



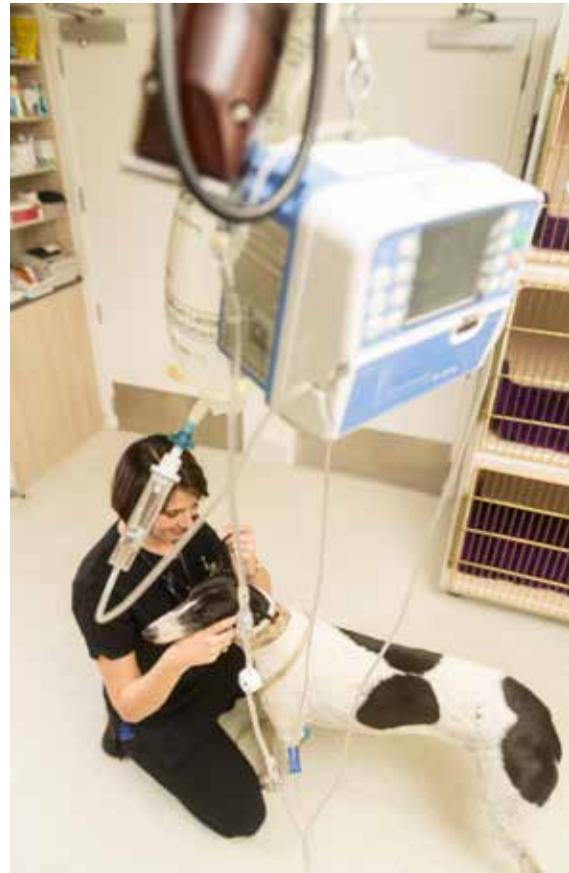
# THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT

---

For a new graduate, starting work at a big business can be a vastly different experience from that of a small clinic. So what are the benefits of the different-sized practices? **Naomi Arnold** reports.



*As a new grad at The Strand Vet, Erin Dowler enjoyed the intimacy and increased responsibility of a smaller practice.*



**WHEN ERIN DOWLER, 27**, graduated from veterinary school four years ago, she liked that her first job at Parnell's The Strand Vet gave her time to learn and grow. It was a small practice, and she was working with just the business owner as the other veterinarian, so there was plenty of time to ask questions, get to know clients and their pets, and build a good relationship with her boss.

She liked it so much, in fact, that she's still there, although the practice and staffing levels have since expanded.

"I found being in a practice that was at an earlier stage of growth was quite good for a new grad. It wasn't crazy busy," she says. "I felt like the quality of support I had was really high."

Instead of having 15 minutes for appointments, as did her peers in larger practices, she'd have 30. "I could look things up more and expand my personal knowledge, rather than doing all that in my own time at 10pm," she says.

With just one other staff member, there were no extra colleagues to call on, but conversely Erin enjoyed the high quality of the one-on-one investment she received in her training. "There was a lot of time put in to making sure I got the support I needed," she says.

That meant her boss scrubbed in with her and advised on surgical technique. "I didn't have three or four people telling me different things because of how they liked to do it. I got my basics down without

having a lot of conflicting information, and when I had that sussed I could expand my knowledge further."

It also meant that she had a lot of early responsibility and built relationships with clients quickly, seeing them frequently and ensuring consistency of care. Her boss spent time introducing her to the regulars so that they knew her face.

Small works for Erin, but she points out that success in a small practice depends hugely on the personalities of the people involved.

"In a smaller team, if there are clashes then they're not diluted," she says, adding that her position works because she and her boss have similar philosophies on pet care. "Our views

---

**“IN A SMALL PRACTICE, IT’S EASIER TO HAVE TEAM MEETINGS, TO MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS ON THE SAME PAGE AND FIX THINGS WHEN THEY GO WRONG. YOU CAN PROBABLY INTRODUCE MORE COMPLEXITY INTO A SMALL BUSINESS AND MAKE IT WORK.”**

---

were very aligned, so if clients related to her, they would relate to me.”

Small and large clinics can also be broken down into corporate group practices and owner-operated, and each has its advantages and setbacks. There is no right or wrong for someone in the first few years of their career, but the differences are worth considering, especially as the trend towards amalgamation continues.

A bigger group practice has been perfect for Krispin Kannan, 31. Krispin always wanted to be a veterinarian. His mother was one in India, but after moving to New Zealand she couldn’t work in the field without further study – not easy with three children. Krispin inherited her love of caring for animals, and after graduating in 2010 he started at Veterinary Enterprises (VetEnt) and has been there ever since, based in Te Awamutu.

“The range of opportunities you get within a large group is vast, from specialising or broadening into different fields,” he says. “You have people with expertise who are already working in those fields in your group, and there are so many opportunities to mould your own career.”

Krispin took on a clinic management position, looking after three clinics in Te Awamutu, Otorohanga and Te Kūiti. VetEnt then gave him a year off for a sabbatical, and now that he’s back he has enrolled in an MBA.

He cites other positives, including less rostered after-hours work and a two-year new graduate training and support programme. That means that grads spend about six days a year covering related work issues such as nutrition, work-life balance, clinical emergencies, ergonomics, and personal and business finances.

“It just gives you that little bit extra you don’t get while out working,” he says.

He liked it so much that after he finished his second year he asked the managing director if he could work alongside him to run it, which he has been doing since 2013.

He also enjoys the “huge institutional knowledge” of being in a larger group.

“The brains trust is incredible, and it’s at your fingertips – you just have to find the ability to utilise it. You have people from all around the country that you can draw on for expertise and knowledge in particular areas, or even just help.

“I think that’s a major. If you can’t find something in your practice, you just ring another VetEnt practice. It’s the colleague pool times 100.”

Sherry Chiang, 30, has experienced both large and small practices. She began her career at a low-cost, high-volume practice in South Auckland staffed by eight veterinarians, then shifted to a two-veterinarian practice in a higher socioeconomic area, and then a six-veterinarian group practice, before moving to the UK, where she locums. “For a new graduate, bigger practices provide a safety net and a support network,” she says. “There’s almost always someone available to give advice or discuss a case.”

For her, the positives of a smaller practice included allowing for case continuity and having a much closer relationship with the pet and client. However, smaller practices also involved reduced exposure to cases, and that could potentially limit the development of certain skill sets and techniques.

“Working in bigger practices allowed the opportunity to assist each other in new procedures that as a younger veterinarian you wouldn’t necessarily attempt on your own,” she says. “It’s great to see different approaches to the same problem, as is being able to teach and learn from each other.”

Steve Merchant, chief executive and co-founder of Pet Doctors Group, has been involved in large and small practices as an employee and an owner, and understands



the stresses of running a smaller clinic as well as a larger group.

Having a smaller practice is becoming increasingly difficult, he says. "A bigger network of resources available if you have a holiday, parental absence, sabbatical, or time out is certainly a benefit that a larger group can bring," he says. "It's a lot easier to make sure that you're still meeting the needs of the business and not working all hours of the day, as opposed to a two-person practice where that often ends up impacting the work-life balance of the veterinarian, and the practice."

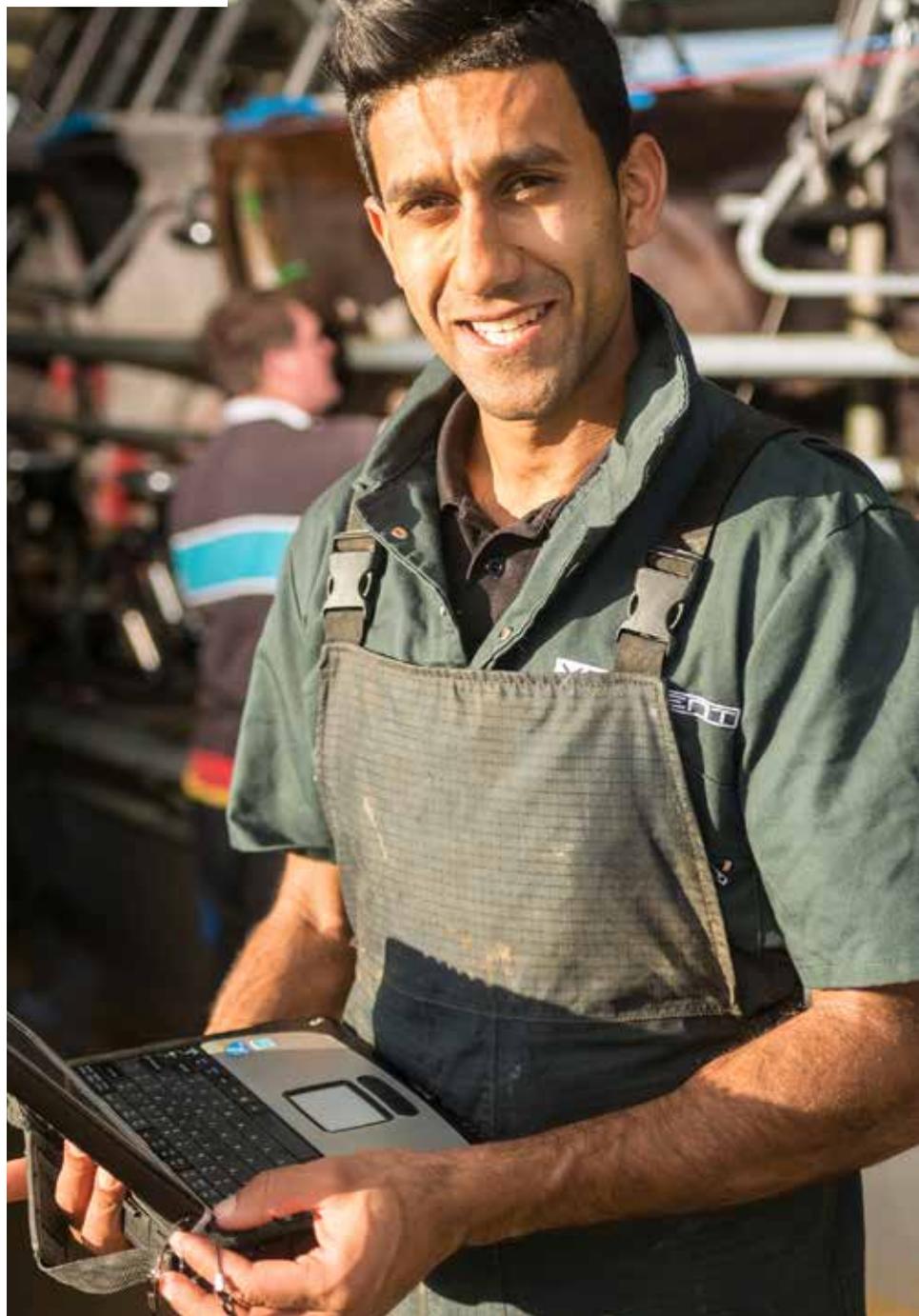
It's also easier in a larger practice to transport your job to another area and to bring in experts and non-clinical administrators, leaving veterinarians and nurses to concentrate on their technical skills. "The smaller the practice, the more hats the owner has to wear."

However, he thinks that working in a smaller practice is in many ways much easier for communication. "It's easier to have team meetings, to make sure everyone is on the same page and fix things when they go wrong. You can probably introduce more complexity into a small business and make it work. In a larger business, the message has to go to higher levels, so it has to be more concise and simple to make sure everyone understands and is on board."

The smaller clinic is also more reminiscent of 'the Kiwi way' – doing what you want without being accountable to anyone else, and treating client issues promptly. "The flipside is the pressure can wear you down after a while. You can never back down from client complaints, the bank, staff issues, the IRD. While you're more autonomous, you're carrying a greater level of responsibility and risk, which is less suited to people these days than it might have been."

Anexa FVC's People, Performance and Culture Manager Sharon McDonald says there is more recognition these days that employees are wanting job flexibility, with both women and men seeking to have more time with their families and pursue outside interests, while balancing work commitments. She believes that

*Krispin Kannan  
found Veterinary  
Enterprises (VetEnt)  
the perfect place to  
begin his veterinary  
career, with scope  
for in-house  
development and  
career advancement.*





a bigger practice is more readily able to accommodate individual employee needs, whether that's young families, the childless or those transitioning out of full-time work.

"Accommodating family life and personal needs is a rapidly changing requirement in this industry," says Sharon. "It's not just younger veterinarians who are seeking flexibility in working arrangements; we're starting to see more seasoned veterinarians wanting opportunities to transition seamlessly into retirement.

"That's where we see Anexa FVC being really proactive. We can accommodate shorter hours and different working patterns because we have a large number of veterinarians and can rejig our model as required."

Anexa FVC veterinarian Tennielle Ellingham is an example of someone who has moved with relative ease into clinic management, from a veterinarian to business development manager. She's taken advantage of a range of internal opportunities.

"A larger practice allows you to learn

---

**"FOR A NEW GRADUATE, BIGGER PRACTICES PROVIDE A SAFETY NET AND A SUPPORT NETWORK. THERE'S ALMOST ALWAYS SOMEONE AVAILABLE TO GIVE ADVICE OR DISCUSS A CASE."**

---

as you go on the job and from the large number of colleagues – and you don't learn this stuff in veterinary school," she says. "There are so many special interest areas that you can sink your teeth into."

Michele Garry, manager of specialist veterinary recruitment agency VetStaff, says one way that all practices can achieve good outcomes for their employees, regardless of their levels of staffing and

resources, is to concentrate on mentoring.

"From what I have seen and heard and the feedback I've had from new grads as to where it's gone wrong, a structured mentoring programme is [essential]."

That means buddying up with someone the new grad can meet with weekly or fortnightly for a non-judgemental collegial discussion, to talk cases and discuss anything that comes up – not just getting together when something goes wrong. "If they only get to have meetings with their mentor when something goes wrong, it saps their self-confidence. Some will end up second-guessing themselves and won't get help, because they feel they are always running when there's a problem. Others will have their confidence eroded – and we can't afford to lose good people from the industry."

In a two-veterinarian practice, mentoring can happen naturally anyway, because the older colleague is often at the grad's shoulder. But it's not hard, no matter the size of practice, she says. "That first 12 months is critical to give them a really good experience and build them up – and then they're away." 