Podcast transcript: An interview with Brian Pound

RCVS Knowledge

Hello and welcome to For the Record, a podcast series from RCVS Knowledge. In this episode, we hear a conversation between Amanda Boag, Chair of Trustees for RCVS Knowledge, and Brian Pound, who founded CVS Limited and is also a former treasurer of RCVS Knowledge. In this wide ranging conversation, Brian reflects on his five decades of experience working in the veterinary sector as an old clinician and the changes he's observed over that time.

Amanda Boag

Hi everyone and welcome to this podcast on behalf of RCVS Knowledge. I'm Amanda Boag. I'm hosting the podcast today and I am the chair of trustees of RCVS Knowledge for the last three or four years now. And in that capacity, I was very, very fortunate to have as my treasurer and one of my fellow trustees, Brian Pound, who is joining me today. So we can have a chat about how the has developed. He isn't a vet but has been involved in our sector for a long long time and so I'm really looking forward to speaking with him and hearing a little bit more about his experiences. But before we get into that I'll hand you over to Brian and Brian do you want to just tell me a little bit about your career and how you ended up working with us in the veterinary sector.

Brian Pound

Well, it's an interesting background because although I started off my career as a management accountant trainee and then went into general management at the bottom of course as one does, I actually joined an agricultural company in 1970 which was a huge company, was on the stock market, it had millions of chickens, lots of sheep, lots of pigs, oyster farm and thousands of acres of farmland, a very successful business, and as I arrived, a fowl pest hit.

And it was the world's biggest pandemic of fowl pests. It was called Essex 70, and the chickens started dying like flies. And when I say that, I'll let you try and imagine this house full of 20,000 chickens, 90 % died. And it continued like that. The pandemic started in Essex, as per the name. It then spread across to America, South Africa, the Middle East and most of Europe and it was uncontrollable. Nobody could control it. And although I joined there, this was a laboratory based company with a lot of specialists in all sorts of areas supporting the poultry business that they run. So when I walked in, I was told by the CEO, for God's sake, Brian, try and find a way of controlling this. And the

company had already got a deal with Dofar, which was in those days, a vet pharmaceutical company with particular interests in vaccines, and they had poultry vaccines for Newcastle disease, for fowl pest, and they didn't work. They were intended for use from four weeks of age in the drinking water, and these were dying at 18 days of age. it was, the prescribed use was too late. And if you put it into the water before that age, it didn't work.

We found that out very quickly. It didn't work. I spent a lot of my time now doing a lot of research, reading and what have you, working with Cambridge University, vet school and all sorts of other people trying to find out what the heck we could do about it. Unfortunately, Dufar had on their paperwork information that showed that this would work in younger birds if it was eye dropped.

Now if you can imagine eye-dropping 300 million chicken, I was going to retire then. So I had to find a way. I did all sorts of work and one of things that I did do and with the help and support and so on of the laboratory boss, I used to take thousands of blood tests. So whatever I did, whatever way I tried to use this vaccine, I would take blood tests afterwards to see what happened with it. And usually the answer was nothing. It didn't work.

And then one day I was watching BBC's Tomorrow's World and spotted something that I thought might just do the trick. And I got hold of, and I told you how to make notes of names, I got hold of Raymond Baxter and said, can you help? And he was excited to help. And I got some equipment and went out there and tried it. Nothing. did no more than anything.

Amanda Boag

Was he the person you saw on Tomorrow's World?

Brian Pound

Yes, he was. He was a presenter of Tomorrow's World and he helped us do this. Anyway, nothing happened and I took the equipment back to the company and they said, no, no, no, no, us exactly what you want and we'll see what we can do with this technology. It's new, it's innovative. And they did and we worked together. I used to take around experimental kit with all sorts of weighty stuff hanging off my neck and trying to get it. And suddenly, boom.

I went into a farm, I vaccinated them, I did the blood test 10 days later and I came out and 90 % cover. And of course they were now protected. Repeat, repeat, repeat as you can imagine and eventually we had cracked it. We cracked it and I became famous for a little while. wrote in press and I wrote in the press. I was interviewed on the BBC and ITV and all sorts and we cracked it.

Amanda Boag

I'm thinking because you've had a very long and incredibly successful career but just to frame it for our listeners was that in the 1960s?

Brian Pound

1970. So the company that I was working for went bust. It had lost so many chicken, I just couldn't survive it and it failed. So I actually went from one company to another, but my love was the pharmaceutical one, which I still did. I carried on with that. And then Parvo hit us, another pandemic. Parvo hit us and we know the reasons now, but no known cure and the vaccines were not available. And Dufar were the first people to produce and use the parvovirus vaccine.

And just to translate that into a technical aspect, when Hal Thompson and Irene McCandless, the two Parvo experts in Britain would go on the stage to talk about it, I was always invited to join them because we had the only vaccine and I had all the technical data. And we offered vets the opportunity to take a blood test of any animal vaccinated with our vaccine to prove whether it worked or not. And we had a lot of takers.

Amanda Boag

What an impact on animal welfare as well. , I guess that's where that kind of veterinary expertise needs to merge with the farmer and the organisational expertise to bring those things through to production and the ability to have such an impact on animal welfare.

Brian Pound

That was my introduction into the vetting profession because I was working with vets throughout this whole process. Then I went to the States and I ran the American Vaccine Production Factory. During my career in the UK at Dufar, I worked with SPVS at their request to provide business training for vets. And it was at SPVS Snow Scene, road shows, and the student seminar up in Lancaster.

It was a usual podium type thing, a half hour or an hour training session. But one of the things that I discovered during that was the most common question I got from the vets there was what am I going to do when I want to retire? Because I just cannot persuade vets, the assistants, to take up a partnership. Not many months later you know what's coming yeah the right well the role sorry the College were forced by the Competition Commission as it was then called they were forced to allow non-vets to own practices and Lawson Soulsby who was past president at that point said to me, Brian, why don't you go and buy a practice and get out of the industry? And I did, and I started CVS. Then of course, in cutting to you, in 2014, I joined Royal College, RCVS Knowledge Board as a trustee, and then became treasurer, and of course you became chairman, and we've worked together since.

Amanda Boag

Yeah, yes, yeah, which, yeah, she's fantastic. And I mean, I knew elements of that journey, particularly you're clearly well known in across the veterinary profession for having been that kind of founder of of CVS, which has obviously grown a lot since it was what's the late late 90s. Friday the 13th you see. I got married on Friday the 13th. yeah, good day.

Brian Pound

Must be lucky, must be lucky for you. Yeah, that's it. And I knew you'd been involved in pharma, but that early part of your career, and that sounds like it must have been a real baptism of fire having to, you know, yeah, I it sounds like it. what an absolutely amazing career. And as you said, you've been involved with so many different elements of the veterinary profession from the suppliers, pharma, research through to service delivery, through the growth of CVS and then the kind of the educational SPVS and not-for-profit charitable with RCVS Knowledge. So what, you've got an amazing view of our profession as somebody who's worked in it all, worked in it all your career and you've seen a lot of changes. So can you, what's your biggest highlight do you think of working alongside veterinary professionals?

Well, let me say that the biggest achievement in my life, despite all these things, was being invited to be a trustee of RCVS Knowledge. And I was able to give something back and, you know, having a fantastic career associated with the profession and not a vet. to be able to, and a lot of people think I am, but to be able to do so much for the profession, within the profession, and yet not be a vet has been, I'm so proud of it.

Amanda Boag

That's good to hear. And I know we in the charity really, really benefited from your insights and your expertise from running such large and diverse organisations over your career. So, thank you. Thank you. you for that. But I guess that leads me on to, what do you think of the value that people from who aren't trained veterinary surgeons bring at all veterinary nurses bring into the sector? Where do you see, what do think that brings to our profession having people such as yourselves involved?

Brian Pound

Well, I'm going to be a little critical for a minute because I've experienced the profession as an observer and also as an owner. One of the frustrating things for me in those early days was that having come from industry where if we needed advice on a particular subject on finance or on health and safety, we were quite happy to go out and pay for it and get the specialists and get the experts in. And what I found frustrating was that the profession attempted to do it themselves too much. And they went, in my opinion, they went too far trying to do it themselves before they sought advice. And I've got lots of examples I could give you, but they did succeed. mean, know, vets are extremely intelligent people. Their ability to adapt and to absorb information and to use it properly is good. And so one of my criticisms is that they try to do too much themselves. there are points where I think they should have already sought outside help and they're struggling on to do it themselves. But that's the only comment.

They do it well, and I think a good example is the Quality Improvement Initiative of RCVS Knowledge, an excellent programme, brilliant programme. So they do get there, they do an excellent job, the time it takes them to seek outside help is a frustration, or was a frustration for me.

Amanda Boag

And so what you bring from that kind of wider business perspective then is that, I guess that openness and the knowledge of where it's beneficial to seek that advice and support from those who are true experts in the field rather than trying to reinvent the wheel and do it all ourselves. Is that what I'm hearing you say?

Brian Pound

Yes, and a large group, I mean I was running large companies, all of the large companies I run had their own internal experts on each of those things. They had HR

experts and health and safety experts, finance experts, and every one of them had them in-house. And of course, if you look at the big corporate groups now, they all have those people, those experts on board already.

Amanda Boag

Yeah, yeah. And as you say, I think you've been involved with a number of organizations. We've mentioned RCVS Knowledge, you mentioned SPVS. I know you're also part of the Veterinary Policy Research Foundation with Lord Trees. So you've had a number of associations with organizations, not-for-profits and charities in the sector as well. So where do you think, what contribution can they make to supporting the profession as a whole?

Brian Pound

Well, the ones I've been involved with, am biased rather, because I do think that Knowledge does a fantastic job. And the two areas that they've concentrated on, whilst I've been in the treasurer's role, has been quality management, quality improvement. And a number of the corporates have picked that up. The initiative, they've really worked hard on it and done a good job. And lots and lots of independents have picked up. That's a fantastic initiative.

One is AMR and AMR is probably the biggest potential area of concern in the world. know, the possibilities of antibiotics not working and people and animals dying as a result. And the work that knowledge have done on that and the work they've done with the VMD and are still doing is fantastic. Am I a bit over the top by saying I think they probably lead the world on it? You know, I certainly think it's... the activity is superb. The library of course is phenomenal and the access to up-to-date information is provided by the team at the library.

It's phenomenal facility and there are so many other things. VPRF serves a role that is not always realized, you know, vice chair of that and I've been there since it started. I was on the board the day it started so I've been involved a long time and what it does is provides Lord Trees with a lot of information, all the information he needs to be able to deal with any veterinary related question that comes into the House of Lords and that's a mammoth task because it can be anything, it can be imported food you know and the inspections that imported food has had and the potential of disease coming through the meat, instance, contaminated meat. know, we've got swine at the moment in Germany and the potential for that to get brought into the UK through inadequate inspection and testing. And he needs to be able to answer those questions in Parliament and talk

knowledgeably about it and that the VPRF provides the information up to date, bang up to date, to enable him to do that.

So that's a valuable service that is not necessarily understood or recognised by the profession very much, but it's great service. And the other one I'm involved in is the Salisbury Foundation. And Lawson Salisbury, as you probably know, was a leader in the Whole Health Initiative and he was president of both the law college and also RSM, the Law Society of Medicine.

The Salisbury Foundation spends a lot of their time and money on encouraging research and development of the whole health aspect. They all do different roles but they're all very valuable to the profession. So yes, they're important for the profession.

Amanda Boag

Yeah, that's really good. And just if we circle back maybe a bit to the quality improvements, as you say, that's something that we spearhead at RCVS Knowledge, but also, I think all of the larger corporate groups and a lot of independent practices and the veterinary associations all, I think it's a really crucial and growing area. Coming from your background in pharma and laboratories where system and process is much more... I guess embedded. What do you think are the big things we can learn from that? And along the vein of what you said earlier, that we need to sometimes ask for help to do things rather than reinventing the wheel.

Brian Pound

The most important thing with quality improvement programs is learn by your mistakes. That is by far the most important element of it. in the quality standards procedures that are applied in industry, the one that applies to the pharmaceutical industry is GMP, Good Manufacturing Procedure, which was invented by the FDA, the Food and Drug Administration in America, and applied to human medicine production. Strangely enough, the Europeans adopted it for production of veterinary pharmaceuticals, where in America they didn't. The most important thing of the whole process is that everything is documented and then everything is made visible so that when you have a mistake made and somebody puts the wrong stuff in the wrong pot to put it in crude terms, that is, it's identified, corrective action is taken to make sure it doesn't happen again and it's pinned on the notice board.

I'm putting it in the most basic form. It's pinned on the notice board. Everybody sees it. There no names attached. Everybody sees it. So they see the problem that's occurred. They see what was done to correct it and they see what was done to make sure it

doesn't happen again. And that's the biggest thing that comes out of quality management is that you you'll always make mistakes, but when you make them learn by them and those that have adopted this will know what I'm talking about because the team effort is also enhanced by it because the moment you know if you make a mistake it's not going to be your death. You know you're not going to get thrown out on your ear because you made a silly mistake but everyone's going to know about it but everybody's going to learn about it.

Hopefully you as a person can avoid making that same mistake because you've read all about it and you know it. That's the biggest strength from the Quality Improvement Programme in my opinion. It's also in a process point of view, it ensures consistency. It ensures that you make the process, do the process in the same way each time and that means you get reproducibility. So those are the benefits I think, well the main benefits at least.

Amanda Boag

Yeah, and the big things that we can learn from sectors that have quality processes more, yeah, sort of embedded for longer than we have.

Brian Pound

Quality awards that are given, some of those quality awards, I we only give awards to the winner, but you know I've read many of them because I've been a reviewer and some of those ideas are phenomenal and fantastic. There was one on temperature of animals during, before, during and after surgery and the difference in recovery when the temperatures manage carefully and so on. A superb initiative and it was written up by one practice their award and my goodness what a good idea.

I think that's, and it's lovely to see that really flourishing across, you know, as you said, lots and lots of different practices, that kind of learning culture and then sharing. So that we can, yeah, that's good.

Amanda Boag

Yeah, so we've talked a little bit about corporatization of the sector and you obviously had a leading role with being the founder of CVS. Are there other big changes you've seen? You've been involved with our profession since it started in 1970 with the fowl pests. What are the rather big changes you've seen in that time as well?

Brian Pound

Well, obviously the feminization of the profession. I looked back for statistics to see if I could find them and apparently in 1930 only 20 % of the profession was female. I believe the figure today is 84%.

Probably about that, it may be little bit less in the practicing session, I'm not quite sure. But yes, I'm sure it'll be round about that. It's only been a huge, huge change though.

The other thing is that up until something like the 1980s, maybe a little before then, 50 % of practices were mixed.

And now there are so few mixed practices. And mixed practices used to give the poor old vets a real headache, didn't they? I mean, you know the day. You if you have a mixed practice and you've got a small animal clinic to keep going and provide a service 24 hours a day, you can know, and you have been able to for some years, buy out of hours cover from a third provider. You can't do that with a, well, you can do it, but it's not so easy starting to explore models.

There are but it's not so easy to do with the agricultural side and the equine side apart from which the clients tend to expect to see the same face again in the farm and equine side. Whereas in small animal practice that happens less than, I mean it still happens and still people ask for a particular person, but it's less of a fact. And therefore the problem of having out of hours cover doesn't necessarily get you off the hook because if somebody says I want to see Bill, whether you're on holiday or whether you're having a weekend off, hard luck.

Change to me has been that change from the mixture of the two and making it so difficult to manage to a situation where actually small animal practice management ain't that difficult anymore with the support of these external services if you need them being available but there is a problem with that and it's a problem that we may not have talked about enough and that is that the external providers quite rightly charge a lot more for out of our services than they do for their daytime services.

And when that was first introduced, it became a problem because the host practice, Fred Bloggs in wherever, whose client then went on to the out of our service, you can imagine if they were, the problem occurred at six o'clock and the practice closed at six o'clock and they went into the five plus six, they were paying a very much bigger bill than they would have been. And the host practice got the blame for

because it was in the same facility often. The out of our service operated from an established clinic in the area and therefore there was no change in venue, just a change of people. So that's been sorted to a point but it isn't still resolved. I think there is still an issue with that and I don't know what the resolution is I'm afraid.

Amanda Boag

No, well, I think there's the importance of communication, both between the practices and with the clients is crucial there. as I think, as we all know, however hard one tries to communicate, there's sometimes there's sometimes barriers, barriers to that. You have to just keep trying.

Brian Pound

So that's a big change. It's a change from the mixed practice to the dedicated small animal the separation of those two areas. The feminization is the other one. whether the feminization, and I know you and I have spoken about this before, whether the feminization of the profession is the reason why there was a low uptake of partnerships in the period that I described, which is when I was doing my lecturing to vets, would have been between about 83 and 93, about that 10 year period. And that was a period that that problem was emerging and it was a big problem and I have very dear friends.

People have been groomed, you know, in the old days an assistant would have been spotted for his potential and groomed and got ready and then when the old partnership were losing one of their elderly team, they could approach the young person and say, come on, how about taking a partnership? And that was much more difficult, described to me as being much more difficult to do in that late 80s and 90s. And I believe it's still an issue. I mean, when I was at school, was no possible no concept in my head that I would ever work anything other than full-time. Never occurred to me. And now... now...

Thank goodness, working flexibility, and that's the other thing that's changed. The fact that employers are prepared to let somebody work two or three days a week, and they're prepared to let them work different hour blocks than they used to do, is very good for work-life balance. It's terrible for management. It's hard.

Amanda Boag

It's hard to work for management. to work for management. yeah. harder work. I But yes, I think that the move to flexible working and actually I think a lot of, well both genders benefit from that as I think been a societal trend, not just in the profession. And as you say, it's generally a very positive thing for people's work-life balance, although can give, albeit can give management headaches.

Brian Pound

One of the things I do like, and I don't know how far this is happening in the profession, I know in places it is, is the peripatetic vets.and they move around practices within a geographical area and take their skills with them those services closer to the client, which a lot of clients like.

And they do, yes, they do like it. And it helps the local practice to develop their own skills by observing and working with those people. So I think that's still, I think, that could be expanded much further and would be popular and may take away the rush to the referral.

Amanda Boag

We talked about the importance of quality and recognizing mistakes earlier, but I think that there is still, there can still be a fear of that driving some decisions, I feel. But I think it's definitely evolving, as you say, the career paths and the clinical career paths that you talked about as advanced practitioner and specialist are again, I know an area that is under a lot of...is the wrong way, but there's a lot of work and a lot of thinking. There's a lot of thinking going on about how to improve those career paths. But as you, she said, there's the corporates as well have opened up other career paths through management leadership roles. and yet we still have lots of independent practices, as you mentioned, opening up as well, which is a different career path again. Yeah.

Brian Pound

I'm delighted because the criticism that we were domineering the market, well in terms of percentage it's true, but there are plenty of opportunities for people to set up still and be successful and that's good news. Other than that, I've got nothing to say.

Amanda Boag

Yeah, yeah, so thanks so much, Brian. It's been absolutely wonderful talking to you, finding out more about your career. There's elements there I just didn't know about and getting your reflections on the sector and how it's changed and what the future

might hold. So thank you so much for your time and yeah, lovely, lovely to spend this time.

Brian Pound

It's been a pleasure and thank you very much.

Amanda Boag

Thank you. Bye everyone.

RCVS Knowledge

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