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## Veterinary medicine education in Portugal: A student's perspective

Vanessa Ralha

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First, I should explain why a fourth year Portuguese veterinary student is writing for *Veterinary Sciences Tomorrow*. It all started at the Symposium on Veterinary Research, held earlier this year in Lisbon, where I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Marian Horzinek and of having the opportunity to talk with him during one of the Symposium's social events. We discussed veterinary education and research in Portugal and, after hearing my views on the subject, he invited me to write an article on the topic - from a student's point of view. Being a member of the Students' Union as well as co-editor of the Union's scientific journal *Medicina Veterinária*, I could not help proposing an exchange of articles. Thus, as agreed, I would write a short article for *Veterinary Sciences Tomorrow*, and in return Prof. Horzinek would write one for our journal, based on the superb lecture he gave at the Symposium. The following contribution is, therefore, my half of the bargain - he has already fulfilled his.



Veterinary education, in Portugal and elsewhere, relies to a great extent on a faculty's academic staff and infrastructure as well as the students will to learn and put their knowledge to good use. In examining these points individually, I prefer not to discuss the first because I do not think I should be judging my lecturers and professors - particularly when I have no reason to believe they are doing anything other than their best to share their knowledge and professional experience with us. I feel far more comfortable talking about Portuguese veterinary students.

In theory, we are all high ranked students, at least as far as our secondary school grades are concerned (we have to be in order to get into a veterinary faculty in Portugal). Most students, however, feel displaced when they start their veterinary studies, because they would have preferred to be at medical school. In my first year, for example, 75 per cent of students did not list veterinary science as their first choice. Over time, of course, many of them change their minds, broaden their horizons and discover there are many more options available to qualified veterinary surgeons than they had believed - realising that being a veterinarian does not necessarily involve clinical work. Nevertheless, there are still a few students who simply follow a veterinary education so that one day they can be something - anything - and they do not care much about what they can achieve as veterinary students or as veterinarians in the future. So much for motivation!

The infrastructure of Lisbon's veterinary school has definitely changed since I started here. The faculty moved from its city centre location, where it was established in 1927, to a modern site that offers a more appropriate environment for veterinary teaching and research. Keeping a veterinary school's facilities updated is essential and requires good management, which may compete with funds needed for maintaining the quality of the education, research projects and the faculty's clinics.

After completing my high school education, I took the initiative to visit three of the four universities in Portugal that offered a degree in veterinary medicine at that time. (More recently, a new institution has opened in Coimbra but this is private and students must pay for their training). I went to Oporto, Vila Real and Lisbon; the fourth, in Évora, was too far from home for me to consider. Although it is not common in Portugal to examine faculties in this way, i.e. to talk to members of staff and students before applying, I found it very helpful and on the basis of these visits eventually decided to go to Lisbon. At the time, the schools in Oporto and Vila Real were still relatively new and the teaching staff and courses seemed less comprehensive than those offered at Lisbon, the oldest veterinary faculty in the country. Recently, a new institution offering a degree in veterinary medicine has opened in Coimbra, it is private, however, and students must pay for the entire course. I was, nevertheless, disappointed with one aspect common to all three faculties: the apparent lack of tradition. Having been born and raised in Coimbra, where Portugal's first university was founded in 1297, I had always dreamed of wearing the students'

traditional uniform (see photograph) and of upholding the academic traditions I had witnessed in Coimbra. Lisbon, despite being a large city, still managed to maintain many of its local customs and mystical ancient traditions. What I had not realised, however, was that most students did not care about them. Fortunately, I was not the only one who felt this was a shame and, from the beginning of my first year, some of us started wearing our academic uniforms again, during exams and for formal celebrations held at the academy.

Every university in Portugal features a different academic uniform, adapted to the town's climate and to the history of the university, though some features are the same for all of them, for instance the black colour and cape (worn differently at each university). The uniforms at the universities in Coimbra, Oporto and Lisbon have always been identical, however; until 1974, the year of the democratic revolution in Portugal, these were the only universities in the country and consequently strong links existed between them.

Wearing the academic uniform was just the beginning of our attempts to reintroduce tradition into our faculty. We knew we would have little influence on students in their final years, so we have focused our attention on the newcomers starting at the university, especially on those not only looking for academic success but also wishing to belong to an academic community. We also started a new 'tuna', which we have named *Vetuna*; 'tuna' has nothing to do with fish, it is the Portuguese name for a group of student musicians who wear traditional gowns and play and sing traditional songs.

There was another reason why I chose the Lisbon veterinary faculty. It had to do with its teaching programme, which seemed more consistent with a six-year veterinary degree than the curricula I had seen at the other faculties. Of course, there are aspects of our course that could do with changes and updates, but I am aware that the current teaching programme is being revised. In many ways, I feel it does not convey the idea that veterinary medicine is a constantly evolving science, in the sense that what we learn today may be proven incorrect tomorrow. When studying a textbook my interest is evoked when I read words like 'unknown' or 'undiscovered'. For me, the greatest satisfaction gained from studying lies in the results of our own thoughts and considerations, in our capacity to produce and analyse data - it does not come in memorising and reproducing what is already known. I am not suggesting that it is possible to become a researcher without first building the foundations of knowledge, but I do believe that encouraging a scientific spirit in students should be more important than convincing them that our current knowledge is sufficient and unquestionable - the latter being strongly encouraged by exams that test memory more than anything else.

During the symposium I mentioned earlier, I became aware of the many research projects developed and running at our faculty - projects that most students have never heard of. Perhaps this is the case in other countries too, but I think students should have access to this information. Also, an insight into the mechanisms of research work would broaden the horizon of many students who, finding practical work unappealing, feel their future is limited. As I see it, the attraction of research is that it is limitless - it involves a constant search for, and renewal of, knowledge. Most people in Portugal still view veterinarians as professionals with a rather physical, 'hands on' occupation and many therefore consider veterinary medicine to be a man's job - even a few of my professors share this view, unfortunately. These people are only familiar with the clinical work of a vet in practice and are ignorant of the fact that this part of the profession would never advance without research to back it up.

There must be repetitive or routine tasks in any research project that students, who are keen to learn and want to be closer to science, could do on behalf of the scientists in charge. Perhaps this is not the case, but I do believe that everyone concerned could benefit from such an experience. During the course of our veterinary education we learn very little about what we will be qualified to do in the end - it would be wonderful to know that we are not simply on a narrow path to veterinary medicine, but instead were on the much broader path of science. And what about other sciences? Research projects and teaching courses in the veterinary faculty could surely benefit from interaction and collaboration with other science faculties. And why must all our professors be veterinarians? Surely we could learn more in specific areas if the topics were taught by specialists in these fields, by people with a much broader based knowledge?

Knowing that veterinary medicine provides a wide range of career options has made me uncertain, and a little anxious, about my future, but at the same time means that I am not constrained to the pursuit of a single goal. Despite my concerns, however, which may well have disappeared by the time I am qualified, I feel extremely lucky that I chose and was accepted onto the veterinary course. I am also delighted to have reintroduced some traditional activities to my faculty and, importantly, to have discovered a number of subjects that I would be delighted to pursue when I am qualified. Most of all, however, I feel happy about the opportunity I have had to meet and learn from people (professors and fellow students) who I admire both for their scientific knowledge and their personalities.