

Breaking the Cycle

By Natalya Redmond



It is a foggy morning in the rolling hills of the English countryside. A farmer picks up the phone to report a case of mastitis amongst his herd. An equestrian calls for a professional to assess her lame thoroughbred. A grey-haired lady sits quietly in a waiting room, hushing the cries of her anxious cat. Now the vet arrives. Who do you see?

A gruff, middle aged man who can joke with the farmer? A proud young woman who started riding when she was three? Perhaps the privately educated daughter of a retired veterinarian, proud to continue the legacy?

Would you be surprised to see me? A young, small woman, brown-skinned with a rainbow of snakes for hair, a face studded with metal, ankles laced with ink? It's ok. You can say yes.

With only 3.5% of vets from the UK being of ethnic minority ^[1], students and qualified practitioners of the Black, Asian, Mixed Ethnicity (BAME) community such as myself, are still regarded as an unusual anomaly. There are many reasons for this: some it is due to believe lack of education, others blame lack of opportunity, or perhaps even unintentional institutional discrimination in the profession. I believe it to be all these things and more, but the primary issue is summarised well by Mandisa Greene, the first black president of the Royal

College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS): "You can't be what you can't see" ^[2] This statement succinctly summarises the notion that lack of diversity in the veterinary profession is due to... lack of diversity in the veterinary profession: a seemingly unbreakable cycle.

A report published in 2018 by UCL Institute of Education found that children rule out career options from a young age, largely based on what they see and hear in the media. This includes factors such as socioeconomic background, race and gender ^[3]. From this, we can conclude that children from a BAME background – and indeed any other under-represented background - may not view veterinary as an appropriate profession for someone like them because they see no evidence of it. So how do we break the cycle?

One way the University of Bristol aims to increase diversity amongst veterinary students is through the Pathways to Health Sciences programme. This scheme encourages local pre-university students of BAME background, low family income and those living in areas with lower participation in higher education to apply for the programme. It involves academic sessions, workshops and general guidance. On completion of the course, the students are guaranteed a contextual offer for their chosen subject. I have worked as a student ambassador on this programme and find that the scheme is truly fantastic in the opportunities, support and information it provides.

However, the students applying with an interest in veterinary science as opposed to medicine and dentistry is comparably low. There are also sessions held specifically for BAME students and in these the percentage is even lower. This is reflected in my own cohort, where I estimate less than 10% of us are of ethnic minority. Furthermore, I have had few interactions with classmates who do not come from middle class backgrounds. This suggests that students in the age group targeted by Pathways (16 years+) have already decided on possible career paths. My solution would be to create similar programmes for children from lower age groups. This would present veterinary science as a viable career path for children from all backgrounds from an earlier age and could encourage parents to support their children with it. The programmes should also be available to students across the country and not just those within one hour of the university. This would increase opportunities for students who do not live close to vet schools offering this sort of programme.

This year we were asked to complete an Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) training activity. This addressed issues such as microaggressions, the role of the bystander and unconscious bias. I found it to be a thought provoking and informative resource. However, although marked as a compulsory activity, students had to self-certify on completion meaning there is absolutely no guarantee that they effectively engaged with it. My solution here would be to incorporate the training into a live session or series of

lectures where attendance is mandatory. This way staff could encourage discussion amongst students about the issues, deepening understanding.

Training like this should be integrated throughout the full five years of the vet course, with all areas of diversity including ethnicity, sexual orientation and socio-economic background being addressed. This would result in a graduating cohort of veterinarians who are more aware and appreciative of the issues surrounding diversity in the profession. It would give them the confidence and courage to stand up for their fellow colleagues and students if needed, with a recent article published in the *Vet Record* [4] suggesting that racist micro and macro aggressions often come from within the profession itself, both at a student and qualified level; the problem isn't just getting a diverse group of people into the veterinary profession: it's keeping them there. I would argue that further EDI training needs to occur after graduation too, in the form of Continuing Professional Development, so that everyone within the profession is continually reminded that this is a very real and current problem.

These systems may increase support for current veterinary diversity groups such as the British Veterinary Ethnicity and Diversity Society and Animal Aspirations, thereby perpetuating the influence they have over education in schools, the public and the profession. By increasing support and finances for these groups, we can hope to see gradual change in the attitudes within and towards the profession and an increase in diversity demonstrating to anyone watching that there *is* a place for them, should they want it.

While I have focussed largely on ethnic diversity in this essay, I believe the same ideology of 'breaking the cycle' can be used to equalise opportunities for all underrepresented groups. This simply is not an issue to be ignored any longer.

References

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