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SUE LAPHAM

"It's not a job,
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FEATURED MEMBER



Sue Lapham

OUR FEATURED MEMBER, DR. SUE LAPHAM FROM INDOOROOPILLY VETERINARY CLINIC, TELLS COMPANION EDITOR BEN NEUTZE ABOUT HER CAREER, FROM BEING A NEW GRADUATE FEMALE VETERINARIAN WORKING IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA IN THE 1980S THROUGH TO HER CURRENT PRACTICE IN SUBURBAN BRISBANE.

IT'S NOT AN UNUSUAL THING FOR A VETERINARIAN'S CAREER TO TAKE THEM ON VARIOUS TWISTS AND TURNS THROUGH DIFFERENT ROLES IN THE VETERINARY WORLD ALL OVER THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD. IT'S A LITTLE MORE UNUSUAL FOR A VET'S CAREER TO UNEXPECTEDLY TAKE THEM FULL CIRCLE AND BACK TO WHERE THEY GREW UP BUT THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED TO DR. SUE LAPHAM.

Sue says she decided to become a vet at just five years old, growing up in Indooroopilly, in Brisbane's western suburbs.

"We weren't necessarily an animal-orientated family, and we didn't come from a farm or anything," she says. "But I was the animal career for the neighbourhood. If somebody went on holidays, I would go and feed their pets."

"I was an avid reader and I read lots of books about horses, and I always wanted one. I still do. But I had in the back of my mind that maybe if I became a vet, then that was a way of getting involved with horses."

Sue had no family connection to the veterinary industry (her father worked for the ABC), but she had her mind set on veterinary science and when she started in the Bachelor of Veterinary Science course at the University of Queensland, she became the first person in her family to study in a medical field medical.

She describes her university days as "very exciting", especially for a "Catholic school girl".

"In those days – 1981 to '85 – everyone was into mixed practice. We all wanted to do everything and demonstrate that we could do everything we were trained to do. At the time, there was a big drought in Australia, and we never thought we'd get jobs, all the way through uni. But then towards the end of my course, the drought was breaking."

Sue found herself working in Albany-Wodonga for four months immediately following uni before moving back up north to Roma, a town about four hours west of Brisbane. Working on cattle properties as a young woman in the late 1980s was a fairly unusual experience, Sue says.

"It was that era when most people thought the typical vet was a male. I didn't think about that so much, because I knew I was capable.

But there were a few dropped jaws when you showed up in your overalls to deliver a calf.

"They were so polite, and they didn't want us to get dirty and they'd be helping us a lot more than they would a man. I actually think it was a bit of an advantage as a new grad, because I don't think they expected that you'd be able to do your job. And so, when you did, they thought more of you, even though people should be judged on merit, not gender."

Of course, female veterinary graduates today far outnumber male graduates, which Sue thinks is a reflection upon the requirements of the profession.

"Apart from your technical skills, you need to be empathetic and compassionate. Those feminine qualities are really important for a vet. There are a lot of great male vets, but females tend to have those qualities intrinsically."

Following Sue's four years in Roma, she spent a year in the UK, like many Australian vets of that generation. There, she discovered a few things about the differences between Australian and British veterinary practice that would shape her future.

"I thought we had an extremely high standard of veterinary science in Australia, compared to the UK. I noticed that some of the clinics didn't even have a microscope. But what I did learn in the UK was that people treated their pets like the family, well ahead of Australia.

"I remember one job I had in Yorkshire, and sometimes I couldn't even understand what they were saying with their accents. I was working in a very poor area, but people would spend all their money on a house-sitter for the dog if it was sick and they didn't want to move it. And they also had pet insurance well before us."

Of course now, Australian pets are very much part of the family, which is a big reason why Sue found herself drawn to the small animal world. After being in a partnership in Toowoomba for several years, in 2008, she unexpectedly moved back home and bought the small animal Indooroopilly Veterinary Clinic.

"It was a bit out of the blue," she recalls. "I wasn't necessarily expecting to own another

practice. After Toowoomba, I managed a clinic in Brisbane, but I hadn't really thought that I would buy a practice at age 45."

Indooroopilly Veterinary Clinic was, at that point, already an established institute of the local community. The building, a large Queenslander, is now almost 100 years old, but the veterinary practice has only been running since the early 1970s, when a DPI vet was living in the building and started to see their neighbour's pets at night. Dr. Ray Barbero bought the practice in the late 1970s and was owner until Sue took over.

Sue has worked to revitalise the 14-staff member strong practice, with an aesthetic makeover and updated equipment. A lot of university students have gone through the practice on their placements since its establishment, and Sue has been keen to continue those traditions.

"I think one of the challenges the profession faces is the presumption that it's a 9 to 5 job," she says. "Some new graduates think that, but you really can't generalise. I think people have to remember that being a vet is a profession and not a job. I'm often saying that to my staff or students. We often have students that don't want to come in on a weekend and I'm constantly saying that pets don't know that it's a weekend or that it's the middle of the night."

In any case, Sue believes that vets still have a work ethic that rivals any other profession.

"People have high expectations of us. They want a lot and they're often not prepared to pay for it. But I see how hard working and caring the vets and vet nurses are, and people just don't see everything that goes on.

"I think a little bit of respect has been lost for the profession in the media. It's completely unwarranted. I had a call from a guy recently who had found a stray that had been hit by a car. It was nine o'clock at night and I raced over and looked after the dog without any expectation that I was going to get any money out of that. We don't expect recognition for it, but it's disappointing when you hear negative things.

"People in the profession are very empathetic, compassionate and sensitive people. It's a fantastic profession."





A day in the life of...

Sue Lapham

6.30AM I get out of bed, do a few morning stretches, then check the email, shower, feed the dogs, the cats and the bird, then, my breakfast. Am pretty sure haven't got that order right. Sometimes I think my pets live better than myself! Quick scan of news and last night's Rugby results. Leave for work at **7.45AM**.

7.55AM Arrive at work. Love the short commute. I am on surgery this morning - speys of two very cute yellow Labrador pups and a dental to be done for a Burmese.

During the dental, I noticed a fracture in the upper carnassial and it needs to come out. Got the owner on the phone and explained the situation and she agreed for the extraction to go ahead. This took longer than expected and knew I would be busy this afternoon.

Various other jobs to attend to, phone backs, filling in insurance forms, running repairs on equipment, chatting to clients picking up medications, talking to the nurses about the monthly jobs, proof reading the newsletter.

12.55PM Hungry, yet I have committed to a Pet Pep visit at the school across the road. Lunch will have to wait.

My nurse and I headed over to the school with my dogs, Patsy and Jessie, both Labradors, a stethoscope, treats, clinic magnets and clinic leads.

1PM The teacher meets us at the gate and escorts us down to the classroom. Wow, one excited 'little' group! 'Little' meaning 25 children excited to see the dogs, not me.

We decide to have our talk just outside the classroom, in the natural light. The interactive lesson has begun...

Who has a pet? All arms go up. Who has a dog? All arms go up. Then a teacher asks a student, 'Paul, I don't think you have a dog at home?' Paul responds, 'yes my aunty has one and she's brought him around' adamantly.

Who does your pet go and see when they are sick? 'A doctor!' Well, a vet looks after sick animals and we are just across the road. A soft chorus of oohs and ahs

More questions and interaction continues and it's already 2.15pm! I need to get back to the clinic.

2.20 TO 2.28PM Eat, well... inhale my lunch and have a quick look at what's in store for this afternoon's consultations.

2.30PM Show time - afternoon consultations. I need to be as bright and enthusiastic for the last patients as I am with the first.

First up, a new client and his cat who was the perfect patient! He sat up quite casually on his hind legs and wrapped his 'arms' around mine while I listened to his heart. I just had to get a photo of this patient and called in one of the girls with the clinic's camera. We have been taking photos of patients and their owners in the waiting room, consultation rooms and boarding, and downloading all of these and putting together a slide show on a television in the waiting room. Some clients ask when they will be 'starring' in the clinic's 'movie'.

2.50PM A lovely German Shepherd, Charlie, coming in for his third pentosan injection.

3.00PM Chipmunk, the Pomeranian has been clawing at his mouth, salivating just a little more and mum has noticed he has terrible bad breath, didn't like to chew on his right hand side and noticed that he has 'slowed' down a little and thinks he is just getting old. Upon examination, poor Chipmunk has a crack in his upper right carnassial! I recommended an extraction of this tooth and explained that this tooth will take a while to get out and showed her with a model. She couldn't believe the size of the thing and complexity of the soon to be procedure. We then discussed costs. This owner would do anything to not see her beloved in pain. We booked Chipmunk in on Wednesday.

3.30PM Running a little behind...

A puppy called Rambo and his whole family come in. Thought this would be a quick one. The whole family had a number of questions, such as, 'when can Rambo start puppy pre-school, does he need to go to puppy pre-school, how often should he be eating at this stage, when does he need to be de-sexed, are his teeth ok, are his hips ok, is he ok?' This consultation took well over half an hour and noticed a consultation was being moved across to the other Veterinarian

to take off the load. After answering the family's questions, vaccination of Rambo, I recommending puppy pre-school here at the clinic. They will book the de-sexing in at the next appointment.

4.10 TO 4.12PM Ladies break... a glass of water and back into my consultation room

4.15PM Rosie the Rottweiler and Mum came in. They were here to discuss results from a biopsy and where to from here. I always need to distance myself with these ones yet remain empathetic. I had to break the news, that Rosie has osteosarcoma and it has spread. I explained the possible treatments yet with no certainty. Tears flooded my consult room... mum had to think about what to do as Rosie was in a great deal of pain even with pain medication.

4.55PM Nurse came running to my room and let me know that two German Shepherds have eaten 24 double chocolate chip muffins and are coming down now. They are new patients.

Caught up on some histories ...

5.12PM Henry and Zorro arrive. I quickly moved them into the consult room and the owner briefly gave me their histories. Upon further investigation and discussion, Zorro ate a miniscule amount, yet Henry was the cookie monster.

Henry was taken "out the back" and was administered Apo morphine. We waited and within 10 minutes, Henry was vomiting combined with bits of muffins. Henry was then taken back into the consultation room to discuss options with mum. Mum was happy to take Henry home under a watchful eye tonight.

5.55PM TO 6.25PM Continued consulting, finished some more histories and Puppy Pre-School is about to start. I head home and, on the way, pick us up some dinner.

7.10PM Arrived home, fed everyone, took off my shoes and then fell onto the couch. Jessie started eating my shoes... Wouldn't change a thing, though.

Caught up on a few e-mails, jotted down things to do tomorrow, had a look in my diary and cleaned up the kitchen, locked the doors and

10PM Lights off and zzzzzz.