

vbj technology insight

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Specialist veterinary care delivered to your practice

Managing the referral process can be one of the most challenging aspects for clinicians working in first opinion veterinary practice.

It is impossible to predict how owners might react to being told their regular practice is no longer able to provide the level of treatment their often seriously ill pet needs.

There will also be concern as to what happens next and how much it's going to cost at a large referral centre full of high-powered specialists and scary-looking equipment.

But there is an alternative.

VSUK Veterinary Independent Specialists (VIS) is a provider of veterinary specialists and experts who work on a peripatetic basis, enabling practices to offer a wider range of veterinary services and care options to clients.

"We felt there was a growing market for a different kind of referral service," said VSUK VIS founder Simon Hester.

"The large, traditional referral centres have lots of resources, but can be a little impersonal



and struggle with continuity and communication, sometimes making it difficult for referring vets and clients to know exactly what is going on with their pet.

"So we decided to set up our peripatetic service, which we feel gives a far more personal service that can be delivered in-house under the auspices of the owner's

regular primary care vet. This keeps the vets in the loop and also provides the continuity of care and peace of mind clients need in what can often be stressful circumstances."

Gap in the market

The idea took root when, after working as a consultant to set up and run an outpatient imaging service at a large veterinary referral centre, Simon became intrigued by the differing levels of veterinary qualification and service offered at the top

end of veterinary care.

Further research produced the same conclusion that, while a tertiary care referral hospital was an ideal environment for some patients, a lot of the services offered there could be equally delivered in a smaller or even peripatetic environment that pet owners like himself and first opinion vets, would prefer.

To fill this gap in the market, Simon joined forces with ECVS specialist in small animal surgery Michael Hamilton, and VSUK was formed in 2012 offering peripatetic specialist veterinary services.

Simon explained: "There was immediate interest and, by late 2013, the business was truly up and running.

"In the meantime, we developed a strategy and protocols for delivering high quality peripatetic specialist orthopaedic and soft tissue veterinary services that surpassed the expectations of client vets and pet owners.

"Generally speaking, if owners are given a range of specialist options, they prefer to see a specialist at their regular practice, coordinated by their vet, who they trust."

Matthieu Cariou, ECVS specialist in small animal surgery, came on board in late 2014 and now heads up clinical delivery of the VSUK VIS peripatetic service.

Simon added: "Matthieu has taken our peripatetic activity to another level. He is a special person with incredible surgical skills, matched by a personality and a care ethos our partner practices and pet owners love.

"Matthieu delivers a service to a range of partner practices, primarily in Sussex, Surrey, Kent, Essex and Berkshire."

If a practice decides it wants to offer specialist level

If owners are given a range of specialist options, they prefer to see a specialist at their regular practice, coordinated by their vet, who they trust



services in this way, Simon will then discuss the options. However, he admits, peripatetic referrals will not suit everyone. "Delivering specialist level surgery in-house does not work in all practices, so a series of points need to be covered in the discussion.

"Once everything is clarified and both parties are in agreement, the practice becomes a partner practice built around a care agreement, which defines the veterinary services and methods to benefit its patients, owners and staff."

Boutique referral

As well as peripatetic services, Simon has also developed a model of care he describes as "boutique referral".

While the peripatetic service worked well for many practices and owners, Simon had always felt smaller referral centres would be an innovative service offering in their own right, to support peripatetic activity in more complex cases and to offer logistical support and respite for the peripatetic surgeons.

To this end, Simon approached Rob Lowe, director of Optivet Referrals in Havant, Hampshire – a specialist ophthalmology referral centre, which had expressed interest in developing further specialist services.

Simon said: "We got to know each other well during a successful trial period

and, in September 2015, launched our first boutique referral specialist orthopaedic and soft tissue service.

Jerry O'Riordan, a well-known Surrey-based ECVS specialist in small animal surgery, heads

up the boutique referral service and support from local practices is building nicely.

"Jerry did not just bring a great personality and specialist skills to the table. He brought a desire to deliver veterinary care that is right for the patient – something he felt was becoming more and more difficult in his former large centre corporate environment."

Jerry is supported by Aidan McAlinden, an ECVS specialist in small animal surgery, who recently co-hosted a CPD event attended by 40 local vets.

So what next? "I am old

enough to not know the answer to that question, but we have plenty to be getting on with for the time being," Simon said.

"Our focus is on continuous improvement, trying to do what we do better and supporting our client vets to improve the overall specialist offering to their pet owners.

"We now offer a boutique referral service in the Guildford area as well and once that is fully proven, we may look elsewhere, subject, of course, to finding top specialists who want to partner with us."

A new breed of veterinary specialist orthopaedic and soft tissue referral

Boutique specialist referral in Hampshire and Surrey

Boutique Referral offers vets and pet owners a more personal, specialist orthopaedic and soft tissue veterinary option in a relaxed and friendly environment.

Key features include:

- Direct telephone access to the specialist before and after consult or surgery.
- Explanation of all the options to the owner, surgical and/or otherwise, allowing them to take as long as they wish to decide the best way forward for their pet – no rush or pressure for surgery unless urgent.
- We treat patients as if they are our own pets.
- Appointments available at short notice or as required by the referring vet and owner.
- The referring vet is involved throughout to be able to deliver continuity of care to his or her client.
- Referral letters/discharge notes emailed on the day of discharge.
- The referring practice receives a **care fee** out of VSUK revenue to cover the costs of being involved in the case and to ensure optimal continuity of care.
- Referring vets are encouraged to view various operations so they can better visualise what their patient has experienced.
- Treatment costs will reduce as case volumes increase.

NEW Outpatient CT Imaging Centre

Opening January 2016 at Optivet Referrals Ltd, Havant

Peripatetic specialist service

We provide a peripatetic specialist orthopaedic and soft tissue service to selected partner practices that want to offer specialist level surgery direct to their patients.

This works well for practices with a veterinary team, facilities and overnight care suitable for offering specialist surgery.

It enables partner practices to:

- offer a more extensive veterinary service offering
- create a specialist internal referral option
- provide continuity of care in-house
- enhance practice perception
- improve customer retention
- increase revenue

Our services are built around a **care agreement**, which defines the agreed veterinary services and methods to benefit your patients, owners, staff and practice. It clearly defines what we do to ensure the best possible specialist service for you and your clients. It's straightforward and effective.

Contact Simon Hester to discuss how your practice can benefit by calling 01903 885869 or 07802 584133.



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