

VN Telford 20 Years Vet Press

It was a veterinary landscape so dramatically different as to be almost totally unrecognisable.

ECC medicine was in its relative infancy, with out-of-hours work being an integral part of the everyday life of a vet and specialised, dedicated emergency provision a rarity.

But, as it celebrates a milestone 20th birthday, the Vets Now's Telford clinic has been right at the heart of two decades of astonishing change and advancement.

And vet Karen Booth and Principal Nurse Manager Fiona Scrimshaw have been there every dramatic moment of the way, starting on day one and proud to still be at the core of a team saving lives and bringing hope.

For Karen the establishment of the Vets Now clinic, one of the first to open in the UK, was, literally, half a world away from anything she was used to.

Graduating from the University of Sydney, she had come to the UK to expand her horizons, working in often dairy-focused practices and just back from maternity leave with her second child when the Telford clinic provided a fresh challenge.

"Doing your own out-of-hours was part and parcel of being a vet," said Karen. "I'd be called from my bed to meet someone in a cold, dark clinic, or even a colder, darker, wetter farm.

"You'd potentially be awake for a long time but expected to perform back in practice the next day and that had to lead to a difference in the level of care.

"Having the privilege of being able to spend whatever time was necessary with clients here and give them all they needed was mind changing for me."

Although veterinary life had always been the dream for Karen, Fiona had initially toyed with the high-flying prospect of becoming a fighter pilot before scepticism from careers advisors saw her apply for training at her local vets.

After nearly a decade-and-a-half there she, too, was ready for a change and applied to join the clinic for its opening at Haygate Veterinary Centre.

At first, staff were far from rushed off their feet.

"I remember it being really quiet that first night as no one knew to get in touch," said Fiona. "One of our vets had just come back from London and he brought in Krispy Kreme donuts. They were a novelty and that was about as exciting as it got.

"It took a while before we started to get a decent caseload."

But as word spread among clients and day practice alike, shifts became ever busier.

The clinic moved to Gladstone Vets in Telford in 2021 and is one of more than 60 Vets Now clinics and hospitals across the UK dealing with emergencies.

Like the others, it's packed with state-of-the-art facilities and equipment, but much of that still lay in the future during those early days.

"The first GDV we did was on a 90kg Great Dane and we didn't even have a hydraulic table," said Karen. "I still don't know how we managed to get it up for treatment. As we didn't have kennel facilities for large dogs, we had to turn a consult room into one to care for it afterwards."

Technological advances and substantial investment mean things are now very different for Karen, Fiona and the team.

Increasingly sophisticated blood machines that give a wide range of different results instantly, allowing treatment options to be tailored on the spot are just one advance.

"The clotting machines let us work out right there if there's a problem that needs addressing," said Karen. "Pancreatic tests have improved, with the incredible Epoch? machine, blood pressure machines that give easy access without faffing around and getting the multi-parameter monitor? was amazing.

"Some of the types of equipment we had when we opened may have been around in America or in big universities or teaching hospitals, but definitely not in pretty rural Shropshire.

"And we've just continued to add and upgrade throughout to make our lives easier and the treatment for our patients better."

While the kit has been transformational, Karen hails the "superstar" nurses and rest of the staff for being key to not just patient outcomes, but also the pull the clinic has.

"The surgical bit, maybe for a ruptured spleen for example, is just a small bit of what happens here," said Karen. "It is relatively straightforward and it's the shock to the body and everything else that can kill the animal.

"So, while I'm doing my own little bit, the nurses are working hard on so many things and it's a real team effort."

That teamwork and the bonds formed are what has kept Karen and Fiona there since opening night, with many other colleagues not too far behind in their length of service.

"People come here and just don't leave," said Fiona. "We all get on amazingly well and are such a tight knit unit. We all know our jobs, how to work together, and there is still a huge satisfaction in making a difference."

What also makes a massive difference is the work-life balance that the long and intense shifts followed by extensive time off allows.

In Fiona's case two or three shifts a week means she four or five days at home with her partner.

"He took early retirement a few years ago, and we spend far more time together than we ever used to," said Fiona. "When I was in day practice, we'd have maybe two hours at most in the evening and then do it all again the next day."

For Karen, the time off meant she could be at the school gates, attend sports days, dance recitals and other important times when her children were younger

"My youngest has just turned 21, so things have evolved but there have been so many things I've been around for that just wouldn't have been possible," said Karen. "And there has always been flexibility in shifts."

Over the decades, client expectations have increased markedly, but the team strive to meet the changing landscape while looking to an exciting future in ECC.

Karen admits the move into emergency medicine was one she wasn't fully sure of when she joined, but she's more than happy she made the leap and has no plans to step away anytime soon.

"It was a new thing and you're really not sure it's going to work," she adds.

"But it totally refreshed my interest in veterinary medicine. I was at a point in day practice where I was jaded and needed a change and needed to be challenged.

"I couldn't imagine ever leaving here and going back to what I did before."