conduct disease testing. Instead, a ‘memorandum of understanding’
acted as the basis of the employment of private sector vets for disease
surveillance, rather than a process of competitive tendering. This informality was
also reflected in the training provided for disease surveillance to private vets by
the SVS: it was locally organised with no set national standards. Finally, whilst
meat inspection work was tendered, it was local veterinary practices rather than large national companies that won this work.

These arrangements began to change in the 1990s as the search for ‘value for money’ within government services introduced neoliberal techniques such as ‘agencification’ and privatisation into the management of public health (Enticott et al., 2011). Agencification was supposed to give these public sector units the freedom to manage their activities and improve the efficiency and quality of service delivery using the tools more commonly associated with the private sector. The first example of this in the management of food animal public health was the creation of the Meat Hygiene Service (MHS) in 1995, followed by the restructuring of the SVS as an agency in 2007.

The effect of these changes has been to inscribe mobility into the subjectivity of the veterinary profession. This has been achieved in the following ways. The creation of the MHS has resulted in the specialisation of veterinary public health work by separating it from everyday private veterinary work. From a situation where meat hygiene inspection was conducted by numerous small private veterinary practices, this work was rapidly concentrated into a handful of large veterinary organisations (e.g. Eville and Jones, Hallmark) established specifically to provide veterinary labour to the MHS. Other reforms – such as to TB testing in 2014 – have further concentrated veterinary labour into a small number of large veterinary companies. For example, just one veterinary company (XL Farmcare) manages the delivery of TB testing across the UK. Crucially, these reforms reflect the challenge of ordering nature, i.e. disease agents, such that food safety and
animal health are manageable. The creation of the MHS can be seen a response to
the problem of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) arising from the
interaction of farming practices and the mutational agency of prions (Hinchliffe,
2001). Similarly, the increasing demand for TB testing reflects the intractable
relations between wildlife vectors (badgers), disease management practices,
bacteria, farmers, the public and policy makers (Grant, 2009; Enticott, 2001).

Just like those labour agencies associated with seasonal agricultural working
schemes (Sporton, 2013), these new modes of organising veterinary labour have
played a key role in mediating migration flows, and inscribing mobility within the
profession. In order to provide sufficient veterinary labour to fulfill their
contractual obligations, veterinary labour companies have turned to overseas
veterinary graduates. In this, they have been facilitated by EU law: the veterinary
profession is recognised in the EU’s Mutual Recognition of Professional
Qualifications (MRPQ) Directive allowing free movement of registered veterinary
surgeons between European member states without additional entrance exams or
language competency tests. As a result of the drive for efficiency within veterinary
services and assisted by the MRPQ, companies such as Eville and Jones, and
Hallmark have sought to recruit vets by holding recruitment fairs at European
veterinary universities. Moreover, the need for European labour has also been
driven by the reluctance of UK trained vets to undertake work ‘dirty work’
(McCabe and Hamilton, 2015) and the institutional delegitimisation of public
health veterinary subjectivities (Enticott, 2018a).
Mobility is inscribed into veterinary labour practices in other ways that are reminiscent of the hyperflexible and precarious working conditions of other forms of temporary agricultural labour (Preibisch, 2010; Lever and Milbourne, 2015). Firstly, to conduct veterinary work, vets must attend training courses at their own expense to qualify as an ‘official veterinarian’ with no guarantee of work on completion, and may need to return to their home country to wait for work opportunities to arise. From the outset, public health vets are therefore required to commit to a mobile life, leaving behind family and friends, to start a new life in the UK. In fact, veterinary recruitment adverts can emphasise how mobility contributes not just to a veterinary career, but also to ‘adventure’ and a ‘new challenge’. These discourses of veterinary professionalism therefore promote a neoliberal entrepreneurial-self, in which vets are encouraged to take risks in order to better themselves. Secondly, veterinary work itself can be highly mobile with vets required to visit a range of geographically dispersed sites. At the same time, however, mobility is set alongside immobility. In actively recruiting overseas vets, veterinary companies seek to retain their labour for as long as possible, providing long-term security for their contractual obligations. By paying for the training course on condition of two years of employment, return migration and career moves are restricted.

3. Migration Methods

The rest of this paper seeks to analyse how both mobility is inscribed within veterinary worlds of work that normalise veterinary migration, and how the lived experiences of disease ecologies lead to veterinary migration to the UK. To do this,
in-depth qualitative interviews with vets working in the UK were conducted. Migration research has frequently been criticised for relying on simplistic survey methods to account for migration motivations (Stockdale, 2014). Instead, there have been calls to reinvigorate migration research by developing new methods to capture the migration and mobilities of people (Milbourne, 2007; Smith, 2007), including ethnographic studies to account for how mobility is inscribed into global work (Cranston, 2014). Others have argued for the use of biographical accounts of migration in order to go beyond the façade of simplistic ‘economic’ or ‘lifestyle’ explanations to fully tease out migration motivations (Halfacree and Boyle, 1993). Biographical methods attempt to move beyond the ‘discursive consciousness’ and tap into the ‘practical consciousness’ – the taken for granted and difficult to explain reasons that underlie migration decisions. These approaches therefore offer one way to move beyond simple explanations of migration to show how mobility is inscribed within disease ecologies, and reveal how disruptions to veterinary worlds of work prompt circulations of veterinary experts.

For this study, Wengraf’s (2001) Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was used to set veterinary migration into a personal and professional biography. Wengraf (2004: 1) argues that narrative expression conveys both conscious concerns and unconscious cultural, societal and individual presuppositions and processes. In doing so it is concerned with the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’ worlds of ‘historical person-in-historical situation’ from which ‘grounded theorisation’ can develop. The approach follows three distinct stages: first, a ‘Single Question for Inducing Narrative’ (SQUIN) is posed to the interviewee. The SQUIN directs the participant to the subject matter but is deliberately broad
enough to allow participants to talk through their lived experiences. The participant is encouraged to talk for as long as possible without interruption until they can offer no more insight. In this case, the SQUIN was:

“I’d like you to tell me the story of your veterinary career, from when you first realised what you wanted to become a vet through to now. Please talk about all the significant events, experiences you’ve had that have lead you to move to the UK and that you think have kept you here”.

Secondly, whilst this story is being described, extensive notes are taken to identify ‘Particular Incident Narratives’ (PINs) which are then explored in the order raised by the participant. Finally, non-narrative questions are asked. In this case, questions about their reactions to and consequences of Brexit.

In total, 35 BNIM interviews were conducted. As there is no open-access register of the nationalities and contact details of all vets in the UK, participants were recruited using a variety of means. Firstly, vets who had participated in previous research with the author were contacted. Secondly, social media (LinkedIn and Twitter) were used to recruit additional migrant vets. Thirdly, snowball sampling was employed by asking all initial interviewees if they knew of any friends or colleagues who would be interested in participating in the research. Broadly reflecting the characteristics of all overseas vets working in the UK, Spanish vets made up over half (19) of all vets interviewed, whilst 17 were female (see table 1).

At the time of the interviews, 20 worked for the Government but many respondents had worked in different sectors during their time in the UK. Similarly,

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<th>Table 1: Characteristics of Interviewees</th>
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the farm animal and food sectors, many vets interviewed also had experience of working in different sectors.

As the name indicates, analysis of BNIM interviews relies on comparing narratives of life as told in relation to the chronology of objective life events (i.e. events that can be checked using official records). The key analytical aim is, through interpretation, to answer why people ‘who lived their lives like this, tell their stories like that?’ (Wengraf, 2004). All but one interview was recorded, fully transcribed and entered into Nvivo to code the narrative interpretation. In what follows, the paper describes these narratives and reveals the different veterinary mobilities inscribed within disease ecologies in the UK and vets’ home countries.

4. Narratives of Veterinary Migration to the United Kingdom

Having described the institutional contribution to veterinary mobility within the UK disease ecology (see section 2.3), this section identifies and connects four narratives of veterinary migration to show how vets lived experience of disease ecologies is linked to its inscriptions of veterinary mobility.

4.1 The First Job

The narrative of the first job describes how the lived experiences of veterinary subjectivities inscribed within disease ecologies outside the UK fails to meet expectations. In research of vets emigrating from the UK, experiences of veterinary work in vets’ first job play a significant role in shaping career aspirations and
migration patterns (Enticott, 2018a). For vets moving to the UK, the same is also true but experienced in different ways. British vets are socialised into a master narrative of the veterinary profession based on the James Herriot books and television series in which vets perform a series of heroic roles, saving farm animals and pets alike, whilst simultaneously dealing with difficult clients and acting as respected permanent fixtures of the rural community. These master narratives are instrumental in choosing a veterinary career, guiding British vets towards mixed practice work, whilst creating a void into which mobile overseas labour occupies.

By contrast, such pervasive cultural master narratives of the veterinary profession are relatively absent from overseas vets’ accounts of their careers. Spanish vets recalled the influence of Félix Rodríguez de la Fuente who featured in a series of Spanish TV programmes about nature conservation:

“I remember being very little; I think I was about six when I did enjoy a particular programme on TV back in Spain, um, and... and I remember I wanted to be like the guy that was presenting the TV programme. It was... it was about wildlife in Spain, um, and it was very interesting, and I... at... at that point, I really thought I wanted to be like this guy, and then I work it out that this guy was a dentist, so I thought, well, but I don’t want to be a dentist, and then I realise that the closer I was going to be to what I wanted to be was becoming a vet, so... so... so, er, it’s... it’s quite really weird but I think being seven or being eight, I kind of already had in mind I wanted to be a vet” [UK04, Spain, Male, Government Vet]
In general though, stories of choosing a veterinary career were marked by a desire to secure professional employment, and contact with the veterinary profession was limited to personal experience on family farms. In this narrative, overseas vets did not tend to dream of becoming a vet from a young age, like many British vets, and instead adopted an instrumental view of the profession, which would provide them with a secure career. This did not mean, however, that there were no master narratives, or versions of veterinary work that had more status than others. In countries such as Spain and Italy, working as a Government vet was held in high esteem: this work was hard to come by, well-paid and permanent, and required passing additional exams. For Spanish vets, this status was perhaps more attractive to their parents who, having endured poverty during Franco’s reign, saw security and prosperity in the profession.

Despite these different career motivations, newly qualified overseas vets tell similar stories about the challenges of being a vet. The narrative of the first job in which vets are overworked and underpaid was a consistent theme that preceded their move to the UK. This narrative stresses the difficulty of getting onto the veterinary career ladder in vets’ home country:

“They won’t give you a job, because you have no experience, but that’s just an excuse because they want someone working for free doing the nurses’ job, okay? So, that’s the normal journey, normal path going out from university, and for one or two years earning no money. It’s just going and try to see if you find a chance to learn something, the basics. You are really lucky if you find someone that teaches you how to do a... a cat spay, a dog spay, okay, and in
one year I’d never done [that]...because the main vet at the practice didn’t want me to do it. The excuse was, “you’ve got no experience, we can’t “afford to make any mistake, we can’t afford to lose a client”, but that’s just an excuse. They don’t give you the opportunity to improve your skills, and improve your abilities. Um, so for one year, I’d been doing just vaccinations, and helping with the operations, and... and that’s it, that was the job. So, after one year, you’re going to be frustrated’ [UK07 Italy, Male, TB Tester Private Practice]

As part of this narrative, some vets recalled instances of direct employment rejection to themselves or their friends and colleagues. For example, one recalled how additional qualifications such as a Ph.D. offered little benefit in the employment market with cheaper less experienced candidates preferred. In this narrative, the over-supply of veterinary labour was a key element of the local disease ecology. Spanish vets spoke of how every region in Spain wanted to have its own veterinary course as a result of inter-regional rivalry or status. However, in other countries, corruption was seen to be just as much a problem as the over-supply of veterinary labour such that only vets with the ‘right connections’ or family connections with the ‘right people’ would lead to secure employment as a government vet:

“The best way in Italy to get money as a vet is to work for the Ministry, but unfortunately, in Italy there is a lot of corruption, so if you don’t know the right people, you won’t get the job” [UK07, Italy, Male, Private Practice]

The narrative of the first job for overseas vets is therefore less about the experiences of veterinary work and more about the experience of finding work in
as part of the ongoing process of becoming a vet. In doing so, it hints less at the
subjugating role of a master narrative of a particular kind of veterinary
subjectivity as in Enticott’s (2018a) analysis of UK vets’ migration. Rather, it is that
the employment market fails to match the most basic promises of professional
employment. In this sense, mobility is written into local disease ecologies as a
reaction to its exclusivity and the difficulty of becoming enrolled within it.

4.2 Escaping from home

Sitting alongside the narrative of the first job are a set of complimentary
narratives that provide a richer explanation of veterinary migration. One of these
narratives is of escape. In migrants’ accounts of their veterinary careers, escape
featured in a number of different ways. Firstly, the escape narrative was a natural
consequence of the employment conditions of the first job.

‘A friend of mine had just started working for Eville and Jones and she told
me it was really good money and by then I was desperate [for work]! I
thought it was a good opportunity – but for me, meat work was the way to
escape Spain. It was very well paid – and I thought it was a way of buying
time. The downside was the type of work – I had to compromise my principles.
She said why don’t you come on over – and I didn’t really think too much
about it. I knew that if I stayed in Spain, my life would suck. I wasn’t happy
and it was a way to escape’ [UK32 Spain, Female, Government Vet]
Escaping from the first job was also tied up with a range of personal factors. Some vets spoke about how their move was related to the desire to ‘have an adventure’, to learn English and experience something ‘new’. Learning English reinforced the idea that moves were not pre-planned as an attempt to pursue a specific kind of veterinary identity. Rather, vets’ English could often be of an insufficient standard, and they were told by employment agencies that they would need to improve before being eligible for work. Thus, private veterinary companies insistence on language competencies mediated the free movement of vets afforded by the MRPQ directive. Similarly, seeking out adventure was matched with an intention that the moves were expected to be short-term rather than permanent.

Vets who had arrived in the UK since the 1990s were likely to look back at their trip wondering how in a time without mobile phones they were able to cope. Some vets described chaotic travel plans, arriving in the UK with little money or job and just a telephone number. Others described how pre-arranged jobs fell through on arrival. Thus, whilst vets may have sought out an adventure, their journey became an adventure in itself:

“My brother-in-law, his brother owns a haulage company, who brings two, three lorries a week [to the UK]...and he takes me to UK. The lorry was jammed full of lettuce...The journey took three days, or two and a half, I don’t remember. I only remember that I tried to sleep in that cabin which was like, er, when you die, you’re like a little thing, like, and I couldn’t, it’s claustrophobic, I couldn’t. [I’m like] the old man telling his stories. So I came in a lorry [laughs]” [UK17, Spain, Male, Government Vet]
Secondly, for some vets, the escape narrative referred to their personal lives and the way they were intertwined with work. Relationship breakdowns (sometimes as a result of work) were key in creating an opportunity to move. This reflects the way migration was often an unplanned process (see next section) and the confluence of different circumstances. For example:

‘I wasn’t happy professionally and, um, I decided to have a big change in my life, and, um, the opportunity to come over to the UK turned up [and] I decided to give it a go. It seemed to me like a very good option, the… the… to break with my life in Spain as it was, moving abroad sounded like a… okay… yeah, moving to a different country was a big time change, so it was a way of breaking all the things that were going wrong with my… not everything, but [certain] things that were going wrong at that time of my life… but that big change in my life seemed like the right thing to do, and then the country, [a different] country and, er, sort of start a new life personally’ [UK05 Spain, Male, Government Vet]

For others, escape was set against a culture of close-knit family life in which constant parental surveillance was seen as restricting. Escape became central to regaining one’s personal freedom. Accounts of migration referred to ‘friends who were still living with their parents’ to highlight the kind of lifestyle that they had sought to escape. The narrative of escape therefore portrayed a movement to modernity, and a progressive society.
4.3 The Lucky Break

Related to escape narratives were accounts of luck, coincidence and chance. Narratives of luck were expressed in two different ways. Firstly, the narrative of the lucky break, revealed how migration was not pre-planned, but became possible through circumstances and social contacts. In these accounts, friends or relatives passed on information about opportunities that were available in other countries. Overseas opportunities came from University (such as Erasmus or Leonardo da Vinci Scholarships), or recruitment opportunities in the local area.

The chance of employment dispels any notion that European vets are somehow predisposed to working in veterinary public health due to specialist options taken during the degree course and therefore seek out this professional identity by migrating to the UK. This identity is often applied to migrant vets working in the UK, but it is mistaken. Whilst the job of a government vet was high status, it was mostly unachievable. Instead, becoming a government vet and its professional identity was achieved through vets’ mobility, rather than preceding it.

Secondly, narratives of luck were associated with the experience of living and working in the UK. These accounts frequently referenced their own good fortune in relation to others who had not and returned home. In relation to living, luck was invoked by vets when describing how they had been cared for and shown how to open bank accounts by new colleagues or old friends that they had by chance ended up living with. For example, in this quote, a Romanian vet described his luck
in finding somewhere to live that not only helped him find work, and not discriminating against him:

’I was lucky enough to find a farm in which, er, the people were English people or...I don’t think it’s English people but they were speaking English like first language, not Welsh. Because I don’t know Welsh....and to be honest, my English when I arrived, it was very limited. But they help me a lot and I learned a lot from them...They accepted me, I didn’t have ever problems being from East European countries, ever. Other people, I understand that they weren’t so lucky. Yeah, it was part of the family pretty much... I was lucky. Yeah, lucky from this point of view because they helped me and they accepted me’ [UK30 Romania, Male, Private Vet]

Similarly, narratives of luck in the workplace emphasised how good fortune allowed vets to adapt to and learn in the workplace by distinguishing between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ abattoir. Tales of ‘bad’ abattoirs revolved around ‘dodgy’ owners, criminality within the workforce, violence and aggression towards staff, and sexism towards female vets. On the other hand, ‘good’ abattoirs provided learning opportunities in a safe, friendly environment. They could not be chosen in advance as vets’ choice of work was restricted. Vets quickly developed their own geography of good and bad (mostly in urban areas) abattoirs, but ending up in a good abattoir was simply a matter of luck:

“it’s, um, an industry that you can get into trouble very easily, and also it is a bit misogynist so if you are a woman, er, if you’re in on your own, you have to
be careful because there’s a lot of lies going around, but I was lucky with the plants I’ve been to” [UK22, Spain, Female, Government Vet].

4.4 Staying Mobilities

Migration can be a continuous processes of mobility between multiple locations (Milbourne and Kitchen, 2014) therefore requiring an understanding of what happens to migrants after they move and the reasons why they stay or move on (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012). The final narrative of ‘staying mobility’ captures both these elements, encapsulating how mobility was part of a veterinary migrant’s life, such that staying also meant moving within the UK.

This narrative was described in a number of ways. Firstly, migration was not portrayed as a one-off event. Whilst taking their veterinary degree, some vets had already travelled abroad as part of their studies or worked as unpaid interns after qualification. For others, work fluctuated between the UK and their home countries, before settling in the UK on a permanent basis. When there was a choice, work locations close to airports with cheap air flights to their home countries to visit friends and family were preferred. In this way, constant mobility, or flow between countries was normalised within vets’ lives.

Secondly, whilst overseas vets resolve the challenge of finding work by working in veterinary public health, this does not mean that they had no aspirations to work in clinical practice (i.e. in a private veterinary clinic). Instead, working in public health was seen as the first step on a career ladder beginning in an abattoir,
leading to work in farm animal work as a TB tester, before reaching a career high as an assistant vet in a private practice. Each step of the ladder provided the experience to secure subsequent employment. However, for those vets that remain in the UK and do not return following their first dispiriting experiences of public health work, movement up this ladder is more imagined than real. Some vets, suggested that the expertise they gained from working in public health roles, combined with the lack of challenge they receive within the labour force from UK vets, reluctantly casts them as experts from which it is difficult to escape. For example:

‘I was sucked into the world of bovine TB, and because bovine TB is a long-term problem, and the more you work in that field the more... well, I suppose it’s just, er, the whole thing snowballs and the more, er, the more you dive into a subject, the more, I don’t know, the harder it gets to depart from it or to disassociate yourself from that and you start to... yeah, to... become a specialist and once you become a specialist in that field, it gets difficult for you to explore other [areas], to get out of your comfort zone’ [UK27 Spain, Male, Government Vet]

As a result, the career ladder appears less mobile than imagined. Instead of moving into private practice, a more common career route was from an abattoir to a managerial role within one of the government agencies responsible for public health, such as the FSA or the APHA, contributing to a blurring of the lines between these public and private veterinary sectors. More generally, it contributes to the increasing separation and lack of mobility between different branches of the
veterinary sector, and distances the vast majority of practicing vets from a public good role.

Thirdly, in their narratives of staying in the UK, vets described how mobility is inscribed into the nature of public health veterinary work. This is manifested in two clear ways. The first is through the abusive and misogynistic cultures prevalent within abattoirs. Vets who arrived in the UK in the 1990s described how they were initially seen as ‘exotic’ and different to traditional UK veterinary inspectors. As newly arrived marginal figures, they were in some ways similar to other migrant workers in abattoirs, but over time the increasing number of overseas vets has diminished this sense of difference. At the same time, vets recalled tensions with the management of abattoirs as part of a narrative of ‘challenging work’. Mobility is a central element to this narrative of ‘challenging work’, providing a temporal and spatial rhythm to veterinary work. On the one hand, veterinary work with its constant movement between different abattoirs challenged vets’ own personal lives:

‘I wasn’t actually living; I didn’t have a central place where I lived. I was just living in bed and breakfast. I didn’t... I didn’t live in a house for months after...coming to this country’ [UK05, Spain, Male, Government Vet]

On the other hand, challenging work, according to vets could not be sustained forever: it had a time limit after which vets needed to move on to the next challenge. Even when they secured a fixed working site, it was recognised that further mobility was inevitable because of the nature of the regulatory work they
were engaged in. For example, vets posted to ‘problem’ or ‘bad’ abattoirs saw it as an opportunity to be solved, before moving on to the next ‘challenge’ – also reflected in the discursive construction of veterinary subjectivity in recruitment adverts. Alternatively, vets saw these abattoirs as short-term employment opportunities, places from which to get away from as soon as possible. The nature of regulation meant that there was effectively a time-limit on working in an abattoir: staying too long could compromise the effectiveness of regulation. Sometimes these challenges were completed by vets themselves, resulting in career progression and satisfaction. This mobile subjectivity therefore is reflective of a broader neoliberal entrepreneurial self: mobility represents a risk to the established-self and ones socio-spatial relations, but it appears necessary and part of modern veterinary work. For example:

‘so I work as a vet in slaughterhouses for several years. I move around: I started working in England, then I went to Wales, then I went to Scotland for about five years. At some point I decided to come back to Wales, and I actually leave Meat Hygiene Service, but I wasn’t really unhappy about the job I was doing; it’s just I found that I’d kind of achieved the challenges I wanted to achieve, so I just wanted to move on to something else where I had a new challenge again. Not that I knew everything about everything, ...but I thought that I was ready to just move on to new pastures, and since I came to work with APHA, I have to say that, er, there is some beautiful challenges, some long term beautiful challenges....I think that one of the things that is keeping me here is the challenges...and once you take on some challenges...it’s hard
to let them go when you haven’t achieved them’ [UK04 Spain, Male, Government Vet]

Amongst the narrative of challenging work are examples of vets who returned quickly to their home country because the challenge was too great, and the working conditions too poor for them or, as mentioned above, unlucky enough not to have the right support when required. Other times, ‘challenging work’ was never completed and vets were moved according to or against their wishes. In this way, these narratives of veterinary life describe how mobility is inscribed within veterinary labour practices themselves. Migrating to the UK may therefore be just the start of a period of constant veterinary mobility.

5. Brexit and the Future of the Veterinary Profession in the UK

Mobility is the defining characteristic of the master narrative of the migrant veterinary subjectivity, inscribed within the disease ecologies that shape migrant vets’ lives and careers. However, the UK’s decision to leave the EU threatens to radically disrupt the relations that construct these disease ecologies. In seeking to ‘regain control’ of policy areas such as trade and immigration, the free movement of overseas qualified vets to the UK may be curtailed. This section analyses vets’ immediate reactions to the Brexit vote and their perceptions on how it has already and will affect their personal and professional lives. To do this, the section supplements interview data with survey data of overseas vets working in Wales undertaken by the British Veterinary Association (IES, 2017; Enticott, 2018b).
5.1 Anger and Betrayal

There was widespread agreement amongst vets that Brexit cast uncertainty over their personal and professional lives and that overall its effect was negative. Survey data showed that the vast majority of vets (85%) viewed the Brexit vote as a matter of sadness. Whilst most (72%) wanted to stay in the UK, a majority felt less welcome (60%), and were finding the situation difficult (68%). These feelings were also evident in interviews. Vets spoke about how ‘things felt different’ at work and in everyday life such that they felt out of place. For example:

“The night before the referendum I couldn’t sleep. I was in shock. It was a huge shock. I couldn’t believe it, I was so disappointed, angry, I had all the emotions. I no longer feel free, at ease. I thought there’d always been respect and civility. But now its like a lid has been opened and a genie has escaped and the genie has a rotten smell. All of a sudden, I do not feel comfortable being here anymore” [UK32 Spain, Female, Government Vet]

At work, this discomfort expressed itself in awkward conversations between clients and colleagues. For example, knowing that a majority of farmers had voted for Brexit meant that conversations between them could be stilted. At TB tests conversations between farmers and vets would usually encompass the latest political and cultural news. Brexit seemed to be one topic neither seemed comfortable talking about. This did not mean that vets did not experience discrimination. Survey data shows that 10% of vets reported that work was less friendly and 15% had directly experienced prejudice. Prejudice was experienced,
for example, on farms through remarks such as ‘when are you going back?’ or ‘so you’re still here then?’. Vets working with endemic diseases such as TB, however, suggested that these remarks were not necessarily pro-Brexit affirmations, but were channeling farmers’ frustration with the management of animal disease. Equally, low staff morale in agencies like APHA was not simply due to Brexit, but connected to ongoing managerial reforms and failures in disease management.

Interestingly, survey data shows that those vets working in non-clinical roles, i.e. Government vets, abattoir vets and researchers, were more likely to report negative feelings following Brexit. Almost half (48%) said their job security had declined, compared to a third of vets working in private practice. Non-clinical vets were also more likely to have observed (37%) or experienced (27%) prejudice in the workplace following the referendum. Similarly, they reported feeling less welcome (67%), more stressed (31%) and pessimistic about their future (31%).

5.2 Vets from Nowhere

In response to Brexit, the survey revealed conflicting feelings about vets’ futures. On the one hand, 37% of non-clinical vets were considering a move back ‘home’ with 21% actively looking for new employment. On the other hand, 78% of non-clinical vets said they were waiting to see how things unfolded before making any decision, whilst 46% had put any major decisions (such as buying a house) on hold. These feelings describe the state of ‘limbo’ that many EU citizens living in the UK have expressed following the referendum (Remigi, 2017). Limbo was expressed in relation to the continuation of future employment rights, but also the
inequity and value that migrant vets had brought to the UK. At the same time, limbo was also expressed in relation to vets’ nationality and sense of identity. Many vets had either already become UK citizens or had started to think about doing so. Yet whilst this may have resolved any issues over their rights to work, it had created an internal tension about who they were and where they were from.

For example:

“This is why it’s even harder. Your world is upside down, you know, just turning on the television one day and seeing...home is here, for me. My life is here. Everything what I have as an individual, material and almost immaterial, is... is now in this country. ... when you speak a second language, you not only speak a language but you are able to accumulate to communicate and to observe the culture. And I... for me, there are lots of very positive elements of the British culture. So, sometimes when I go back to Spain, I get annoyed with some of the things I see there. And again, this creates a conflict because you feel like a citizen of nowhere. So, you feel rejected here and you feel like you are not really fitting with what is there, in a way?” [UK21 Spain, Male, Government Vet]

Being a ‘citizen of nowhere’ created a conflict between mobility and permanence: whereas the ambiguities of mobility could be lived with, Brexit required vets to fix their claims to a single identity by claiming British citizenship. Some vets found resolving this tension relatively easy. For those without children or strong ties to the area in which they were living, the answer lay in leaving the UK and finding a job elsewhere. By contrast, those that had lived in the UK a long time had
developed strong connections within their local communities. Through their children they contributed to local schools, and their own businesses contributed to the local economy. These vets had become embedded within their local communities, such that moving become unthinkable:

“Because we’re with four kids, um, two of them were born at home. We’re two home birds. The last two are home birds. So, you know, it...we could never sell that house. Even if we did move on, we’d never sell that house because that’s a part of us and part of our family.” [UK35 Ireland, Male, Private Vet]

At the same time, however, vets also expressed a kind of ‘Brexit Realpolitik’ in which they understood their importance within the food system and its regulation. Without public health vets, the vast majority of whom came from outside the UK, food production and agricultural exports would be impossible. Thus, despite their mobile professional subjectivity, being recognised as fixed economic assets would secure their future.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen. They’re not...I don’t think they’re going to kick us out of the country, especially people that are working there...are working here with a permanent job, paying taxes. Like...! I mean the mortgage and everything, I don’t think they’re going to throw us away. But if they do, well, tough on them” [UK28 Spain, Female, Private Vet].

6. Conclusion
Vets are vital actors for rural economies and societies, and essential to the regulation of food safety and animal health. This paper has sought to highlight the global nature of the veterinary profession: it represents an example of the kinds of ‘global work’ that, through its mobilities, contributes to the globalisation of rural areas. To understand the global mobility of the veterinary profession, the paper has developed the concept of disease ecology: an assemblage of heterogeneous actors and relations that constitute ‘veterinary worlds of work’. These ecologies establish expected and appropriate conduct for vets, but within these master narratives of veterinary subjectivity, mobility is both inscribed and emergent. Governmental rationalities, such as privatisation and deregulation, help to normalise the mobile vet by demanding a flexible and competitive labour force. Equally, the lived experience of these disease ecologies and disruptions to them from disease outbreaks contribute to the re-inscription of new patterns of veterinary mobility.

The biographical narrative method used for this research also reveals the complex nature of veterinary migration. Migration emerges from the rupturing of expected veterinary worlds of work, but is facilitated by biographical factors such as relationship breakdowns and luck. Whilst migration can be frequently unplanned, it is also temporally expansive with a permanent sense of mobility to veterinary careers. Whilst this can reveal elements of a neoliberal entrepreneurial self, mobility may also be circumvented by becoming an expert in a specific veterinary field viewed as undesirable by British vets. However, if migration eventually leads to a new settled veterinary world of work, Brexit threatens to disrupt these new orders, bringing a sense of placelessness and uncertainty to the fore.
The paper also highlights the global inter-relationship between different disease ecologies. Inscriptions of mobility that contribute to the normalisation of veterinary mobility may be developed at a regional level, but its effects unequally distributed in space. Thus, in the UK, the impact of changes to the organisation of veterinary services have travelled across international boundaries and into the veterinary profession of distant countries. Brexit questions the extent to which mobility can be normalised in other countries. This should highlight concerns about the resilience of biosecurity, food safety and animal health services in the UK. However, rather than the UK government seek out replacement sources of cheap flexible veterinary labour, a better response might be to question why are these aspects of work marginalised within the veterinary profession, and what can be done to normalise these careers amongst UK vets?

Finally, there remains a need to conduct further research on veterinary mobility. Globalisation is not one-way traffic: rather it results in the hybridisation of practices and places as the global and the local interact. This should draw attention to the possibility that veterinary practices may evolve, either through a process of ‘brain-drain’ or the arrival and domination of overseas vets in particular areas of veterinary work in the UK. At the same time, sites of veterinary practice may undergo further change arising from return migration of vets as a consequence of Brexit, or otherwise. The way these changes and adaptations are played out has the potential to explore not just why veterinary migration occurs, but also the ways in which rural professions, practices and places evolve and emerge from the processes of globalisation.
References


