

# Veterinary Medicine in the Land "Down Under"

*Danelle Bickett*<sup>†</sup>

On June 12, 1997, I arrived in Melbourne, Australia, and a summer of experiences was launched. I spent my first day and night at the veterinary school in Werribee, Victoria, approximately 35 kilometres west of Melbourne. Their veterinary program is quite different from ours in America, as they do one year of science and then four years at a veterinary school.

Acceptance into their veterinary schools occurs when they are in year twelve in high school. They must attain a certain grade point and be at or above the ninety-eighth percentile in their class. The average age of graduating veterinarians in Australia is twenty-four, whereas in America, it is closer to thirty. Economically, veterinary school in Australia only costs students \$1,000 per semester, and they can apply for scholarships to help them with living expenses. This is quite a difference

from the average American veterinarian debt load of \$54,000. Until 1988, veterinary school in Australia was tuition-free for students. Australian taxes are much higher than those in America, and from that, the government offers an inexpensive higher education system. In Victoria, the first, second, and third-year students attend the University of Melbourne, where they take classes

and have all their labs at the main campus. The fourth and fifth year students are in Werribee, where they attend lectures in the morning and then work in the clinics in the afternoon. The students live in Kendall Hall and that is where I stayed my first night. I met Peter Mansell, BVSc, a bovine lecturer, and he gave me a tour of the veterinary school

and introduced me to several lecturers and clinicians. Notice I did not address Peter Mansell as "doctor" due to the fact that they receive a Bachelor of Veterinary Science (BVSc) upon graduation, not a doctorate degree as in America. Veterinary school is not thought of as a post-graduate program in Australia, although they are looking into that option.

Their veterinary teaching hospital was similar to Iowa State University, except on a smaller scale. They do not have the large animal clientele that ISU does, as Werribee is very

metropolitan. Classes are held year round, with scattered two and three week breaks throughout the year. During those breaks, first through fourth-year students must work on farms to get practical experience. Fifth-year students must do practical work at a veterinary clinic and they get much of their large animal experience there.

It was very interesting to sit and talk with other veterinary students, and even being that far from home, I felt very welcome and we had a lot in common. They enjoyed



Danelle Bickett, ISU

**Danelle Bickett feeds an orphan kangaroo joey at the Cowra Veterinary Centre in New South Wales, Australia.**

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**Cattle graze on the rolling pastures of Millamolong Station in Mundurama, New South Wales.**

looking at our student handbook, CVM viewbook, and the *Choosing to Make a Difference* video that I brought with me. I not only learned a lot about the veterinary education in Australia, but also taught them about how it is in America. They had quite a few questions about our country and it was exciting to be able to relate to them one on one.

From Werribee, I took a train to Timboon, Victoria, where I spent the next seventeen days at the Timboon Veterinary Group. This is a four partner and four associate practice that does primarily dairy cattle work. I spent most of my time with Bill Morgan, BVSc, doing mostly clinical herd health management practices. I was allowed to assist in pregnancy diagnosing and also in pregnancy induction. The larger dairy producers in Australia like to calve at one time during the year, so we injected cows with five millilitres of dexamethasone intramuscularly eight to eleven weeks prior to calving to keep them within a specific interval. I also assisted in several calvings, fetotomys, and displaced abomasum surgeries. I helped out on seven LDA's and two RDA's in those seventeen days. I was also involved in Johne's Disease (JD) testing of several herds in Victoria. There is a Market Assurance Program aimed at controlling JD in Australia and, although it is not mandatory unless one is discovered positive, most farms are getting their cattle blood tested. The other veterinarians at the clinic invited me to spend a day with them, so I did clinical work with Tom Walsh, BVSc, Monica Hore, BVSc, John Ryan, BVSc, Rob Mills, BVSc, and Tonya Stokes, BVSc. I also spent a day with Peter Younis, BVSc, who primarily does embryo transfer work. It was interesting to see some of the top cattle in Aus-



**Danelle Bickett practices her rectal palpation skills under the supervision of Bill Morgan, BVSc, a partner with the Timboon Veterinary Group.**

tralia and the different recipient cows they use. Chris Hibburt, BVSc, does consultancy work with TVG and I spent a day with him traveling to farms and analyzing feedstuffs, pasture management, and herd health status.

From Timboon, Victoria, I traveled north by train to Cowra, New South Wales (NSW), where I spent seventeen days with Paul Cusack, BVSc. At the Cowra Veterinary Centre, I spent mornings with Paul Cusack on consultancy calls and afternoons either in the clinic seeing small animal clients or out on calls with David Payton, BVSc. Paul has a very diverse consultancy clientele consisting of dairy farms, cow-calf properties, and feedlots. Dairy production in Australia is very different from what I have experienced in the United States. Australian dairies are pasture-fed rather than maintained on a high grain ration fed twice a day as in America. I learned "heaps" about rotating grazing oat pastures, when and how often to apply nitrogen and pesticides, and to call them "paddocks," not pastures. They also measure their milk in litres, not pounds, so that took some converting for easier understanding on my part. Their total annual production is much less than in America, but their cattle live much longer than they do here. Most cow-calf properties are rather large and also run sheep as well. It was interesting to learn about the parasites they have and the drugs they use to control them on these large operations. One particular place stands out in my mind and that is the Millamolong Station in Mundurama, NSW. James Ashton is a second generation producer and on his 6,000 acres runs 1,800 cattle, 15,000 sheep, and over 100 head of race and polo horses. It was quite an im-

pressive place and consulting on that large of a scale really takes experience and a broad knowledge of nutrition and herd health management. Paul Cusack has been a consultant for over 5 years, just became board certified in ruminant nutrition, and serves as President of the Australian Association of Cattle Veterinarians. He is a great veterinarian and I learned a lot about cattle consultancy from him. There are two other veterinarians at Cowra Veterinary Centre: Geoff Freeth, BVSc, who is board certified in small animal surgery, and Stephen Fearnside, BVSc, who just graduated one and a half years ago (and is six months younger than I am). When I was not out on calls with Paul or David, I stayed in the clinic and assisted with the small animal appointments. I was allowed to assist in spays and neuters and also a caesarian section on a red heeler bitch. A highlight of this practice was the two orphan kangaroo joeys that came into the clinic. Some people from the clinic took them home at night, but I was able to feed and care for them during the day. What an incredible experience to hold a baby wild animal in your arms and have them so completely depend on you for everything. I will always remember the great experiences I had at Cowra Veterinary Centre.

The third clinic I went to was the Barraba Veterinary Clinic in Barraba, NSW. There I spent sixteen days with Ben Gardiner, BVSc, at his one person practice. He also owns two other practices in the area, and I was able to spend an afternoon at each of those clinics. It was calving season while I was there, so I got hands-on experience with a few Caesarean sections, from giving anesthesia to pulling out the calf and suturing up the uterus and the abdominal wall. We also performed a lot of breeding soundness exams on beef cattle, and Ben allowed me to do several exams and collect and analyze semen. It was a very rural practice, so we saw quite a variety of animals at the clinic. We had routine small animal work to do, got called out to an ostrich farm, and removed a cast and applied a splint to a female orphan wallaby. I really enjoyed the diversity of this practice, and since Ben was a sole practitioner, I was allowed to do a lot of surgery preparation, anesthesia, and suturing.

I flew out of Brisbane, Queensland, on August 15, 1997, a few days earlier than originally planned. Before departing, however, I was able to tour the University of



Danelle Bickel, ESU

**This female orphan wallaby received veterinary care at the Barraba Veterinary Clinic in Barraba, New South Wales.**

Queensland Veterinary School and Companion Animal Practice. It is much more like Iowa State University than the University of Melbourne was. However, the large animal clients all go to the teaching hospital at Goondiwindi, and I was not able to visit there. Students attending the U of Q have a very similar curriculum to those in Victoria except the fourth year is lectures and surgery introduction and the fifth year is clinical rotations, similar to Iowa State. Also, the students are at the same campus all five years, except to go to Goondiwindi for the large animal rotations.

My trip to Australia is one I will never forget. The people there are very friendly and took me into their homes and lives like they had known me forever. The greatest experience was going out to the farms and meeting the "cockies," Australian farmers. They were excited to meet an American and to show me around their properties. They were just as enthusiastic as the veterinary students to hear about my country and the differences in the farming ways. It made me proud to come from such an upstanding international farming area and I was happy to share with them as much as I could. ♦