

Reflections on a practical training session with Guide Dogs for the Blind

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Background

There are almost 4800 guide dog owners in the UK. If veterinary staff are not used to working with visually impaired clients their reactions can be awkward and show a lack of confidence and more work is needed to improve these skills. On this basis Guide Dogs Scotland were invited to spend a day with 2nd and 4th year veterinary nursing students to enable a greater understanding of visual impairments and enhance employability skills.

Training day

The first part of the day concentrated on different types of visual impairment and the problems that people face when affected by these conditions. Students were then asked to undertake practical tasks whilst wearing a blind fold, or simulation glasses. Tasks included pouring a cup of tea or identifying the contents of tins of food. Working in pairs they learnt how to guide someone and had the opportunity to be guided round the campus. In doing this they had to place their trust in their colleagues. Students were able to talk to a guide dog owner to find out more about the experiences of relying on a guide dog. These discussions highlighted the strong bond that exists between a guide dog and owner, and the importance of recognising this in practice.



Student experiences

Students felt that they had gained knowledge and skills that were relevant to practice and life outside of work:

- 'Practical activities were fun and everybody got involved'*
- 'Developed skills and knowledge that I can use in everyday life'*
- 'The experience of being led with a blindfold ... gave perspective.....I found this beneficial'*
- 'It will give me more confidence when interacting with blind / partially sighted clients'*
- 'I really enjoyed myself as well as learning'*

Implications for assessment

The practical abilities of veterinary students are assessed throughout the programme through TLPEs (Time Limited Practical Examinations). Practical assessments can be a stressful situation (Brand & Schoonheim-Klein, 2009) and everyone will respond to this in a different way. By allowing the students to attend a practical session that was not assessed, they were able to engage fully with the material, not be afraid of making mistakes, develop camaraderie with their colleagues and increase their own confidence. Confidence is an attribute that is required for success in practical assessments. Whilst confidence can be specific for a skill and learnt over time, general self-confidence is also required to pass practical assessments. It has been proposed by Clarke & Gardiner (2010) that increased self-confidence can help overcome anxiety and improve performance in assessment. It is therefore suggested that elements of the programme should focus on life skills and the development of confidence and self esteem to prepare students for life outside university and that this will also help them to deal with assessments.



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