

# Juggling career and family: Not just an issue for women?

## When people want to work less than 60 hours per week

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There is no "one size fits all" recipe book for juggling career and family. As a profession we are all bound together with the common bond of a veterinary degree, but as individuals we are all truly unique and our dreams, priorities and actual reality are all going to be different.

A defining moment in my career was in my final year of vet school (1996) when a guest speaker informed all 75 of us that he preferred not to employ women because they had the tendency to want to go part-time and have babies after a couple of years and that this was a real hassle for him. Given that two thirds of my class were women I saw that he had a bit of an issue coming on!

The NZ Veterinary Council Annual Report 2012 states that the median age of the workforce is 43, and 45% of the (full time equivalent or FTE) veterinarians are women. In the 20-40 age group women make up 59% of the FTE workforce. Similarly in the United Kingdom there are >7000 women vets under 40 years of age (RCVS annual report 2012) representing 68% of all vets in this age group. In New Zealand (2012 NZVC report) of those over the age of 50 only 16% are women.

The average routine hours worked by veterinarians was 41. For men it changes very little over the year groups, until the age of 60 when it starts to decline. During their 20s women work similar hours to men, but average routine work hours tended to decrease after 25 and remained relatively static between 35 and 55. The age showing the greatest difference in hours worked by women and men was in the 40 to 44 age group.

My working life looks like these trends although I was a little older when I graduated at 29. As a new graduate my veterinary career was top on the list of my priorities in life. To prove this I did some daft things. Friends will tell you about my engagement dinner I missed because I was on an afterhours call. Looking back I can't even remember what the afterhours call was for, but I can assure you that my friends have not forgotten their side of the story of what happened that night.

Reminiscing on my years as a new grad another daft thing I look back on and now think... "what was I thinking?" was my avoidance of getting up on the mountain and skiing. For years I didn't do something I really love for fear of getting injured in spring. In my defence my first three years in practice saw me lumbered with a one in two afterhours roster. It was nearly a full time job in itself negotiating and bargaining my way around that and having a life outside of work. I didn't have a lot in my life to juggle and my life largely revolved around me being a vet.

My starting a family coincided with the concerns about the changing demographics in our profession and the early rumblings about vets leaving the profession and more women wanting part-time roles. Once again I did daft things to prove to myself and others that my career was important. My midwife told me off on more than one occasion for turning up to an appointment wearing gumboots and literally popping out of my overalls. A few months down the track even I recognised the irony of getting up in the early hours of the morning another half an hour earlier than usual so I could leave milk in the fridge for my baby and then go pregnancy testing cows during the morning milking. From memory I was doing as many early starts as the guys with my justification being that I could still

pull my weight and work a full day by doing an early start and then go home late morning to be a mother to a very young baby.

While it was exhausting my reality was that I needed to work and would have gone nuts at home and my job now became my time out/me time. The money was handy too and some tough farming years saw my income support the household and farm business. We had the flexibility within our own farming business to enable John to be a hands on Dad, both Johns and my parents lived nearby and my mother loved having her weekly ‘Nan’s Day’.

Having a family won’t be for everyone but it is going to be big part for the majority of the 30-40 age group. Continuing to work while having children, or returning to work after having children, can be fulfilling and rewarding but it isn’t easy - the nature of the job, the expectation of clients, employers and dare I say it ourselves. The flexibility (or lack of it) of bosses, clients, spouses, and the natural demand of children has led to many women choosing to leave clinical work as it doesn’t work for them and their family. Due to the lack of childcare in our rural area it would certainly have been impossible for me without my husband, family and employer. I think if I had taken time off to have children, and not worked part-time through that period, then the likelihood of me remaining/returning to the profession would have been much lower. Getting your foot back in the clinic door is easier if you have kept your toe in the way of it closing completely.

I am very lucky in that my employer has always been hugely supportive and understanding of my life outside of my job, and he’s still the one most likely to swap afterhours duty with me if I have something else on. As the practice has grown it has enabled more flexibility and I’ve been able to take advantage of this. Our younger staff occasionally give me grief about my ‘part-timeness’ – I used to get defensive but now I just quietly smile to myself (remembering how I used to think like that) and I wonder what life will throw at them to teach them about changing priorities over time.

Seventeen years along my career track things have changed a lot and my life’s not just about me and my job anymore. John and I have two children, have a home with a big garden, own a farm, run an 800ha intensive farming operation, employ four staff, I am involved in my community, I have positions on the local school BOT and PTA, have been on the DCV exec for the last ten years, and I work part-time as a veterinarian. Whilst my veterinary career is not top on the list of priorities anymore it doesn’t mean that I don’t still contribute, nor am I ‘lost’ to my profession. I have always done a full timers equivalent of afterhours (a one in eight roster these days is a doddle!) I work part-time, do extra when needed, cover holidays, sickness and injury etc. I am the practice polyfilla!

It would be safe to say that as my career has progressed it has become less about the money and more about the sense of satisfaction I gain from it. According to the Vet Councils demographic analysis I should be increasing my hours again – hmmm – I am happy with how things are so we will see about that!