

The life of a veterinary dental nurse

Liz Jefferson is a patient at Renew Dental in Birmingham and is one of nine veterinary nurses to hold a qualification in dentistry. Here, she shares her dental nursing experience in the animal kingdom with her dentist **Dr Indy Johal**

Liz Jefferson RVN ISFM (Feline Nursing) Ncert (Dentistry) is branch head nurse at Blacks Vets in Lye, Stourbridge in the West Midlands. She studied for her veterinary nursing qualification at Rodbaston College in Staffordshire, West Midlands, and then at Improve International in Swindon for her Ncert in Dentistry and online for her ISFM Certificate in Feline Nursing.

She has been a veterinary nurse for 24 years. In fact, on leaving school in 1996, she was offered a job at Blacks Vets and has been there ever since. Liz happens to be one of my patients and kindly took time out to talk about her role and looking after the teeth and gums of animals...

So, is dentistry a new qualification for veterinary nurses?

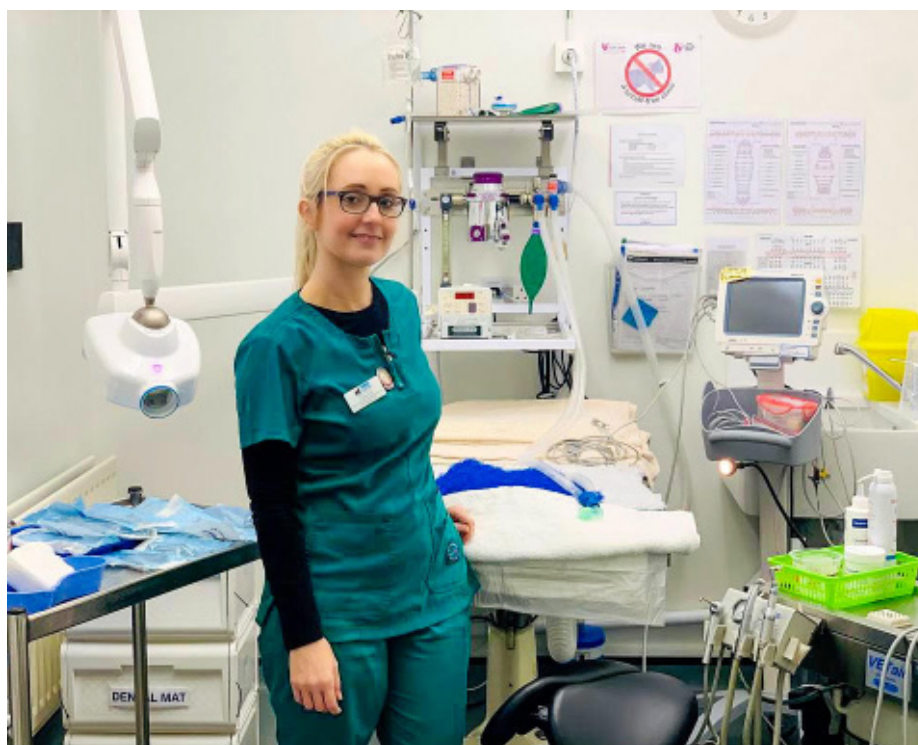
The Ncert in Dentistry is for qualified veterinary nurses and was introduced to the UK in 2019. I was one of nine of the first pupils to complete the course.

How long was the course?

It is a modular programme and is made up of three two-day courses, followed by multiple choice and spot check examinations and then a completion of a clinical audit. I had three years to complete all the requirements. However,



Dr Indy Johal is practice principal of Renew Dental in Walsall in Birmingham. She was formerly a dental nurse and describes herself as 'just a normal girl from the Midlands who happens to love teeth!'



through a lot of hard work I was able to complete it in eight months.

Do you see this as a personal achievement. And, is it the start of a new way to care for the welfare of our animals?

I was amongst the first intake of this new course in the UK 2019 and, yes, this is a big achievement for me and makes me feel very proud.

I really enjoy dentistry and want to learn as much as there is about this subject. I feel there is a great depth of knowledge to learn in dentistry, which I feel people fail to realise.

I worked very closely with a vet

for many years whose favourite area was dentistry.

Her knowledge and expertise made me fall in love with the subject and fuelled my determination to learn more in small animal dentistry. I wanted to know how I could help animals even more.

What made you choose this career in the first place?

I have always had a passion for animals and learning about them in great detail.

From a very young age, I always wanted to work in the veterinary sector.

I wanted to educate owners and help treat animals. Doing my best for them and making them better is a great achievement and I feel makes me a better nurse.

Do you have to be an animal lover to do this job?

Yes, I feel you do. Being passionate about the job makes you a good nurse and bonds you to the practice and to your clients. Clients see this and put their trust in you when you are looking after their pets. Pets are part of our families.

Animals can sense that you are trying to help them and care for them, which results in them feeling more at ease with you.

My promise to my patients is: 'I will always treat your pet as if they were my own'. I care and treat animals to my best ability. Knowing I have helped animals to feel better and more comfortable gives me so much job satisfaction.

What does your role involve?

My job as a veterinary nurse involves many things. From reception/administration work to monitoring anaesthesia, taking X-rays, inserting cannulas to administering intravenous fluids, medications and taking blood samples and more. As I have been a head nurse of my branch for nearly 20 years, my role is to also organise my team daily to ensure the practice is run to a gold standard. High quality care is very important to me.

Do you have to do charting – and does this vary from animal to animal?

Yes, we do have to chart all animals' teeth – I presume the same way a dentist does with human patients. It involves us using a special dental probe to exam around each tooth to check for dental pockets, pulp exposure, calculus, fractures and so on. We then document any normal/abnormal findings on a species-specific dental chart, which is a legal document for that patient.

Each tooth has a number – the numbers mostly are different depending on what species we are examining at the time. The major difference in veterinary dentistry is each animal species have a different number of teeth. Some species and breeds are susceptible to certain concerns and issues.

Therefore, this is something we have to be aware of as we see so many different species. For example, an adult dog has 42 teeth, whereas an adult

cat has just 30. Different species also have different skull conformations, which plays an important part in dentistry and the shape and positioning of teeth in the maxilla and mandible can be different in each species.

How often do animals require a dental health check?

We normally recommended a dental check every six months. Nurses and vets discuss teeth brushing, abnormalities or concerns if found at the time and ways to treat this, and why it is important to brush our pet's teeth.

What makes better patients – animals or humans?

This is a hard one. Communication is much easier with humans – you can tell us where to sit, how far to 'open wide' and to keep still etc. With animals, this is obviously harder as they do not understand and always fear the worst.

Periodontal disease – are the systemic links regarding inflammation and dental health an issue for animals, too?

Yes, periodontal disease is seen very frequently in animals, probably more so than with humans perhaps. We quite often have to extract teeth due to this disease.

This is normally because animals do not have their teeth cleaned once/twice a day like humans. More recently, dentistry has become a more recognised subject in the veterinary field and clients are being educated much more on their pets' dental problems and how important it is to clean their teeth.

What should we be doing for our pets to ensure healthy teeth and gums?

Ideally pets teeth should be cleaned once a day to remove the build-up of plaque and to help further prevent calculus and periodontal disease.

Are animals always sedated?

Yes, we always have to anaesthetise our pets for any dental procedures or surgery.

Unlike humans, pets will not allow a thorough oral examination consciously.

Therefore, for all dental procedures, including scale and polishes, pets are given a general anaesthetic in order to be able to assess the entire oral cavity and all surfaces of every tooth.

What's the largest animal you have helped to treat?

I have always worked in a small animal practice. Therefore, the largest pet I have ever dealt with is an Irish wolfhound, which can grow to be up to and above 32 inches and when stood up, can be as tall as 7ft. Their weight can be anything from 50-75kg

What's the smallest?

The smallest animal I have ever treated is a budgie, they do not have teeth, but we do have to occasionally clip back their beaks to enable them to eat more easily.

Have you ever been bitten?

No fortunately I have never been bitten. I may have had the occasional 'warning' but not a bite where the skin has been broken or was too serious.

Why not human dental nursing?

I feel animals have always been my passion, I like to make them feel at ease and I love the fact I can make a difference in making them feel better and prolonging their life. To be honest, I am not a very good patient at the dentist – it is definitely one of my biggest fears.

Even though Indy (her current dentist) has definitely helped me a lot over the years face my fears, I am now a different person working into her for my routine check-ups. I am also not very good at dealing with medical issues related to people – blood, for example, makes me feel a little queasy, as silly as that sounds.

Dentistry was always a subject that made me feel a little uneasy. When doing my work experience at the age of 14, dentistry was one of the first procedures I observed, and this made me rethink veterinary nursing briefly. Luckily it didn't put me off too much! And how that has changed as here I am today, I love anything related to dentistry!