

## Veterinary Nursing History – The Early Years

*Patience, gentleness, forbearance, the ability to observe ...  
...these are some of the words that frequently occur in early proposals for the qualities required in  
a veterinary nurse. A story that predates the 1961 introduction of the RCVS training scheme*

Ever since animals have been kept the value of nursing has been known, but until very recent years the practice was erratic. Invariably the value of the animal or the wealth of the owner were the deciding factors. While there was a growing realisation that nursing was an invaluable part of animal care and treatment little was being done in an organised fashion.

As far back as 1888 J H Steele (a prominent early veterinary scientist) wrote that nursing required, “strict attention to the animal’s comfort and well-being in matters of warmth, quietude, cleanliness, pure air and diet”.

By 1925 matters had advanced much further and Louis Sewell (veterinary surgeon to Queen Alexandria) was writing of “specially trained canine nurses”, costing from £2.10s to £3.0s per week, live-in(!) and of a Distemper Hospital in Montpelier Place, Knightsbridge. The hospital had four wards and, “an ample staff of day and night nurses”. At that time distemper was the major canine infectious disease problem, with invariably a fatal outcome.

In 1934 F.W. Cousens (veterinary surgeon to King George V) described his Nursing home with a medically qualified Hospital Matron in charge claiming that, “this was the first attempt at training women nurses for dogs in this or any other country”. He also noted that he had tried to get the RCVS to recognise the title “Canine Nurse”, after passing a suitable examination and being granted a certificate of efficiency. He recorded, “the Council would not entertain the idea”, adding “of course the Council will come round to my views, probably sooner than later”.

Progress however was slow and hindered by the 1939-45 war, but in 1947 a new edition of *Hobday’s Surgical Diseases of the Dog and Cat* included a chapter on veterinary nursing written by Phyllis Peake who (probably uniquely) was qualified both SRN and MRCVS. She discussed her subject competently adding that, to be a good animal nurse needed, “a strong vocational call ... for self-sacrifice, tenderness and the ability to consider the patient as an individual”. Presciently she also wrote, “There is scope for a registration system whereby the veterinary surgeon can regulate these activities, and the certificate of registration could be a sign of competence which would be of great value to the prospective employer”.

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Hamilton Kirk, a leading small animal veterinarian wrote in 1948 that nursing is an important part of the successful treatment of canines and felines (at last cats get a mention). He noted that the nurse, “should have limitless patience ... exercise gentleness and forbearance and possess the ability to observe”.

Finally, in 1961, the RANA scheme was approved and veterinary nursing became an officially recognised professional qualification.

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