



VETERINARY ADVENTURES

A Kiwi vet on roads less travelled

Kiwi veterinarian Trish Johansen has used her veterinary degree and her desire to give back as a springboard to amazing adventures. Here CQ editor Sarah Fowler talks to Trish about her travels and how she got involved with mine-sniffing rats, rabies eradication and the charity Cows for Cambodia.

Trish says she has always believed that if you can dream it, you can make it happen. But after travelling extensively through developing countries, including visiting a refugee camp in Myanmar, she realised that this is not true for everyone. Being born a New Zealander gives us access to healthcare, employment, education and opportunities which help make our dreams possible.

Trish was brought up in scattered locations throughout Australia and New Zealand. Basics like food and clothing were an issue, and she experienced a lot of cruelty and violence (to herself, animals and others). When she was eleven years old, she and siblings were taken into state care where abuse continued. Trish says these experiences shaped who she is today. "My childhood is probably why I'm driven by animal and human health and welfare in vulnerable communities. I want to provide resources for people who don't have access through no fault of their own." Initially, she was motivated to help only animals but evolved to care deeply about helping people as well. As part of this giving back to vulnerable communities Trish recently testified about her experiences at The Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, an experience she says was "terrible. I had no idea I had compartmentalised so much trauma. Years of it came up at once and I cried for 6 months."

Despite these hardships Trish says as a little girl, she always longed to be a vet, visit extreme places like deserts, glaciers and Disneyland, and to meet interesting people from all over the world. She had a compulsion to make the world a better place that felt almost distressing

as she couldn't see how a small child could do anything much. These are goals that continue to shape her life. Her tough childhood produced a rebellious, anti-authoritarian, independent streak and a firm belief that "the only person I could depend on was me; I could trust no-one." She has long since realised that is not true. After spending much of the last 30 years travelling the world she believes that humanity is a global community designed to support one another: "generally the same things make us happy, the same things make us sad".

In her first year at Massey University, Trish found the pre-vet course overwhelming. She felt it was impossible to compete and qualify for veterinary school due to gaps in her knowledge from skipping school and a lack of study habits. After a few weeks, she met with the Dean, told him she desperately wanted to be a vet but should have taken a year off to prepare between finishing school and starting university. She was granted permission to defer her qualifying year to the next year. Relieved, Trish packed her bags and spent the next few months as a landgirl, milking cows, feeding calves, riding the farm bike and stomping ragwort. She returned to Massey and was accepted into the BVSc degree after completing her second year of study. As is the case for many of us, imposter syndrome was rife initially, causing her to feel as if her name had ended up on the roll call by mistake.

After graduating, Trish took a 6-month hiatus to celebrate then landed her first job at Eltham Veterinary Services in Taranaki, in a practice that was 80% dairy cattle and 20% everything else. Here she was thrilled to gain extensive experience

in all kinds of surgery, on small and large animals with senior vets who were incredibly supportive. Of those days Trish says, "Things were different then, new graduates were expected to be very hands-on. I always offered referral to Massey for complicated cases, but often if you weren't prepared to try, the animal would be put down. I did a hip toggle 6 months qualified using an open textbook with colleagues reassuring me I was putting the screw in the right place." Her caseload was mainly pregnancy testing, calvings, fertility work, lame cows, twisted gut and caesarian surgeries as well as most of the small animal work.

After 2 years experience and carrying a significant vet school loan, she put a one-way ticket on her credit card and headed off on the young Kiwi OE to see the world and pay off her debts. That trip ended up taking 11 years. In the 90's locum vets in the UK were well paid relative to salaries in New Zealand and were provided with a car and accommodation. As well as her daily rota, Trish volunteered for every available 'on call' and weekend for 3 months then would take 2 months off to travel through Europe, then repeat. In 18 months she had paid off her debt, travelled extensively and attended multiple surgical courses offered by UK and US specialists. On a trauma management course, she met her British husband-to-be, and they eventually ran a practice and had a son together. Trish describes this relationship as a fabulous wedding day in a castle, followed by an amicable divorce but a disastrous match in between.

Free to travel again, she began to spend several months of the year travelling the



world with her son Lucas (now 19). Their first big trip (when Lucas was 3 years old) was for 3½ months backpacking around the Arctic, exploring Finland, Sweden and Norway. Trish remembers this as a magical time with memories of whizzing down ice-covered roads on a sledge, grocery bags hanging from the handles, playing 'I Spy' with the shimmering aurora borealis from the top of a snow-covered hill behind their cabin in Norway, and reindeer sledging. They also travelled around Scotland for several weeks, visiting castles, highland games and failing to find the Loch Ness monster. They learned to ski in France and later went to Switzerland. After leaving the UK, they travelled around parts of Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and finally ended up in Cambodia en route to returning home to New Zealand in 2007.

Cambodia had a powerful impact on Trish, and the desire to return and make her skills available was unrelenting. The pull was due to a love of the place itself, the warm, open-hearted people, compassion for their history and a desire to help bridge some of the generational knowledge lost during the Khmer Rouge reign (1975–1979). During this time cities were evacuated and the entire population forced to work in the countryside to rebuild the country based on an 11th century model of agriculture. All government officials, educated people, and people of influence, such as musicians and artists, were executed first. The Khmer Rouge burned books and discarded anything Western, including medicine. About 2 million people (about ¼ of Cambodia's population) died from starvation, overwork or execution.

After a trip to the remote northern Kalimantan jungle, Trish and Lucas moved to Cambodia in 2015. She established Siem Reap Veterinary Care clinic to serve the local community the same year. It was much more challenging than she had anticipated. She laughs "I thought I could google 'what diseases are present in Cambodia?' and use that knowledge as my base, but that research hadn't been done." Trish planned to be involved in the practice for 6 months; however, it turned out to be almost impossible to find an experienced surgical veterinarian prepared to work in Cambodia and that 6 months turned into 5 years.

Trish had to adapt to minimal equipment, drugs and diagnostic aids. "Simple



[all photographs courtesy of Trish Johansen]



things taken for granted were suddenly difficult." In the early days, she was unable to get deworming medication or tick control. Drugs we take for granted in New Zealand were simply not available, certainly nothing animal-specific; premed drugs and analgesics were particularly tough to source. She recalls cutting up brown envelopes to wrap surgical kits and sterilising them in a rice pressure cooker. Then there was the language barrier and finding and training assistants in a job that had never previously existed in Siem Reap. In her previous veterinary life, she had always

used a gown, mask and surgical hat but couldn't due to the humid heat that fills surgical gloves with sweat. Anything other than shorts, singlet and surgical gloves was impractical. "I had to let go of a lot of perfectionism," Trish says "but despite limited testing and assess to case histories, you can make many diagnoses using your hands and observations. Most animals are lean, so once you get the patient relaxed, you can thoroughly palpate internal organs. Abnormalities like abdominal tumours, an enlarged or painful kidney, intestinal changes etc. are pretty apparent."



The clinic's caseload consists primarily of infectious diseases: parvovirus, distemper, tick-borne infections (*Ehrlichia*, anaplasmosis), and parasites. It's not uncommon to have all of these conditions concurrently, so many cases are emergencies. Trish and her staff encourage and educate the local community about preventative care and neutering. Parasites and vaccine-preventable diseases are a huge source of mortality. Trauma cases are also common: broken backs and limbs, injuries from falling off balconies and road traffic accidents, and cats attacked by dogs. Trish says a fresh fracture is

rare, they are usually at least a few weeks and sometimes months old. "If they are functional and pain-free, I leave nature to carry on with the healing. If the animals are in pain or the limb is interfering with mobility, then I re-fracture and surgically repair in the correct alignment."

Around the time Trish started her practice, two local veterinarians also started practices, and the clinics have a co-operative relationship. Angkor clinic has brought many veterinary products into the country, which has been an enormous boost for animal health and welfare. Trish's clinic stocks very little and

sends everyone to Angkor Clinic for food, toys and other products. The local vet, Dr Buntha, is experienced and respected. He has few overheads and provides an excellent low-cost service. "We refer clients to him where the cost is an issue. Both practices send Siem Reap Veterinary Care cases that are complicated or need tests they don't have."

Animal welfare and veterinary care have come a long way in only a few years. Hard-working animal welfare groups have achieved great things, Cambodian pet ownership is more common, and people want to take care of their pets.

While in Cambodia, Trish has become involved in several charitable causes. Until recently, Siem Reap Veterinary Care were the veterinarians for the APOPO project's giant African pouched rats (*Cricetomys gambianus*) used to detect landmines and other explosives. Following the Khmer Rouge reign and the extensive bombing of neutral Cambodia by the USA during the Vietnamese war, there are still more than 70 landmine injuries/deaths annually in Cambodia. These rodents, native to Sub-Saharan Africa, may grow up to nearly 75 cm long (half of which is tail) and weigh 1–1.3 kg. The rats have a very keen sense of smell, are intelligent and easy to train and are too light to set off the explosives. They are bred and trained in Tanzania and sent out to various countries post-war to clear landmines. <https://www.apopo.org/en>.

During her first visit to Cambodia in 2007, Trish observed how thin many of the cows were. The cows are seen as money 'in the bank' for funerals and weddings. If a cow could get healthy enough to have even one calf, it could change a whole family's life, Trish thought. The average rural wage was around \$1 a day, and a calf is worth \$600, which could mean the difference between children attending school or not. Curious about the reasons and possible solutions, Trish spoke with the local government vets about it. They provided staff and transport for her to visit villages and translators to talk with the chiefs. Based on the information she gathered but unsure how to further progress the project, she put together a document and posted it to her LinkedIn profile. This was found by Australian media personality Andrew Costello who had fallen in love with Cambodia and wanted to donate eight cows to families



in the Siem Reap area. He messaged Trish asking for advice and for contacts who could help him. His project, Cows For Cambodia, eventually developed way beyond anything Trish feels she could have achieved and he now has incredible facilities and hundreds of Cambodian cattle. The project acts as a “cow bank” lending Cambodian families a pregnant cow until the calf is born and weaned. The family keep the calf, and the cow is returned to Cows for Cambodia and lent to another family. Trish’s role has been talking to his tour groups and pregnancy testing the cattle, and some buffalo, a few times a year.

Trish has been passionate about rabies eradication since the film *Cujo* came out. While in Cambodia, every rabid dog she saw and each report of another human death from rabies, reminded her how unacceptable it is that an eradicable disease was still wreaking havoc in the lives of vulnerable people more than 100 years after the development of an effective vaccine. With advice and help from international agencies and the Cambodian government, she

developed a vaccination programme called Eradicate Rabies One Village At A Time (EROVAAT). Before a village qualifies for the programme, they have a meeting to determine if they want to commit to being rabies-free. The result so far has been a unanimous yes, with several villages on a waiting list. The programme teaches the villagers everything they need to know about rabies, and EROVAAT gives the first annual rabies vaccinations. The associated local animal health workers are trained to store and inject the vaccines and connected to a vaccine supplier for subsequent vaccinations. The animal health workers are also taught about parvovirus, distemper, parasites, tick-borne disease, and their prevention to improve animal welfare, the survival of vaccinated dogs and the rabies programme success. From then, ongoing rabies control is in the local community’s hands, is self-sustaining and helps the local economy. The number of villages supported has been limited by funding, so Trish was thrilled that EROVAAT was approved as a New Zealand-based international charity

in January. EROVAAT can now receive donations and sponsorship at a time when WHO, OIE, GARC and FAO have a collaborative global strategic plan to eradicate dog-transmitted rabies by 2030 – “Zero By 30”.

After 5 years of running her clinic in Siem Reap, Trish is back in Queenstown, New Zealand. Pre-covid, she had planned to come home to rest and recover, and catch up with friends and family. Covid has meant staying longer. With a fabulous manager and veterinarian in place at Siem Reap Veterinary Care, she isn’t needed in the practice and feels she can exhale and take time out. Her NZ plans include working on the NGO aspect of EROVAAT with her board members and with volunteers willing to come forward and help. There is the logo and website to be done, marketing, fundraising etc. In finishing, Trish says “It is nice to kick back and enjoy the beauty of New Zealand again, relax, have fun and enjoy the lighter side of life. But there will be more adventures. After I rest a bit”. ●