



News

[Media Centre](#)[News articles](#)[For the public](#)[Membership](#)[Vet Ed](#)[Resources](#)[ASAVA](#)[Cattle](#)[Equine](#)[Practice Management](#)[About us](#)

The veterinary degree – a traveler’s companion



The world certainly is an oyster, with many treasures waiting to be found. Every now and again curiosity leads me to look beyond the twisted, contorted, calcareous shell of life, and go looking for these pearls.

Those of us that have slogged through a veterinary degree (or two) and managed to survive sleepless on-call shifts need to balance our lives and seek to find beauty.

Your own pearl might be a worthwhile dig in your backyard, spending time with your family, painting, photography, reading, or going to the opera. Pearls are precious and you need to cultivate them.

I find pearls at conferences, and especially in cultivating visits with veterinary colleagues in developing countries. Many years ago Vets Beyond Borders (VBB) began in my living room among the clutter of appreciated donations from Provet, Zebrevet, Cenvet, IM3, Animal Wellness and Lyppard. Three intrepid pioneers, including two vets and a photographer, became pearl hunters off to Bodhgaya, India. We survived, and VBB grew, with the help of Catherine Schuetze and other volunteers. More information about these adventures is available at www.vetsbeyondborders.org.

The vet is a portable person. Locum work, teaching, mingling with education facilities, and sharing knowledge comes easily once you have passed the ivory tower hurdle.

The companionship and solidarity of belonging to a (some would say) ‘struggling’ and relatively low income profession perhaps has an advantage. It teaches us how to travel light, to travel for the experience and to enjoy helping others.

Some of my most prized pearls are in Bali – in the curious faces of the kids I sponsor and teach. My amazing friend Drh Bayu, who is responsible for rescuing the Bali Starling from extinction by coordinating a captive breeding program, has the most ‘pearlescent’ smile. You can read about his work and others at the ‘Friends of National Park and Forests’ on their website www.fnpf.org.

Ross Perry and Pat MacWhirter have also done some amazing supportive work helping this organisation. This is a remarkable achievement on a shoestring budget – not bad for a poor veterinary profession! Drh Bayu has also performed extensive work educating local people to prevent deforestation in orangutan country and aiding Proboscis monkey populations and turtle conservation. He understands that a team effort is required, where everyone achieves more. It’s a win-win situation, where locals gain eco-tourist dollars and habitats and wildlife are rescued.

The exciting thing about this pearling business is everyone can do it! Sure you might get a little oyster cut here and there – the flight might not connect, the camping bed might be uncomfortable and the meals not standard Aussie fare, not to mention the toilet facilities (or lack of them!). This is all part of culturing your life.

Before my recent trip, which took many evenings on the internet to plan and book the coordinating connecting flights, my husband commented to me that “the world is like a real Disneyland to you”. “Quite right”, I said.

It feels right to be able to communicate with so many different people around the world especially through the conduit of fellowship provided by veterinary medicine.

As pet carers we talk the same language of animal husbandry, and walk the same path – so to all of you reading this, I thank you for being part of this integrated circle.

We speak of a global economy, world financial situations, and environmental interconnectedness, yet for me, there is no better way of feeling this connection than to sponsor a child in a developing country, visit them and help teach and share knowledge with them. And there is so much to learn from other cultures. Who knew you could eat the stalk of the banana or the ‘banana flower’, and that noni juice mixed with coconut oil, garlic oil and onion juice could quickly cure swimmers ear when there is no pharmacy around?

When one reacts with joy while attempting to thrash rice on a primitive but highly functional foot driven wooden mechanical thrasher, plant rice, join in to make batik in poorly lit sheds, go night fishing for squid, and carry handmade bricks up steep bamboo ladders all for less than two dollars a day, one realises the true value of life.

Life is about sharing and caring and smile exchanges, not the bottom dollar – although one does need the bottom dollar often to do this escapade.

Truly we vets should celebrate with gratitude our lot, for I have found that we are the pearls! One of my favourite expressions is “Today is a gift, that’s why it is called the present” – so open up and live out of your shell!

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