



## A vet in paradise

**AS A VETERINARY** Advisor for Zoetis, I am fortunate to have a varied and interesting working day. What I do during the day ranges from answering technical queries, to reviewing the latest information relating to veterinary science, to interacting with some of the leading veterinary experts in New Zealand and around the world. I then have the privilege of sharing this information with the fantastic veterinarians who work in clinics around New Zealand. It's a far cry from being in

Returning to clinical work – “the essence of vetting” – saw **Steve Stevenson**, Veterinary Advisor, Zoetis, recently volunteering with SPAW in Tonga.

practice, and a thoroughly enjoyable way to spend my professional life.

However, every now and then the urge to get my hands dirty comes over me; I want to have an actual patient to examine and I want to feel a scalpel in my hand. With this in mind, I was lucky to be able to volunteer for South Pacific Animal Welfare (SPAW) and join the Unitec team on a recent trip to Tonga.

It was with some nervousness and a lot of excitement that I met up with the team at Auckland Airport, ready to head off into



the unknown and put my clinical skills back to the test. The team of 20 comprised some very eager and talented people: five veterinarians, three veterinary nurses and 12 Unitec veterinary nursing students. A few members of the group had been to Tonga before; however, for most of us this was the first trip. We had been fully briefed prior to leaving, but words did not prepare us for what we were about to experience.

Our job on the first day was to prepare the clinic – a very different clinic from that which we are used to in New Zealand. The conditions were intimate for a group of 20 people and the facilities, while good for the island, were limited. There were no gaseous anaesthetics and no diagnostic machines; our medications comprised

only those we had been able to carry with us and there was no possibility of ordering more.

With the team working hard, we made our temporary base functional for the upcoming week. Our 'consult room' was under the shade of a handy tree outside the clinic, with surgical recovery under another one. The two rooms in the building became the space where four surgeries could be performed simultaneously; they also incorporated the dispensary and instrument cleaning station. The one room that had limited air conditioning provided a modest escape from the heat.

We took a day to explore the island and relax and then it was time for me to get started, armed with just

a stethoscope and my clinical skills, alongside the rest of the team.

I spent most of the morning of day one examining dogs and cats prior to pre-medication and seeing weakened animals suffering from a combination of malnutrition, dehydration and parasitism. It was great to be seeing patients and assessing animals, and it was made all the easier by the superb team around me – all dedicated, knowledgeable and extremely efficient.

But then it came time to delve deeper into my toolkit of veterinary skills and get a scalpel in my hand. The dog neuters came thick and fast, with plenty of patients waiting for surgery.

Day two was straight into it with some intra-abdominal surgery. Fortunately,

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the dogs in Tonga are not generally overweight, so fishing through fat was not an issue; however, with the high level of parasitism on the island, many were borderline anaemic and oozing blood was a constant battle. An unexpected complication while locating the uterus in one female was the number of fleas trying to jump into the wound! But this just added to the excitement of surgery.

Most of our work was neutering surgery and parasite treatment, but there were also some other very interesting cases. Those who know me will be aware that, while I have a depth of knowledge of small animal medicine, my knowledge outside domestic carnivores is somewhat limited. However, I dived in and treated some goats and pigs; quite successfully, I may add.

The case that will stick with me the most was a young pup, no more than four months old. The owners came in with a box containing two sick puppies. When we looked in the box one pup had unfortunately already died on the way to the clinic, and the second one looked to be in a dire condition. On examination, the pup was dehydrated and very thin, with white mucous membranes. The

suspicion was that extreme parasitism had literally sucked the life out of these pups. We gave fluids and treated the surviving pup for parasites, but I was afraid that this would not be enough. Had we been in New Zealand, a blood transfusion would have been an option. However, we had no giving set with a blood filter, or even any anticoagulant to use for the collection of blood from a donor. That was until one of the nurses pointed out that the stoppers we were using on the ends of the catheters were heparinised. We flushed out several of the stoppers into a syringe and now had an improvised heparinised syringe. Fortunately a number of large dogs were waiting outside so a donor was selected.

So there I was, in the most unlikely of situations, doing a direct blood transfer from one dog to another. It was great to see the gums of this little pup going from white to pink again and knowing that we had given him a fighting chance.

It was amazing to work with the people of Tonga. Their concern for their animals and genuine gratitude for what we were doing were truly remarkable. With no permanent small animal veterinary resource on the island, it is difficult for

Tongan dog and cat owners to get optimal care for their animals. While the love they have for them is genuine, their knowledge of animal husbandry is sadly lacking.

The gratitude that these people, who had so little for themselves and their families, showed us for our help was incredible. All the treatment was provided free through SPAW and, while donations were accepted, many people didn't have money to spare. So many people returned to the clinic with whatever they had growing in their gardens to give us. We were spoilt with the pineapples, watermelons and other fruit that was so kindly brought in.

But it is not only the animals and people of Tonga who require help – SPAW is committed to providing help in as many Pacific Islands as possible.

I was very fortunate to be able to go on this trip and I'm looking forward to many more visits to help the animals of the Pacific. I recommend the experience of volunteering with SPAW to anyone – you will return with a new appreciation of, and renewed passion for, the veterinary profession. 🐾

### GET INVOLVED WITH SPAW

The work SPAW does is totally dependent on the sponsorship it receives, whether that's based on finance, pharmaceuticals or time. Individuals and clinics can provide immeasurable value to SPAW through fundraising and sending staff to help.

The Pacific Islands are crying out for veterinary aid, in terms of both professional time and veterinary products, to help their animals.

Zoetis is the premium sponsorship partner of SPAW. I hope my words have conveyed a sense of the wonderful experience I had in Tonga, but words alone will never truly reflect the value of undertaking such a trip for yourself. To find out more, please visit [www.spaw.org.nz](http://www.spaw.org.nz) and get involved.