

How to Survive as a Veterinary Technician

Amy Newfield, CVT, VTS (ECC)

BluePearl Veterinary Partners

NewfieldAmy@hotmail.com

Introduction

Being a veterinary nurse is tough. Not many survive. Studies show that veterinary nurses have an estimated 30-35% turnover rate (LinkedIn Career Outlook). The national average turnover rate is only 12-15%. The 30-35% of veterinary nurses that decide to leave the profession do so between 5-10 years after they started. This makes the work force very young with most veterinary nurses being under 35 years of age. Staggering statistics. Why do so many veterinary nurses enter the workforce and leave so quickly? How does one survive in this field? More importantly, how does one thrive?

The Failures Of The Profession

According to United State Bureau of Labor Statistics in May 2012 the average yearly veterinary nurse salary was \$34,000. That being said there is quite a large range of what a nurse can make. Some make just minimum wage and others make six figure salaries.

The job, as a whole, is physically and mentally demanding. Because of the lack of public awareness of the profession the public tends to disregard a trained veterinary nurses's skills and knowledge. The animal patients of the hospital may carry diseases and may be aggressive. The dynamic between veterinary doctor and nurse can be difficult. The job requires employees to be able to lift 40-50 pounds, stand on their feet all day, bend down, kneel down and crouch down in numerous yoga-like positions to conform to the size of the patient they are working on. Urine, feces and vomit occur on a daily basis and it is required to clean up all three on a routine basis.

The hours can be tough. Working weekends, nights, holidays, long hours are all part of most veterinary nurses's job description. Being called in to cover or being on call is normal in the profession. It is a difficult profession to also be a parent of a child in because very few hospitals support "normal" hours for parents.

The Success of the Profession

There are plenty of jobs. In fact, according to United State Bureau of Labor Statistics, the profession of veterinary nurse is expected to grow about 30% over the next 10 years. That is significantly higher than most professions. Salary is also expected to increase slightly higher than the rate of inflation.

The public awareness of what a veterinary nurse is has increased dramatically over the past 10 years. Veterinarians are now being trained on how to utilize the skills of a veterinary nurse and how to work with together with them as a team. This allows nurses to utilize their skills more.

The patients of the veterinary hospital are arguably the best patients of any medical profession. They cause veterinary nurse to make baby noises at them, smile and laugh over their antics.

What a veterinary nurse can do is quite diverse. While most nurse work in a general practice, the field is one of the largest of any professions. A veterinary nurse can chose which species to work with (lab, large, wildlife, small, exotic, zoo) as well as the specialty (radiology, emergency, anesthesia, surgery, behavior, etc). They can chose to work for large corporations as consultants, researchers or managers (pharmaceutical, pet food industry) to small hospitals (head nurses, specialty, general practice).

So How Does One Survive?

What is YOUR Passion? The amount of different areas that a veterinary nurse can work in is vast. If you are bored or feeling burnt out at your job ask yourself "what do I enjoy about this job?" Chances are you don't dislike all of it. There are likely some parts of it you really do enjoy. If you find yourself enjoying puppies perhaps you really love behavior science. If you already work in specialty medicine what area of it still gets you excited? Do you love when a pet needs a blood transfusion?

Taking Ownership Of Your Passion You despise running fecals, but you don't mind IV catheter placement. You find yourself fearing CPR, but you don't mind caring for critical pets. How do you do the

thing you love the most? Most of the time what you love to do is a job in and of itself. Depending on how specific your passion is you may need to realize you might have to do some things that are not your passion so that you can do what you love most of the time. Knowing is half the battle and from there you can then formulate your battle plan.

The most common thing that a majority of burnt out nurses do when they have found a passion is to go in to that specific area of medicine. If you already work in a specialty you can get even more specific. If you work in an ER and are tired of vomiting and diarrhea, but you really find yourself loving when an animal needs a blood transfusion you can suggest having your own practice start a blood transfusion program. Running an in-house blood bank or even a successful blood donor program looks great on a resume. Larger hospitals may already have an in-house blood banking program and may be looking for a new nurse. You don't know what you may find until you start looking.

Taking On A Specialty In 1993 NAVTA created the Committee on Veterinary Specialties (CVTS) and by 1994 NAVTA grants the first provisional specialty in veterinary technology to the Academy of Veterinary Emergency and Critical Care Technicians. The demand and need for specialties is because of the increase level of veterinary care to animals. Continuous improving of medicine lends itself to those that specialize in certain areas. The veterinarians were the first to specialize and there are currently over 20 specialties for veterinarians. Since 1994 nurses can specialize in over 11 specialties. <https://www.navta.net/specialties/specialties>. All specialties are defined by the title Veterinary Technician Specialist (VTS). INTERNATIONAL nurses can also become a VTS!!!

Much like board certification for veterinarians, each nurse specialty has slightly different requirements. Generally it is a 1 year application process. The application usually requires letters of recommendation, X amount of hours in that specialty, X amount of cases and then X amount of professionally written case reports. The application process reviews whether you, as a nurse, has a higher level of knowledge for that specialty. Reviewers of the applications are looking for your knowledge of WHY you did certain things, not just the fact you did them. What complications occur after an animal is shock, why did you give that drug, etc.

Unlike a veterinarian who wishes to specialize there are no nurse residency programs. If your application is accepted you have a 6 month to 1 year self study. This is your time to study everything in that specialty. Then you sit for a board certifying exam. Some VTS organizations have hands on parts, some offer only a written exam. All of them occur within 1 day and are usually given only once a year. The exam asks difficult questions. It is meant to ensure those that pass the test understand pathophysiology, pharmacology and a higher level of knowledge then you received in your regular school education.

If you pass you earn the VTS title and you are considered at the forefront of your field. VTS nurses are considered leaders. While most earn a higher salary, not all employers honor obtaining a VTS with a raise. That being said a VTS opens more doors and opportunities. Being a VTS opens doors for speaking, publishing and teaching.

Education . By 1999 there were 80 programs in the USA that were AVMA accredited. In 2003 the number of accredited programs climbed to 103. In 2014 there are over 220 AVMA accredited veterinary nurse schools in the USA. Education is available in a classroom or online. If you have already obtained a college education as a veterinary nurse you may want to go back to school to further it. For example, if you have an associate's degree and are interested in management going back to school to obtain a bachelor's degree in management may help you go for your passion. If you just wish to learn about a particular area (emergency, pathology, pharmacology) there are plenty of online courses or conferences which offer continuing education in just about anything you can think of. Increasing your knowledge definitely leads to more opportunities as well as increases in salary. Putting your continuing education on your resume shows potential employers that you are committed to your field and that you are current in medicine.

Learning Never Stops If you have been working in the profession and it's been more than two years since you did any continuing education then you are already setting yourself up to fail. Medicine is a constantly evolving and updating field. In order to survive in this profession you must evolve with it. Failure to do so will cause you to fail for your patients and yourself. You likely went in to this profession because you loved pets

and medicine. If you are finding yourself stagnant in your job it's likely because you stopped learning. Learning not only increases your knowledge, but elevates the entire practice and the care to the pets you work with.

Toxic Work Environment Sometimes despite knowing your passion is simply not enough if you work in a toxic work environment. It's possible you are not even aware that you are in a bad working environment or it's possible you are the cause of it. When polled with the question "list something in your last job you did not enjoy" the number one answer was "gossip". The second most written down answer was "laziness of fellow coworkers".

No one likes gossip. Gossip occurs when an individual speaks about another individual when they are not present. There is "positive" gossip and "negative" gossip, but both forms can be harmful and not welcomed by most people. While nurses say they don't like gossip in a work environment the reality is that most people will listen to, enjoy and even feed in to the gossip being given to them. A work environment where gossip overruns the practice is a toxic work environment. It breeds distrust, disrespect and dislike amongst coworkers. You will never survive in a toxic environment. If people around you are telling you negative thoughts day in and day out you will never excel. You will be filled with negativity, thoughts of why the practice is bad to work at and you will experience demotivation. Conversely, if you are the one providing the gossip then you are the one who is demotivating the rest of the staff.

There is no need for a "negative nancy" in a practice. That person is the worst of the gossipers. They are the one who does nothing but constantly tell others what's wrong with everyone else. They will tell you why the day is so hectic. They will tell you about why that client was horrible and why the doctor made wrong the decision. This person sets up others to fail. It takes a strong person to tell that employee to ignore them when they start complaining.

If your work environment is toxic you have three options: Recognize and Ignore It, Express your Concerns to the Manager or Leave and Find a Healthier Environment. There are some people who recognize it's a toxic environment and have the ability to ignore the gossip and negative issues, put blinders on and still thrive. You should always tell your manager or owner if you find yourself in a toxic environment. Be sure when you express your concern you don't play the blame game. Sit down and express your concern about this individual dragging down the team as a whole. Express your concern about the overall team's health. Lastly you can leave. Unfortunately there are some working environments that are simply toxic. It's not that they can't be fixed, but it's that they cannot be fixed by you. This type of work environment requires aggressive help from management or the owner. If you have expressed your concern and nothing has changed sometimes it is best to move on.

Dress the Part The saying "dress of success" is a popular one for good reasons. You will not succeed in the field if no one takes you seriously. You work in medicine. You are a medical professional. Stains on your scrubs, holes in shoes, mismatched scrubs look unprofessional. How will clients ever take the veterinary nurse profession seriously if they see a green scrub top that has bleach stains on it and blue scrub pants that have rips in the knees?

Dress in a way that elevates the profession. That includes when you are representing your profession at events. You are representing your profession. If you don't look professional then how will veterinarians, management, front office staff view the profession? When you go to an interview you should dress appropriately. If you are coming from work and truly do not have time to change in to business attire apologize to the person interviewing you.

Outside Life You must have a healthy work-life balance. Yes, there will be days you get stuck late at work. Yes, there will be days you get called in. If you work on salary you may find times you work 50-60 hours a week. Go home, unwind and stop going online or on your smartphone to check on work! If you are in a management position be sure to set boundaries for your employees and the company. It should be normal to assume that not everyone is available 24/7. If your job asks you to be on call be sure to be compensated for it. Most states require hourly employees to be paid for on call if it is a requirement of the job. If you are salaried

and it is a requirement be sure to set boundaries and make sure the request is reasonable. Above all else you must find time to go home, get away from work and live life...and hug your own pets!

Recognition of Stress Nurses work in stressful work environment. It is a labor intensive and an emotionally charged profession. Nurses are constantly helping others. They help clients, pets and their coworkers. Unfortunately, they often drop the ball when it comes to helping themselves. You cannot survive in this profession if you do not help yourself.

Burnout and compassion fatigue are two different things which may be causing you not to survive in this profession. Burnout is a cumulative process in which the individual slowly lacks empathy for a particular situation and is due to an increase in stress or workload. The individual often has feelings of anger and does not care about their work as much as they use to. They watch the clock and know exactly how many minutes are left in each shift. If they see a mess they walk over it rather than stopping to clean it up because they simply have stopped caring due to burnout. Compassion fatigue is an emotional strain from the consequences of traumatic events such as a stressful case or event. An individual experiencing compassion fatigue may have nightmares about a particular event, be more emotional or think about a particular event if something triggers it. Perhaps they poured their heart and soul out over a tragic case of a young dog that was hit by a car. After a week of trying to save the dog it died. That nurse can still show empathy to other patients, but may be more emotionally invested, cry if they see the same breed of dog or not want to work with a hit by car for some time. The two syndromes can be experienced together.

Recognition is the first step. Realizing that you need a vacation or a break from work for a few days is important. Talking to your manager, coworkers or a professional will help as well. If you have been in this business long enough you have a good chance of experiencing one or both of these things. Everyone has different coping mechanisms and it's important to find yours.

Besides burnout and compassion fatigue the simple nature of the job can play as toll on an individual. Taking care of yourself while on the job is equally important to taking care of yourself after. Even if you work long shifts and the clinic is very busy you must stop to do the following: eat, stay hydrated, go to the bathroom and laugh. Failure to do these things will result in exhaustion and misery. It does not take long to do any of those things and taking a few minutes to do one of them will make you happier in your job. A happy nurse equals better care to clients, pets and coworkers. Equally important is living a good lifestyle when you get home. Getting a good night's sleep, eating well and working to stay healthy will keep you performing better at your job.

Surviving an Overnight Shift Since nurses have such a wide range of jobs they can do you may be one that has a schedule that requires overnight shifts. Overnight shifts are bad for your health. There are some people that do better with overnight shifts. These people are those that can actually sleep during the day. There are other people that can suffer through them. They don't sleep well during the daytime, but they get enough sleep to function. Then there are some people who simply can't work an overnight. If you fall in this group and recognize you can't sleep at all during the day then it's best to change jobs or ask for a different schedule. It's simply dangerous working without sleep. If you are in the first two groups you must do your best to take care of yourself.

It's not natural to work nights. Your body knows this. Overnight employees have a harder time losing weight, your kidneys actually don't regulate fluid balance as well so you may find yourself thirstier or having to urinate more frequently. Overnight employees have weakened immune systems. The lack of sleep can cause an overnight employee to fall asleep while driving or not be able to think as clearly which may lead to medical mistakes. Both of these can be deadly. Recognition of how your body handles an overnight shift is important.

Speak to your doctor about medication that may be beneficial to help you to sleep, eat healthy and find some rituals that work well for you. Black out shades, no caffeine before the end of your shift and white noise in the bedroom may all help with you sleeping during the day.

Conclusion Survival is up to you and how much you want to be a veterinary nurse. You may find some mentors along the way, but ultimately it's up to you. Only you can decide if you want to survive and if you do, then go get what you want out of the profession. Your happiness as a veterinary nurse is obtainable.