

Early History of the Murdoch Veterinary School

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Foreword

It is with great pleasure I write the foreword to this reprint of the “Early History of the Murdoch Veterinary School”. This article was written by Bill Clark and John Grandage and printed in the Australian History Record in July 2005. Both Bill and John have been longstanding members of the staff at Murdoch and have seen it grow from the sand in the pine forest to an internationally recognised veterinary school producing top quality graduates.

As one who follows their footsteps, I thank them for the inspiration and dedication they have shown through the years. This commitment to the vet school is demonstrated by their work in producing this article. What better way to remember the past if not by the words of those who have gone before.

Thank you Bill and John for, not only your work in preparing this history, but also in mentoring and teaching 26 years of veterinary graduates.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "John Edwards". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Professor John Edwards
Dean of School of Veterinary & Biomedical Sciences
December 2005

Murdoch University currently has about 12,640 students attending fourteen different schools. Murdoch's veterinary school is now 30 years old and has graduated 1287 students. The inclusion of a professional school, which attracted high achieving students, was an important factor in the early success of Murdoch as an academic institution.



Fig 1: This foundation plaque and statue in Bush Court marks the inauguration of the new University by the Governor-General, Sir John Kerr on 17th September 1974, 100 years after the birth of Sir Walter Murdoch, former Professor of English at the University of Western Australia, after whom the University was named. The Veterinary School itself was not officially opened until 23rd March 1979, when the Premier of the state, Sir Charles Court did so, even though the first students in the University had enrolled in 1975. He expressed the view that "The whole purpose of this school is to get the best trained surgeons onto farms doing wonderful things for the economy and the farming industry of WA". He also said he would not like to see vets caught up in the dog and cat syndrome.

Agriculture and the early history of the Veterinary School

The critical relationship between veterinary and agricultural science in Western Australia was recognised by the University of Western Australia in 1913 when Dr E A Weston BVSc was appointed to a Department of Veterinary Science within the Faculty of Agriculture. He was called for war service in 1914 and did not return to his position.

In 1917 Dr E A Le Souef BVSc was appointed on a part-time basis to give lectures in Anatomy, Physiology, Dietetics and Pathology and he held this appointment until 1931 when the lectureship was discontinued. In 1932 the Veterinary Association protested strongly to the Chancellor of the University over the appointment of non-veterinary lecturers to teach Veterinary Pathology, Anatomy, Physiology and Hygiene. In reply the Chancellor explained that the University was unable to afford to pay for the services of fully qualified veterinary lecturers and that two ex-students of the University, who had undertaken advanced work, one in medicine, the other in animal instruction had offered to give the lectures free.

In the early 1960s Dr J Shilkin, in his roles as Vice-President and later President of the W.A. division of the Australian Veterinary Association sought support from the farming community for the establishment of a faculty of veterinary science in Western Australia. At the annual conference of the Farmers' Union in 1963 the following resolution was passed and forwarded to the State government.

"That in view of the shortage of veterinarians and the substantial loss to the state due to an insufficient number of veterinary surgeons in country areas the Government be urged to set up a Committee to investigate the possibility of introducing a Faculty of Veterinary Science in W.A."

The proposal was at first rejected but following further support from senior agriculturalists and rural interest groups the Government agreed to set up a committee to investigate the position. At the A.V.A. meeting in Alice Springs in 1964 a resolution was passed expressing the full support of the Association for the establishment of a veterinary school in Western Australia and in December 1964 the investigating committee recommended that there was a need for a veterinary school. Premier Brand gave the proposal firm support saying that Western Australia had a stronger case for the fourth veterinary school than any other state in the country.

Submissions for funding were made to the Universities Commission and after some delay funds were granted for the 1970-72 triennium. At the time of the initial discussions the Faculty of Veterinary Science was to be part of the University of Western Australia but by the 1970s it was decided to include a School of Veterinary Science as a pivotal component in the new Murdoch University. Early plans suggested that veterinary students should begin their studies at the University of Western Australia, and subsequently continue at the state's second University on the Murdoch campus. In the event all students attended full time at Murdoch.

A planning sub-committee for the new school was set up and the members were Mr Dunn, Drs Nairn and Gardiner and Professors Moir, Bayliss, Simmonds and Griew.



Fig 2: Members of the Veterinary Planning Sub-Committee with visiting Veterinary Deans viewing the Murdoch site on 20th September 1970. From the left Professor Simmonds, Professor Moir, Mr Dunn, Dr Prior (Dean of the Queensland Veterinary School), Dr Gardiner, Professor Bayliss, Dr Nairn and Professor Butterfield (Dean of the Sydney Veterinary School). Missing from the photograph are Professor Jubb (Dean of the Melbourne Veterinary School) and Professor Griew.

Undergraduate training in food animal medicine

Many students commencing the veterinary program have little experience of farming or country life so a vacation farm experience scheme was organised in order to allow students to participate directly in commercial enterprises involving livestock production. Arrangements were usually made for the students to live with the farmer's family as this increased the opportunity for discussion on the advantages and problems of rural enterprises. In the later years of the course students were required to undertake work experience with veterinarians in rural practice.

At the outset it was recognised that staff teaching food animal medicine must have a good understanding of animal production and the factors affecting the economics of animal industries. Staff members with particular expertise in dealing with health and production problems in sheep, cattle and pig farming were selected and they established consultancies with a limited number of farmers. This arrangement allowed the students to see at first hand the problems and issues involved in dealing with health and production problems on a commercial basis. The large animal emphasis was also manifest in the initial Anatomy program, where sheep were used as the type animal for dissection for the first two years of the program. Subsequently, this was changed to the dog.



Fig 3: A generous donation from Dr B J Lawrence enabled the establishment of a toxic plant garden to help students recognise some of the common plants that cause significant losses in Western Australia. Dr Lawrence made this donation in memory of Dr H Bennetts, an eminent veterinary pathologist who had made significant discoveries concerning diseases caused in farm animals by toxic plants, mineral deficiencies and infectious agents in Western Australia. Left, the garden being laid out in 1977: right, 10 years later.

Research and development

From the outset the School had an active program in farm animal research using the scientific resources of the laboratories and the animal facilities on the farm. The first postgraduate student enrolled in 1975 after being awarded a Federal Government fellowship in agricultural extension to study farmers' attitudes towards veterinary services. The Rural and Industries Bank of Western Australia funded a scholarship and the first project involved a study of factors affecting fertility in sheep. Another project studying the pathology of Pompe's disease in cattle was supported by funds from the United States National Institute of Health.

A dairy herd health scheme using computer records to reduce wasteful diseases and increase farm profits was established and a field study on sheep health and production was started in co-operation with farmers in the Kojonup area. A survey of beef herds was carried out to determine the severity and economic losses caused by infectious kerato-conjunctivitis and a vaccine developed for caseous lymphadenitis, a cause of significant economic loss in sheep flocks.

The Murdoch campus

The Murdoch campus provided the opportunity to offer a spectacular juxtaposition of facilities, all within the major city of the state. The site was large enough to support a substantial increase in future enrolments and the generation of a wide range of academic programs. In addition to the Veterinary School there were, initially, a further five schools (Education, Environmental and Life Sciences, Mathematical and Physical Sciences, Social Enquiry, Human Communication).



Fig 4: The original campus was centred on a low hill called Bush Court (1) adjacent to the Library (2). One of the great benefits of the Murdoch Veterinary School was its easy access to related disciplines. The Physical and Chemical Sciences (3) were complemented by Biological and Environmental Sciences (4), all inviting collaboration with staff in Veterinary Biology (5). The Preclinical Sciences could, in turn, communicate conveniently with the Clinical Sciences (6) and beyond to the farm (8) and its paddocks (7). The veterinary program was designed to take into account the interdisciplinary approach, which was one of the early principles, established in the academic plans for the new university. Professor Dunlop explained that this had been achieved by “...insisting on preserving time within the crowded professional curriculum for broadening and elective courses that require independence of thought, consideration of major issues and project work.” The desire to retain some interdisciplinary study has remained as one of the cornerstones of Murdoch undergraduate study.



Fig 5: The huge Murdoch campus of 220 hectares that was selected for the new university was formerly a pine plantation. It proved an ideal site for the Veterinary School (foreground) because it was big enough to support a university of several schools, a farm, (middle ground) a nature reserve, and abundant natural bush and wetlands, (background).



Fig 6: The building program was timed to correspond to the advance of the students through the course and was dominated initially by the building for the Division of Veterinary Biology (foreground). It contained staff offices and research facilities for the preclinical and paraclinical disciplines as well as teaching laboratories, museum and seminar facilities. A separate block containing necropsy rooms and holding areas was added slightly later.

The building for the Division of Veterinary Clinical Sciences (background) was unfortunately delayed and faced with the need to provide case material for fourth year students it was decided to provide temporary accommodation using demountable buildings re-located to the veterinary school farm. This was an inauspicious, but nonetheless successful, start for the Murdoch University Veterinary Teaching Hospital.

The Veterinary Clinical Sciences building was mainly single story as it contained large areas designed for treating and housing animals but it also contained diagnostic facilities, library, lecture theatres, seminar rooms and offices for the Dean staff and school administration.



Fig 7: The incorporation of a Veterinary School Farm was an integral part of the veterinary plan and reflected the importance of horses and farm animals. An area of 40 hectares on the southeast corner of the campus was set aside for holding animals used for teaching and research. The area was fenced and pastures were established and by installing irrigation over a substantial part of the farm the holding capacity was increased. Facilities for holding and handling sheep and cattle were constructed and a piggery was built several years later. The historic wooden police stables, (middle distance, top right), first built at Shenton Park and later moved to Wembley were re-located on the farm and officially opened by Ray Campbell, University Business Manager, in 1976.

A laboratory for meat research was constructed next to the clinical sciences building. It contained facilities for slaughtering sheep, cattle and pigs for meat quality studies. However the location of this building caused some concern in the local community when it was incorrectly described as an abattoir but in effect the facility was only lightly used and caused none of the anticipated problems.

The equine section of the veterinary hospital dealt with many racing and pacing horses with performance or lameness problems which could best be diagnosed by studying the animals during exercise. Plans were drawn up for an exercise track and a site was allocated on the campus. It was proposed that the development would be funded by donations, especially from connections with the racing industry.

This scheme also attracted some unfavourable comment in the press. The Bulletin in a short article headed “Nothing to whinny about” expressed the view that “...the paying fraternity, whose feeling that universities are ivory towers utterly out of touch with the real world can only be fortified by this bit of nonsense in the face of budget cuts...”

Despite some success in the fund raising efforts insufficient money was raised and after a time the project was dropped.

Thus the Veterinary School, not only had the advantage of proximity to a capital city but also a rich complement of pertinent faculties in its immediate vicinity. Veterinary Biology was complemented by its neighbouring science schools while Veterinary Clinical Studies abutted the veterinary school farm and an adjacent wildlife nature reserve all close to natural bush and wetlands. The close proximity of pre-clinical and clinical divisions is still appreciated by most of the staff and enables and encourages interdisciplinary co-operation.

The first Dean – Professor R H Dunlop

Bob Dunlop was invited to become the foundation dean of the veterinary school at Murdoch in 1973. He was well qualified for a senior position in education having worked in four veterinary schools and having had a senior role in setting up two of them.

Bob's interest in education extended well beyond the veterinary school and he had a considerable influence on the educational philosophies and course structures in the early days of Murdoch University although professors in other schools did not always accept his ideas.



Fig 8: The first Dean of the Veterinary School, Professor Bob Dunlop addressing secretarial and general staff and postgraduate students in 1976. He led his fledgling school with flair, energy and great imagination. His optimism, vision and conviction were inspirational to the 100 new staff who he helped select and who gathered at Murdoch between 1975 and 1980; he helped them develop the infectious camaraderie and pride that persisted even after Bob, himself had left to become Dean of the Veterinary School in Minnesota in December 1979, before the first graduation ceremony.

Veterinary students

The first class of undergraduate students enrolled at Murdoch in February 1975 and completed their training in November 1979. Prior to 1979 all veterinarians working in Western Australia had been trained in veterinary schools in the Eastern States or overseas. In order to encourage Western Australians to become veterinarians and help meet the needs of the state the government offered cadetships through the State Department of Agriculture.



Fig 9: The first cohort of veterinary students who graduated in 1979. From the outset the school made provision for students from states or territories which did not have veterinary schools. An information brochure produced in 1977 explained the allocation of places. "There is an entry quota of 48 students per year, including up to 12 students from South Australia and up to four students from Tasmania and/or the Northern Territory. A further four places may be filled by overseas students from countries which do not have adequate veterinary training programs."

Shortly after the veterinary program commenced concerns were expressed within the veterinary profession and in the press that there might be an overproduction of veterinarians. An article by the economics editor in the Financial Review pointed out that veterinary science had the highest cost per student and that employment opportunities in the rural sector were limited. The article provoked a reply from the Executive Director of the Australian Veterinary Association who pointed out the increasing demand for high standard medicine and surgery for companion animals. However the School thought fit to include the following cautionary note in the Information for Prospective Students brochure.

"Aspiring applicants may or may not be aware that there is at present, a controversy regarding the number of veterinary graduates being produced each year in Australia. Some members of the profession believe that a crisis of over-supply is almost on us while others feel that employment prospects for the projected number of graduates are good. Only time will tell which opinion is correct."

The undergraduate program

The main aim of the undergraduate program was to educate students to a level which would make them eligible to register with the veterinary surgeons boards in Australia. The program was also designed to take into account the interdisciplinary approach which was one of the early principles established in the academic plans for the new university.

Students were awarded two degrees. After successfully completing third year a Bachelor of Science in Veterinary Biology was awarded and after a further two years the degree of Bachelor of Veterinary Medicine and Surgery allowed the student to register to practice as a veterinary surgeon.

The first year study contained science units and a trunk unit designed to introduce students to University study by developing learning skills and required some interdisciplinary study. There was also a requirement to take several elective units, some of them outside the veterinary school.

The second year units used the Animal Body as a theme and this included cell biology and studies on structure and function of body systems. The third year theme was Biology of Disease and here the cause and nature of disease was taught with specific training in the recognition of pathological processes in animals.

Fourth and fifth year teaching concentrated on teaching the knowledge and skills required for the diagnosis, prevention and treatment of common animal diseases. For farm animals the approach to optimising animal health and productivity was taught and the veterinarian's role in Public Health was also covered. Extensive practical work was carried out in the equine and small animal hospitals and on visits to farms.

Student activities

Murdoch University Veterinary Student Association was established by the first class of students in 1975. The President, in 1976, observed that:

"Being a new professional school in a new university, undergraduates have a big role to play in developing good relationships: with staff, with the rest of the university, with the veterinary profession, with the general public and by no means least by developing a good professional spirit among fellow students, at Murdoch and other schools."

The major activities of MUVSA have included organising social and sporting functions, purchasing clothing, books and equipment for students, orientating commencing students and providing student input into many school and university committees.

The student association is also responsible for publishing *Intravetanus*, an annual publication which has continued for over 25 years and has proved a useful source of information for this article.

In the early years of curriculum development there were student members on many of the school committees and their involvement provided ideas and feed back on the reaction of the students to the presentation and content of the new courses. At that time the school was fortunate in recruiting many talented staff members keen to teach in innovative ways.

Sporting contests have been frequently held. In the early years there was an annual football match between the Veterinary School and the Animal Health Division of the Department of Agriculture. Over the years there have been contests between staff and students in a number of sports including squash, golf and cricket and the annual cricket match continues to the present time. Mud volleyball was also popular for a number of years until campus development led to the loss of the court.

MUVSA has organised many social functions. Some of them have been useful fund-raisers for activities concerned with student life. The functions have included Happy Hours, Quiz Nights, Winter Dinners and Balls, Graduation Dinners, Barn Dances, River Cruises and various other activities. These functions were well supported by students who welcomed the chance to relax from the demands of a very full veterinary program.

An animal handling course, held for some years at Muresk and at other times at the veterinary school farm, combined practical training in handling farm animals with an opportunity for the early year students to get to know each other better especially when in residence for three days at Muresk.

“Half Way Day” is traditionally celebrated by students in Australian veterinary faculties on reaching the half way mark in the course. The first half way day was held in 1977 and the students arrived in fancy dress for a champagne breakfast. The Dean joined in the spirit of the occasion by addressing the students dressed as a large animal veterinarian in overalls and gumboots. The half way day tradition has been maintained continuously since then, sometimes with a theme to the costumes but on other occasions no discernable theme other than the intention to have a good time.

The first Perth conference of the Australasian Veterinary Students’ Association was held in 1979 and attracted approximately 200 delegates. The scientific program included sessions on equine reproduction, live sheep exports and a symposium on the possible oversupply of veterinarians, which was a controversial issue at the time. There was a very full social program which included local tours, a visit to Rottnest, a river cruise, square dance and dinner.

From the early days the Australian Veterinary Association, and especially the Western Australian Branch, has taken a keen interest in the school and encouraged Murdoch undergraduates to become student members of the Association and gain many of the benefits available to members of the veterinary profession.

Administrative structure of the school

The school had two academic divisions. Professor John Howell was head of the Division of Veterinary Biology and Professor Mal Nairn was in charge of the Division of Applied Veterinary Medicine. There were 40 academic staff members, supported in their teaching and research activities by well-qualified technical, secretarial and general staff. Overall supervision of the non-academic staff was the responsibility of the Chief Technologist and the Senior Administrative Officer and these officers looked after many important administrative tasks for the school.

When Murdoch University was established in the early 1970s it was decided that there should be opportunity for wide consultation on policy-making issues. Thus a large number of committees were established with the members drawn from academic and non-academic staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students and sometimes members from outside the school and sometimes outside the university. Current university administration uses a more streamlined executive model; however, for the new veterinary school, extensive consultation and participation in discussion brought forth the innovative curriculum and enthusiastic teaching which characterised the program from the outset.

The main decisions were made at the School Board, chaired by the Dean. Other important committees included the Board of Examiners and Program, Finance, Research, Hospital and Farm committees. There was also a School Forum scheduled to be held twice a year. It was a general school meeting with some invited members from outside the University. Some Forum meetings were held but after a few years the frequency declined to extinction, probably because it was not considered to be effective in the policy making process.

Murdoch University Foundation for Continuing Veterinary Education

The school recognised that it should have an important role in providing education beyond the formal undergraduate and postgraduate courses. Facilities were made available for seminars and courses but the running costs had to be met from donations, fees and sponsorship. However in 1978 a generous donation from Dr B J Lawrence in support of continuing veterinary education allowed the University, in conjunction with the Australian Veterinary Association, to establish a foundation for this purpose in 1979 with the financial security it needed to expand its educational role.

Courses have been mounted at Murdoch University, at regional centres in Western Australia and also in South Australia. Many of the courses have covered subjects of interest to veterinary practitioners but farmers, pet owners and breeders, horse owners and trainers and others with interests in domestic or wild animals have been catered for.

The foundation has drawn heavily on the expertise of the staff in the clinical, paraclinical and preclinical areas in the School and has also been able to attract experts from other states in Australia and from overseas.

A further bequest in 1985 was used to establish the B J Lawrence Veterinarian in Residence program. Financial support allows veterinarians to spend some time at Murdoch University to develop skills in a chosen area of veterinary activity and also to interact with staff and students. To date 16 veterinarians have participated in this program.

Postscript

In 2005, thirty years after the first veterinary students were enrolled, the program still retains the same overall structure with five years of study and degrees after the third and fifth years. However there have been many changes in course content to ensure that the students are still well prepared for a career in veterinary science. Some rescheduling of the lecture component has freed up sufficient time for fifth year students to spend most of the academic year in the hospital clinical services, diagnostic support services and on some outside clinical placements.

Several years ago the Veterinary school started teaching a new program in Biomedical Science and in recognition of this the school name was changed to Veterinary and Biomedical Science. More recently programs in Animal Science and Health and the Environment have also started.

The original six-school structure of university administration has changed over time and now there are three Divisions and the School of Veterinary and Biomedical Science is one part of the Division of Health Sciences.

The current enrolment in all undergraduate programs in the school is 600 including 385 enrolments in veterinary science.

The school also offers masters by coursework degrees in Conservation Medicine, Small Animal Medicine and Surgery and Veterinary Surveillance and there are 57 students in these programs.

Research training is provided through one year honours degrees and three year research degrees. Currently 20 students are enrolled for honours and 81 for doctor or master of philosophy degrees

Acknowledgements

Mrs Pat McHattie, secretary to the first Dean, Professor Dunlop, kept a comprehensive scrapbook on the developments of the new school. It contains newspaper cuttings, extracts from the Murdoch News, programs for events and texts of important speeches. The authors of this article are most appreciative of Mrs McHattie's work in preserving so much of the early history of the school.

Dr Andy Keefe, registrar of the Veterinary Surgeons Board, made available early records on veterinary education in Western Australia and the moves to establish a veterinary school in this state.

Mr John Farley, Murdoch University archivist, encouraged and supported this project while Mr Geoff Griffiths, school photographer, who has comprehensively recorded the development of the school since its inception, provided the photographs.

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Bill Clark



John Grandage