

How working in my practice has changed

AS a society, we were already moving towards digital transformation, but Covid-19 has catapulted us years ahead.

Businesses have now realised that they don't have to fly long haul just to have a face-to-face meeting with their international colleagues. Industries that previously prohibited working from home, from bankers to personal trainers, are now able to work just as efficiently from their front rooms or bedrooms, and we have learnt that we can have quite meaningful connections with each other online, when used in the right way.

Many vets are also rapidly turning towards the use of remote technology. Telemedicine – despite earlier controversy surrounding its use – is now in full swing, and veterinary conferences and CPD courses have gone virtual. However, to do clinical work, vets and nurses still need to be in the practice – we haven't figured out a virtual solution to that just yet! So how has veterinary practice life changed since the start of this crisis?

Since being called back to work a few weeks ago, after being furloughed, things have changed a lot for the team and the way in which we now work. First, we are now all wearing face shields, which muffle your voice and make communicating that little bit harder. We must speak up and speak directly to the person we are trying to communicate with, rather than shout in their general direction and hope that they heard us, as we used to do. We give acknowledgement that we've heard an instruction with a thumbs up or by repeating it back; this is actually how high-performance teams are taught to communicate, so we've found that this change has led to much more efficient communication among the team. Despite this improvement, I can't say that I like wearing the face shield!

Secondly, we have implemented a telemedicine service. This has meant that one of our team members, who has been shielding, has been able to continue to work full time answering all the email enquiries and undertaking teleconsults. We video call her at the start of each day so she can join in on the morning rounds and fill us in on her teleconsults and let us know how our patients are doing postoperatively. It's been a great way to keep her connected and involved even though she cannot join us in person. Although, I have to say that I'm not sure she was too pleased the time we accidentally called her and woke her up on her day off!



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Thirdly, we no longer have clients in the consult room. We take a history over the phone, do the pet handover in the car park, and then examine the animal in the practice with the help of a nurse or care assistant. Personally, I have found it much easier having a professional hold the pet rather than the owner; consultations have gone more smoothly and have been far less stressful for me, and I believe for the animal too, as they don't pick up on their owner's stress. No more trying to examine a cat that has climbed its way onto its owner's shoulder, nor risking fingers trying to prise a Chihuahua from its owner's cleavage, nor having to hear the same tired jokes about

how easily the cat went back into its carrier compared to how difficult it was to get the cat in the carrier. When the owners want to be in the consult room, they can join remotely via a teleconsult service from their smartphones.

With many of our staff still furloughed, our smaller, busier team has had to pull together more than ever before, and the work has actually become more enjoyable and fulfilling as a result.

Despite these positives, there are some things that haven't improved. For example, the other day I was frantically searching the practice pharmacy for a drug to dispense, but gave up after a few seconds and called out to ask one of the nurses why there was no eye ointment available. 'Is this what you were looking for?' she asked, pointing out the drug on the shelf right in front of my nose – I mean, I am still a vet after all and Covid can't sort every problem!

Although I enjoyed my time furloughed as it gave me the opportunity to think and create, I find I am truly grateful to be back at work. I welcome the future of veterinary practice and retaining some of the adaptations we have implemented during this pandemic, but I don't want to lose the daily banter that comes with being physically present with colleagues and the camaraderie of a busy shift – nothing can beat that. ●