

Scratching the surface



As my training progressed, my little green training book began to fill up as various tasks were signed off. I added copious notes to the book about the practical aspects of my day-to-day job. I found that the knowledge I was gaining from my studies at home, together with what I learnt at college, was constantly being put to practical use.

As with every aspect of my job, I usually started with the basics, and gradually worked my way up to the more complicated elements of different tasks, always listening to my peers, and always following instructions to the letter.

Some areas I genuinely struggled with, and laboratory work became a particular nemesis of mine. Most veterinary practices back then did not have an extensive range of laboratory equipment, with most of the lab work centring around the practice microscope and the preparation of slides of blood, urine, hair, or even faeces for microscopic examination. I could never quite get the hang of the steady-handed sweep of one microscope slide against another to create a perfect blood smear for microscopy, or the ability to prepare a slide for bacteriological examination without coating myself, my clothing, and most of the surrounding area with the bright red and blue stains required to highlight different cell types. I did, however, develop a



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talent for performing worm egg counts on faecal samples. These tests were routinely requested by livestock owners to enable them to make decisions on frequency of worming, or to check that their current worming protocols were effective. I quickly learned that this newly-acquired skill was not something to brag about. It was bad enough when word got out that I was completing this element of my training, because suddenly I became the recipient of dozens of containers of faeces from horses, cattle, sheep, and even the occasional goat. Lifting the lid on a tightly-sealed container of manure is not for the faint-hearted, particularly on a warm day when the aforementioned container has been sunning itself on a window ledge in the lab for a few hours. The containers ranged from the official plastic screw-top sample pots, which came with a useful little scoop in the lid, to re-purposed margarine or ice cream tubs. It didn't matter what size the container, you could guarantee it was filled to the brim. When trying to prise open the lid of an old margarine or ice cream tub, it wasn't long before I was automatically turning my head slightly to avoid the splatter that inevitably burst forth.

Laboratory work may have been messy, smelly and very exacting, but there was always a huge amount of satisfaction when you found something diagnostic whilst peering down the eyepiece of a microscope.

Tiny skin mites such as demodectic or sarcoptic mange, capable of causing immense discomfort to affected dogs when present in sufficient numbers, were commonly diagnosed via microscopy. The classic cigar shape of the demodectic mange mite was a complete contrast to the squat, round body of the sarcoptic mange mite, but identifying either one of these mites microscopically, and correlating the findings against clinical symptoms, meant that the correct treatment could then be administered. Nowadays, mange mite treatments are very straightforward, most cases responding well to either regular applications of a spot-on treatment or even a flavoured tablet given at prescribed intervals. Step back twenty plus years, however, and there was only one licensed treatment available, which came in the form of a strong-smelling chemical wash that had to be applied weekly. In most cases, dogs had to be thoroughly shampooed before the first wash was applied, and it was also advisable to have long-haired dogs clipped for the duration of treatment. The foul-smelling liquid had to be diluted with water, sponged all over the affected dog's body and then left to air dry.

We frequently admitted dogs affected with mange as day patients, to apply the wash ourselves, as some owners struggled to cope with the process. It was a relatively common sight to see a vet and nurse at the bottom of the garden sporting gloves and disposable aprons, with a trusty bucket at their side, sponging a patient from nose to tail. The smell of the liquid was so potent it was always a task that needed to be done outside in the fresh air whenever possible.

It was always worth the hard work and effort, especially when the cases were severe. And there's one case that always springs to mind: Harry, a little terrier cross.

Harry was found by a young couple whilst they were out on a walk one day. They spotted him lying curled up under a hedge by the side of a path. They were shocked by what they saw when they stopped to take a closer look. The little dog had no fur to speak of, just the odd tuft here and there, poking



through his chronically thickened and damaged skin; skin that had grown almost like elephant hide. The dog's entire body was covered in painful, weeping, open sores. Feebly, Harry tried to lift a back leg to scratch himself, to relieve some of the intense irritation that he was feeling, but he just didn't have the strength. He had, it seemed, all but given up.

The couple, Ken and Lydia, didn't hesitate: they scooped him up, wrapped him in a picnic blanket they had in their car, and drove him straight to Greenfields, where Matthew, one of the duty vets, was waiting for them.

As soon as they arrived, Matthew whisked them into a consulting room, and I joined them, having heard that a very poorly dog had just been rushed in.

The first thing that hit me was the smell of the wrapped-up bundle on the consulting room table. The smell of chronically damaged, infected skin is unpleasantly musty, and tends to linger in your nostrils.

Matthew unwrapped the blanket and we caught a first glimpse of our patient, who was in a very sorry state indeed. Harry looked back at us, barely able to open his eyes due to the crusty scabs that were weighing down his eyelids, but he acknowledged our presence with a little wag of his stumpy tail. That tiny gesture told us all that we needed to know: there was a spark deep inside this little soul, a little flicker of life still there, and as we all know, every life is precious.

That tail wag strengthened our resolve to help; to give this dog a chance.

It wasn't just us who noticed the spark. Ken and Lydia, who had never owned a dog and never even considered owning a dog, offered to take Harry home to care for him and to administer any treatments that we recommended. Something about the plight of this poor neglected soul had touched their hearts, and they were only too willing to volunteer their help.

Suddenly, things were looking a lot more positive for this little dog.

Matthew gave him a thorough check over, and, despite every part of his body being incredibly sore, the dog allowed Matthew to examine his eyes, ears, tummy, chest, and heart. After checking his teeth, Matthew informed Ken and Lydia that Harry was likely to be quite young; no more than two years of age he thought.

The next step was to confirm what we thought was the underlying cause of his skin problem - demodectic mange.

Gently, Matthew took some scrapes from Harry's skin and smeared them onto several microscope slides. I took them straight up to the lab room, and popped the first one under the microscope. I wasn't in the least bit surprised to find a number of demodectic mange mites.

Demodectic mites occur naturally in dog hair follicles, but in certain circumstances, where the dog's immune system has been impaired, or if the dog is suffering from malnutrition, the mites can reproduce at a rapid rate. Subsequent skin damage can then allow secondary skin infections to take hold and, in some instances, severe cases of demodectic mange have proved fatal.

There was no way of telling for certain how Harry had got into such a state. Our best guess was that he had simply been abandoned by his previous owners.

But that was all in the past. Now, we needed to focus on the future, and begin the process of healing.



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Together with Ken and Lydia, we devised a treatment plan. We kept Harry at Greenfields to enable us to start the course of chemical washes that would rid him of his troublesome mites. We also needed to assess his general health, and work out a feeding guide so he could start building up his weight, as he was extremely underweight. We were also obliged to report him to the authorities as a stray in case there was an owner actively looking for him (something we very much doubted).

As he turned to leave, Ken reached out to stroke him and murmured softly, "Harry. We will call him Harry. I think it will suit him. We'll see you soon then, young chap."

"Let's get to work," said Matthew. "You bring Harry and I'll get what we need."

Within a few minutes, we had assembled our wash station at the bottom of the garden and were ready to start.

First, we used a medicated shampoo, which we gently massaged into Harry's damaged skin to try to break down some of the crusts and grease. Although in quite a weakened state, Harry was able to stand, with just a little support from my steadying hand underneath his chest. Once the shampoo had been rinsed off, we began to apply the wash that would hopefully kill off Harry's mites and start to ease his discomfort. Harry's feet were badly affected, all four were very swollen and sore, so we stood him in a plastic litter tray and poured in some wash, to allow it to thoroughly soak in.

As the wash was designed to be left on and not rinsed away, once we were satisfied that Harry had been completely coated, I carried him into the surgical unit, and found him a kennel and a soft bed, where he could rest and dry off. Although obviously tired from his bathing session, Harry still managed a wag of his tail as he circled a couple of times before curling up in the warmth of his new bed. I watched for a while as he slept, hoping that Harry understood that he was now amongst friends.

Harry's subsequent recovery was little short of miraculous.

After just over three weeks at Greenfields, we felt confident enough to hand the care of Harry over to Ken and Lydia. Harry really was coming on in leaps and bounds: this little dog who had all but given up on himself grew brighter and stronger every day. Through carefully monitored feeding, Harry was now getting the nutrition he so badly needed to help him on his road to recovery.

It was lovely to be greeted by Harry each day. He quickly fell into his routine of an early morning potter around the garden, followed by a small breakfast and his first dose of an antibiotic that was helping to clear up his badly infected skin. Harry couldn't walk far initially as he tired quickly, so we took it easy and let Harry tell us when he'd had enough and wanted to go back inside. But even after only a couple of days, Harry started to take more notice of his surroundings, pausing to stop and sniff or raise his nose in the air to catch a new scent. Elevenses followed breakfast, along with his daily vet check. Lunchtime always came with another short meander around the garden, and afternoon tea was always eagerly anticipated. Tea time brought with it a second dose of antibiotic and another small meal, and a bedtime treat was always delivered before Harry settled for the night. The little-and-



often feeding regime is by far the best way to restore nutrition to those who have been denied it for long periods of time.

Over the next few weeks, Ken and Lydia brought Harry back for his weekly washes, and each time we could see the changes in him. His thickened skin started to soften, and the crusty scabs that covered his entire body began to fall away, revealing healthy skin underneath. New shafts of hair began to push their way through his healing skin, and bit by bit Harry started to look like a dog again. Before each bath, we took a few skin scrapes, and were delighted to see the number of mites reducing each time we examined them under the microscope.

Ken and Lydia were devoted to Harry. Diligently, they had followed our feeding instructions to the letter, and had been gradually building up his exercise. They had bought him a smart new collar and lead, and a vast array of different toys for Harry to play with. Harry slept at the foot of their bed each night in a huge padded dog bed; he even had his own blanket to cover him as he slept.

Once Harry's skin scrapes revealed no further evidence of mites for three consecutive weeks, we stopped the chemical washes and signed him off. Harry was now able to continue his new life free from pain and discomfort. This little dog had well and truly landed on his feet.

I bumped into Harry several months later, when Ken and Lydia popped in with Harry to weigh him. I could hardly believe he was the same dog! Gone was the smelly, mange-ridden bag of bones I once knew. The little dog jumping up around my legs, issuing little yips of excitement, with a stumpy tail that just didn't stop wagging, was bursting with health and vitality. I sank my fingers into Harry's newly regrown fur, revelling in its soft texture. Gone were the crusts, scabs and sores, and in their place a dense, full coat of brilliant white fur, but for a single brown patch over Harry's left eye. Harry danced and skipped around my feet as Ken and Lydia looked on, immense pride on their faces.

"Harry is such a character." Lydia smiled. "Everyone in our village loves him."

"I can see why." I laughed, scooping Harry into my arms, allowing him to smother my face with enthusiastic licks.

"We can't imagine life without him," said Ken. "He really does brighten our day. How anyone could have treated him so badly is totally beyond us."

I buried my face in the silky fur around Harry's neck, inhaling the scent of fresh shampoo, and whispered one word into his ear. One word that, for me, has so many different meanings: 'saved.'

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