Interview with Kimberly (pseudonym), animal technician

5th July 2022, in-person at participant’s place of work.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: How did you come into this career?

P: Erm, I’ve been with the [facility] for 22 years now. I started off on small animals, your mice and your rats. Did that for 14 or 15 years. Felt like I needed a change, I wasn’t going anywhere. So, a position came up here, I tried it out and absolutely loved it. A lot more interaction with the animals, you do get bonds with them. So, I've been up on this site with the large animals for the last 6ish years.

K: Had you had much interaction with pigs before?

P: No, never. Not till I actually came up here. I can remember my first day, I did like a week work experience. My manager, he came up and just was like “go on, get in and clean her out”. No word of a lie, this pig was about 180 kilos, just jumped up on the gate with her trotters. Face to face, and he was just like “get in there”. And yeah, did it and loved it. Been here ever since.

K: So what’s it like working with pigs compared to other animals?

P: As I said, you do get a bond with them. They are very intelligent creatures. No day is the same with them. One day they could be all happy and bouncy, it’s a bit like having a very overgrown size dog. Obviously, they trust us. You’ve got to know your animals, you’ll see them in a minute. You’ve got to know your animals enough to get a bond with them, and if you need to move them room to room or into trolleys and stuff, if they don’t want to do it they won’t go. So everything we do with them is like positive rewards, so making a fuss of them, “good girl, good girl!”, lots of treats and everything. If they don’t want to do it, we don’t force them. You do get very attached to them.

K: How do you build their trust over time?

P: Literally just patience, you go in with them, sit down. You let them come to you first. If they don’t want to do something, you don’t force them. You’ll be surprised, within a couple days you can get your hands all over them, literally just spending time with them as you would with your cat, pet dog, anything when you initally get them. Just spend time with them. It doesn’t have to be hours and hours, even just sat in there for 15 to 20 minutes, doing that throughout the day. Especially with the big girls, the Large Whites, they are easier to acclimatise and get hands-on, more so than the minis. Yeah.

K: Why is that?

P: All pigs have their own characters, but with the mini pigs they seem to have their own really unique characters. I don’t know if the company we get them from, well they do spend time with them, I know they do because I've been over there. Honestly I don’t know with that one. Maybe cause they’re just a little bit... not weirder, but a bit more unique. Yeah, unique. But the Large Whites are like your bog standard pigs that you’d get in the supermarket.

K: Do you get them from the same supplier each time the Large Whites?

P: We get them from a local farmer. Then the mini pigs come from Denmark. They are the two suppliers we use.

K: And you went to the Denmark supplier?

P: Yeah. I went to a research facility in Denmark, I went to a company that breeds mini pigs and has them there.

K: How was that?

P: Good, they tend to do a lot of obesity trials with the company I went to. It was interesting to see how they looked after them. A lot were singularly housed, they could see each other because they had clear plastic, so they could see each other through it. There was a few bits were they could nuzzle. But ours are obviously group housed, they like companionship.

K: Do you see them make bonds with each other?

P: yeah, you’d be surprised when... I take it you know about translational biomedical stuff.. So when we take them over and bring them back, or the first one we will bring back and the other one is still in a pen, you can hear them chatting to each other. They have different sounds when they’re chatting to eachother, when they’re chatting to us, or screaming for food. They have a load of different sounds. You get to recognise them.

K: How would you describe pigs to others who don’t know much about them?

P: Erm, definitely people say that pigs are dirty, which they are not. They are very clean animals. If this was their room they would literally pick one corner for their toilet facilities, unlike some other animals who will literally just use their whole pen to poo everywhere. So, they are very clean. They are very intelligent. They can be cheeky as well, they’ve got a little cheeky side to them. Very lovely.

K: You said sometimes if they don’t want to do something, they won’t do it. Does that ever affect the study procedure?

P: erm. If we know we have an issue with a pig that say, doesn’t like going to the weight crate, before we move any animals we will put a weight crate in there anyway. So, we put it in and open up the doors and they can just see it as a play toy so they can get used to go in and out, then when we actually need to move them it’s not as scary for them. Erm, so, if we occasionally get some that don’t like to go in it, we will let them come out off the pen on their own and put them in the trolley that way rather than having to put them into the weigh crate if they physically don’t like it. Sometimes if you do need to know their weight for surgery purposes, unfortunately then it is a case of positioning the trolley and you get the pig into a certain position to, and the only way is that they have to go through it. Then once they are through we reward them lots, “good girl, good girl” and apples and polos... it’s always positive and always encouraging them. If we can help it, never forcing them.

K: And how would you describe the general culture of care here?

P: Hopefully you will see... I say we are very, very good. Nothing is too much trouble, we will go above and beyond for the care of our pigs and all of our animals, sheep, rabbits, guinea pigs. We make sure they get the best of everything.

K: Are there any challenges or like barriers to giving the ideal care that you would like to in research?

P: To be honest, I think we are okay. We work very well with translational biomedical and we all have the same outlook that the animals come first no matter what. So, we don’t really get too many issues.

K: Are you involved in any procedures?

P: We mainly take them into induction, help sedate them. Well, not help, the anesthetist sedates them but we are there to keep them calm as they can get a bit stressed. Helping with the moving and the aftercare when we bring them back. I have seen a couple of procedures in there and they are very good, if we wanted to go and see a procedure then we would just arrange it on a less busy days. It is quite unique in there.

K: How Is pig stressed handled when they are moved?

P: We weight them the night before so all the medication is ready, so when we get in everything is set up and ready to go straight away. Everything is done and organised quickly. If they do get over stressed, we switch the lights off and are very quiet so they can calm down.

K: How would you describe your relationship with the pigs in your care here?

P: Hopefully very good. I treat them as if they were my individual pets, so they get the best of everything. They have toys left, right and centre. They get fed twice a day, cleaned out, which is standard anyway. Often we buy them fresh fruit and veg, polos, they love polos. Again, just physically spending time with them. The best form of enrichment you can give a pig is yourself, literally just spending time sitting in there with them. Yeah, they are very well looked after.

K: And they all have names?

P: Yes. Depending on what study we’ve got, but yeah, every single animal gets named. At the minute, the big girls are just girls names through the alphabet. Then the mini pigs, that theme is cocktails. So, I'm not a drinker, so half are cocktails I've never heard of! So yeah, they are cocktail themed. One lot of the sheep are perfumes, another one are cars. Literally whatever study we just pick a topic. We’ve had flowers, fruit, countries, sport teams, oceans. Yeah, it helps with the surgeons and staff, but rather than like “oh can we have 257”, it personalises it a bit more.

K: do you like that personalisation?

P: Yes. And they do get to know their names. You say “morning Ruthie” or whatever, so they do get to know their names.

K: You said you always remember past names and try not to get the same name again?

P: Yes, obviously we’ve gotta keep all the records and we try to have different names. If someone says two years down the line that they want Stacy’s records, is that Stacy from 2000, 2001? So, we try not to. There has been instances where there is the same name but one has been a Large White and one has been a mini pig. So, two completely different studies. But yeah, we try different names.

K: Do they have numbers at all?

P: On the computer system yes, they get the name and the procedure number. So it might be 41, 42 and so on. So, there are different ways we can track them if needed.

K: It’s unusual for research animals to have names?

P: yes. We just like to personalise it a bit, they’re not just a number in and out.

K: Have they always had names?

P: Yes, always have

K: how might your relationship with a pig shift as they progress through a study?

P: Erm, it just gets stronger. You spend that time initially to get their trust, then some studies with the big girls, we get them in at 20kilograms size which is about 6-8 weeks, so not long been weaned, they get weaned at about three weeks. So they haven’t long been taken away from their mums, so they are small but we get them in that young and we keep them for six months, so you do get a bond with them. We go in every single day, it’s like seeing your cat or your dog, it just gets stronger and stronger. You love all the pigs the same, well I know I do, but there are certain ones where you just seem to get a bit more of a favourite sort of thing. We all get it, in the years I've had many that you get a bit of an extra bond with.

K: And what might cause you to have a favourite?

P: Erm, it’s just their personalities. Some like showers, others like belly rubs. It’s just whatever shines out on them.

K: How are they culled here, is it different for studies?

P: No, it’s all the same. We take them over and stay with them till induction. Depending on what procedure they’ve had, they might then go back into an MRI scan, have an echo, or they are just terminated straight away.

K: Do you stay around for that?

P: If it’s ones we are just taking over who are terminated... we might have to restrain and hold them.

K: How do you feel at those times?

P: initially when I first started, many a times I used to go in there and you could tell I would be choked up. There would be tears. You don’t get used to it, you never get used to killing, terminating an animal. I think you just learn to process it in a different way. It helps to look at it like they are doing their bit for us, so in hopefully two or three years, what they’ve gone through can be in human trials. Yeah, that’s sort of the way.... yeah, you never get used to it, you just learn to cope. Those particular pigs, those three up there [points to pictures hanging on wall], everybody had such a bond with them. On the day they went, no one spoke. It was a case of just getting in, getting it done, and getting out. As I say, there are certain pigs that everyone gets bonds with, like the girls might have a different pig they like that is not the one we like. But yeah.

K: What was it about those three pigs?

P: Those three we had six months and they were just all such characters, especially that one in the middle drinking out the hosepipe. They all just had funny little characters about them.

K: what were their names?

P: You have Polo, Bobby and Oprah [pointing them out individually]. All over 140 kilos at the end which is like 22 stone. Imagine wanting to move 22 stone of muscle and it doesn’t want to do it...

K: So why did they have big personalities, was it compared to others?

P: No as I said, they’ve all got their own, bit there's just seemed to come out more. I keep repeating myself but you’re with them every single day and yeah, they just grow on you.

K: Do you ever follow research after they leave here?

P: The guys usually let us know how it went and stuff, so yeah we do find out how well it went if we want. They are here for six months, so three months after their surgery they go in for their echo and they scan the heart. We ask if it’s okay, well it’s not going to be okay because they’ve damaged the heart for the research, but they will tell us then how it has degraded, or if it is alright or.... I always ask what was the outcome with her heart and stuff...

K: What studies are on at the moment?

P: At the moment we have a kidney work trial. And we have got a heart research at the minute, to see if they can get grafts to take onto the heart. The pigs we get from 0-6 months, that life span is replicated from like a child to 18 years old, so like a child having to go in every couple of years to have a different graft, they’re trying to get ones that can stay into adulthood. So, that’s what they are trying to replicate in the big girls now. So other work we’ve had is with Parkinsons, that’s more with the sheep.

K: What is your favourite thing about pigs?

P: Erm. My favourite thing, that’s a good one. This is gonna sound weird, but the smell. You do, it’s like when you’ve been away on holiday and you come back, you just [takes big inhale]. They have a different smell when they come in from the farm because they are outdoor pigs, so they might be all caked in mud and stuff . It goes away because they clean themselves up and lay on the straw and stuff. But yeah, I just love them in general, their personality and quirkiness. Not when they’re screaming because they want their tea.

K: is it like the familiarity of the smell?

P: yeah probably, I come back and think that I've missed that smell.