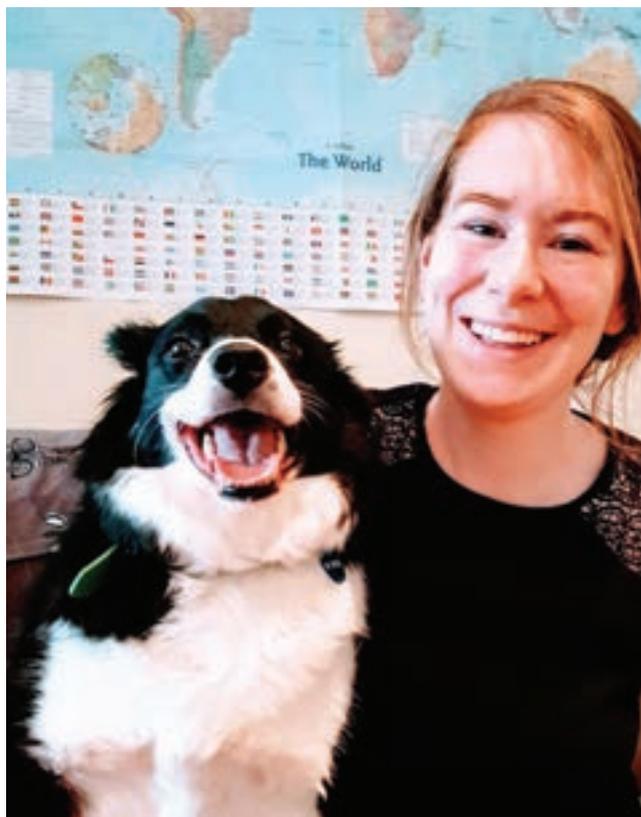


Student Veterinary Nurse of the Year 2017

Lorraine McDonnell RVN, vice-chairperson, Irish Veterinary Nurses Association, catches up with Student Veterinary Nurse of the Year 2017, Aisling Holmes



Aisling Holmes with Prince, the dog.

While studying veterinary nursing in St John's College, Cork, Aisling Holmes also worked at Gilabbeey Veterinary Hospital, Cork, where she is now fully employed. From a very young age Aisling always knew she wanted to work with animals. "I grew up on a dairy farm in Limerick and, from as far back as I can recall, I just wanted to be outside with the animals. However, my path to veterinary nursing wasn't very clear-cut. When I didn't receive the points to study veterinary after my Leaving Certificate, I went on to complete my degree in biochemistry in University College Cork (UCC), as I enjoyed studying science.

"Following this, I took some time out and volunteered at a wildlife rehabilitation sanctuary in Vancouver and, from there, I knew that my career would revolve around the treatment and caring of animals. When I returned home from Canada, I applied for a veterinary nursing course in Cork as a mature student and I haven't looked back since." Aisling had a lot of experience with animals prior to starting her nursing studies. "Growing up on a dairy farm with five sisters and no brothers meant we were always outside helping our father, so there was lots of hands-on

experience. It wasn't until later on, in transition year, when I completed a few weeks of work experience in different veterinary clinics, that I got a taste of working with small animals. After my degree, I completed a few more weeks of work experience in small animal clinics and I was fascinated by the crossover between human medicine and veterinary medicine. As much as I love working with large animals, and always will, I find the surgeries that are performed on dogs and cats, especially in orthopaedics, are nothing short of amazing," she said.

REWARDING PART OF THE JOB

"It's very hard to pinpoint one thing in particular that is rewarding about the job," Aisling said. "For me it's all the little things that add up, like seeing a patient progress after a surgery or an illness. It can be very small steps they are making, but if you are the nurse caring for the patient during those small steps, it can mean so much. When an animal starts to regain its strength and normality, you can see that change in them and it's very rewarding. It is also always nice to be greeted by a tail wag the next morning after looking after the patient the day before." Being a new graduate, Aisling knows what most students find difficult after qualifying. "It's the adjustment from being a student veterinary nurse to a qualified veterinary nurse: taking on the responsibility yourself and having confidence in your actions, and not feeling the need to have your work checked over. From talking to other nurses, this takes time but it's something that will happen naturally."

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Aisling believes there is a huge supportive community within the profession. "There are so many groups and forums on social media for education purposes, or even just to share a thought, where veterinary nurses all over the world can join," she said. "Being newly qualified, so many things can seem daunting, but hearing how other nurses may have overcome or gone through the same situations can be both comforting and helpful. Here in Ireland, I witnessed the veterinary nursing community at the Irish Veterinary Nurses Association Annual Congress in May. This was the first national veterinary nursing event that I attended and it was so lovely and reassuring that all the veterinary nurses were coming together to support and recognise each other's hard work. As somebody just fresh in the door to this profession, this was a very positive experience."

VETERINARY NURSING IN PRACTICE

Aisling sees the role of a veterinary nurse in practice today



Lisa Joyce, IVNA chairperson; Aisling Holmes SVN; and Joe Campbell, Allianz. Photo: Eithne O'Brien.

as "vast and very interchangeable, depending on the practice you're in".

"In most veterinary practices I have completed work experience in, I've seen veterinary nurses being utilised to their full potential and being given the responsibilities that we train hard to get."

She also observed that, in some practices, veterinary nurses may not always be used to their full potential and this is where the public's understanding of the profession can become misunderstood.

In modern practice, Aisling believes that nursing clinics are hugely important. "I think nursing clinics are one of the ways where our role within the veterinary profession can be maximised. It is important that we have more interaction between the veterinary nurse and the public. The amount of work a veterinary nurse does should be highlighted to clients. This would also provide an opportunity to strengthen the bond between the veterinary nurse, the client and their pet.

"With nursing clinics, the nurse gets to monitor the pet weekly or bi-weekly and this focus and attention is appreciated by the client. Likewise, when admitting a pet for a day or longer, it's very comforting for the owner to be able to put a face to the nurses looking after their cherished dog, cat, rabbit or one of the many other 'fur babies' out there!"

STUDENT VETERINARY NURSE OF THE YEAR AWARD

"I was absolutely stunned when I won the IVNA Student Veterinary Nurse of the Year Award. The nomination that was read out before my name was called was so lovely, it was no wonder I started welling up. When my name was called out, I could feel my hands trembling a little, I was most definitely in shock. After taking a few different directions en route to becoming a veterinary nurse, this award cemented in my mind that I was finally where I should be."

Since winning the award, has her perspective on veterinary nursing changed?

"My own perspective on veterinary nursing hasn't changed, moreso it has been opened up since receiving the award, due to the fact I was nominated by the veterinary practice.

I completed the bulk of my work experience throughout college. It was encouraging that student veterinary nurses, although still learning, are being recognised for their time and work. "As for other people's perspectives on veterinary nursing, my family and friends who may not have known about the size of the profession and how much it is growing. Their views have definitely changed now."

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE OF VETERINARY NURSING

One of Aisling's hopes for the future of veterinary nursing is she would love to see a pay scale being introduced into veterinary nursing.

According to Aisling, this would bring equality across Ireland no matter what practice you were employed in. "I feel this would encourage nurses to gain further advanced skills in veterinary nursing, which would, in turn, benefit the practice that they work for and advance the veterinary nursing career further," she said.

ADVICE TO NEWLY QUALIFIED NURSES

"If I were to give advice to up-and-coming nurses, it would be to try and enjoy work and life equally," Aisling said. "Coming into veterinary nursing as a mature student meant that I have had plenty of experience in the workforce before nursing. This experience has taught me that you have to have balance in your life. I think this mantra applies very much to the veterinary nursing profession.

"Like any job, there are going to be tough days, stressful days, busy days and in veterinary nursing there can be some very mentally-challenging days. When these days arrive, it's so important to be able to go home and be at home mentally. To be able to start work fresh each day, you need to be able to finish work, at work, the day before and not dwell over it. To cope with this, I like to run and I can just empty my head. Running isn't for everyone so I would encourage up-and-coming nurses to find their running equivalent that allows them to clear their head."

If you would like to nominate a student veterinary nurse for 2018 the nominations will start in January. Please keep an eye on the IVNA Facebook page and website, www.ivna.ie