

Small Animal Practice in Sydney in the Early Post-War Years

After graduating in 1944, I spent eighteen months in poultry practice on the outskirts of Sydney. Over the next three years I was involved in dairy practice in the Waikato, New Zealand, and then on the south coast of NSW. By that time my back was telling me that I had only a short future in large animal practice, leaving me with the option of small animal practice.

At that time there were few small animal veterinary practices in Sydney. With limited experience with small animals, I approached a number of practices seeking a position as an assistant but without success. That left me with the option of setting up my own practice with limited resources in a renovated garage in the family home in North Bondi in November 1949. Initially practice was slow to build up, not because of competition but because the pet-owning public had yet to recognise and pay for veterinary treatment for their pets.

I was fortunate because a large number of pre-war and early post-war German and Austrian refugees settled in Sydney's eastern suburbs. They came from a society where veterinary treatment for their pets was the norm and held the veterinary profession in high esteem. At this time, before James Herriot and Harry's Practice, the small animal practitioner in Australia had yet to earn this status. Even within the veterinary profession, small animal practice was regarded negatively, and even before the explosion of small animal practice in Sydney, the pet population was regarded as being over-serviced and referred to as "every pet has it's vet".

During our veterinary course training in clinical practice left a lot to be desired. So when I started practice I wasn't particularly well equipped clinically. It has been facetiously said that our practice at that time was confined the three P's – penicillin, plaster and paraffin. Our choice of anaesthetic was limited to ether and intraperitoneal nembutal; intravenous pentothal was several years away and more so halothane and now the ubiquitous anaesthetic machine. It was a number of years before an x-ray machine became affordable. However, I was fortunate that my practice wasn't too far from the university and John Keep, the university clinic's superintendent, was always available for those difficult cases, and my local pharmacist was helpful in advising me on the properties of drugs.

The NSW Division of the AVA held monthly meetings at the Sydney veterinary school but as most of those attending were departmental and university veterinary academics, there was little of interest for small animal practitioners. It wasn't until the early 1960s with the foundation of the Metropolitan Practitioner's Branch, the Australian Small Animal Veterinary Association and the Post Graduate Foundation in Veterinary Science of the University of Sydney, that the specific interests of small animal practitioners were recognised. In those years the incentive to upgrade our skills was stimulated by visits of a number of overseas' small animal specialists. Attending overseas small animal conferences firstly to the UK and later the USA made me aware of the potential of small animal practice which was reflected in my practice and stimulated a continuing interest in upgrading my veterinary knowledge and skills until I retired in 1989.

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