Interview with Lewis (pseudonym), animal technician

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

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: what made you want to come into this career?

P: I’ve done this for 21 years. Started off as a junior technician with rodents. I. Then I sort of, we had a new building built and I came out and continued with rodents, but I was helping out here cause there's only, you know, not far and they needed help. So, I used to work in a kennel. Always wanted to work with animals and it was quite good money to be honest. For working with animals, it’s quite good pay. So, it was down to money and love of animals.

K: Did you have any experience prior with pigs?

P: No, none with pigs. Sort of with cows, come from a farming background really. So, we’ve got a smallholding but we don’t have pigs. But I used to help my dad go work on a dairy farm, so I’ve worked with large animals, chickens, and cows mainly.

K: Has your thoughts about pigs changed since you’ve come here?

P: I suppose so. They are quite nice animals. When you think… pigs they stink, well no. Here, you sort of think well, do I want to get some for home? Probably not. But I think they are really intelligent animals. Not sort having much to do with them you don’t really think about it, you think it’s just a pig. But working with them closely, you do sort of think they are really intelligent. So, yeah that’s really… I have got attached to them to be honest. And we name them all, that makes it a bit different so they’re not just a number. So yeah, but no, I do find them fascinating actually.

K: So, how would you describe your relationship with them?

P: Erm, well, I dunno really. Erm, they’re just kind and friendly and playful. Yeah. They are quite loving. The ones here are anyway. They are loving, definitely. When they come in, they’re a bit nervous but they get used to you.

K: Does that happen quite quickly?

P: yeah ‘cause we go and handle them a lot, sit with them. So yeah, quite quick.

K: Does your relationship with them change over the time they are here?

P: No. It stays… I mean, they get used to you a lot more, so yeah. You go in and some of them are noisy towards you, calling out… is that towards you or is it just they know you might go in the food cupboard? But our sort of care stays steady throughout really.

K: And are you involved in any procedures?

P: No, so, erm me personally not. Really, we just take them into [the research centre] where they do all the procedures then we just collect them when they are done and just care for them really.  
  
K: And what does care look like at those more stressful points?

P: The work they have done is quite intense for them, but pigs are just amazing. If humans were like pigs everything would be easier. They are straight back up, in with their friends in their pens. By the next day they are back to normal if it’s all gone well with surgery. Nothing really changes towards us, you might get the odd one that might be a little bit more nervous, but they soon come… a piece of apple and a pig will do anything basically. Erm, but yeah, they’re pretty good.

K: So, does being quite food driven animals make them good for research?

P: Yeah, definitely. I mean with sheep some of those are a bit different, they might eat a bit of apple but they’re a lot more nervy. It takes longer, whereas with pigs you go in there with a pack of polos, they sniff them out and that’s it. I mean I haven’t worked with pigs as much as I have with rodents, it’s only been the last few years with pigs.

K: So, caring for rodents and moving to pigs, is there skills you pick up working with such different animals?

P: With healthcare, it’s the same really. It’s just different sizes and handling techniques obviously a lot different. Your health checks are the same, if you’re doing a visual health check on a pig it’s the same as doing it on a rodent. Just obviously bigger and different things to take into consideration. But no, not much different. And I think you have to be stronger physically with pigs. I mean they can get huge. We had one at 150 kilograms a few weeks ago, they can just toss you around and push you over.

K: And what about in terms of picking up on their emotions and how they are feeling?

P: Yeah, that’s obviously a lot different. You can, it’s like a cat or a dog so it’s bigger and they do look sad, or they look happy… but a rodent, you can tell a sick rodent because it’s a stirred coat, it’s sort of sat there hunched. But pigs you can tell in their faces. Unless they are really unwell, they do get up. But if they’re off their food, that’s another main one. But sometimes, you just think “oh you don’t look quite yourself.” You can sort of tell. A rodent, you can’t really, you might say it’s a little off but definitely with pigs you can pick up like a pet dog that something is not right. I always said the larger the animal, the harder it gets for us as technicians. Everyone has their own opinion, but to me a little mouse, I don’t feel as attached, but as the animals get bigger, I feel attached. That’s just me personally, because they have more personality. A pig has more personality than a mouse. I mean rats are quite, they’ve got personality, but you do get more attached to pigs. I personally am okay with it, I worked here for years. So, the ending when they go it’s not too bad.

K: You can tell in their faces if they’re not well?

P: You can tell in their eyes, and they just look sad. It’s hard to describe, but you can sort of tell. Also, when you’re with pigs and you know those pigs, we all work together, so you get to know if one is acting slightly different. It might be the one that’s always first up to you is last. You think that’s not quite right. Or it’s a noisy one and it’s not so noisy. Different things you just pick up. It’s hard to explain really. We had one recently and you could tell… usually when you go in, they are all up, but this one was sat under the heat lamp. That’s not right. She got up eventually but was very slow. But you pick that up through working with them and getting to know them.

K: Do you like that they have individual names?

P: [hesitates] it doesn’t bother me. It is good. For pigs we have here long term it’s good, you can go in and call them which helps. But I’m not one for giving animals names really. We have chickens at home and none of them are named, but people do. But here people name them all, and there is a theme for all the names. So, they might begin with a particular name, or have like a car theme… it is good. It’s good as well for the technicians to make up the names and think of them. It sort of personalises them a bit more than just a number. I don’t know if giving them a name makes it harder at the end. You know, you’ve named it Luna or whatever and then you put it down. But it doesn’t bother me either way really.

K: How do you think the pigs perceive their relationship with you?

P: Erm, they do love the attention. Unfortunately, obviously we are so busy, and you don’t get the time to spend with them all the time. But it’s the same with rodents, with rats they really like attention and the more you handle them the easier they are. But you can’t just sit playing with animals all day, I wish you could! So, we try as much as possible to go in. Once we have cleaned them out, we go in, and in the afternoon if we’ve got a spare ten minutes we will go in and like play with them. When we’re in there cleaning them that’s a good time to be scratching and patting them. Yeah, they do interact with us quite well. I do find, so we did have one guy who was very hands on with the pigs, he used to like tumble around and play with them. I think the more you do that, unfortunately the rougher the pig gets. I know when I used to come up and I’d be like “he’s just bit my leg” or whatever. Because they like rough playing and they don’t know different. But with us, we tickle them under the belly and sit with them on the floor and stuff. But he was a rough and tumble kind of guy, he would roll around with them on the floor. Which is nice, it’s good. But they can still nip you and things, they get too excited. Years ago, they used to be more excitable because the more you rough and tumble with them the more excited they are. Then they start to nip you and you end up with bruises everywhere. But erm, we don’t necessarily roll around with them anymore, but we sit and play with them.

K: Is that purposefully to make them calmer?

P: Yeah, so it’s to get them used to us. We have to weigh them and stuff, so we try and get them in to the weigh crates with bits of food and things, sit them in the pen. Especially with the mini pigs, we give it to them as like a toy. So, we will leave the gates open and the crate in the middle so they can just walk in and out of it. It gets them used to everything, makes life a lot easier. We give them apples and stuff so it’s easier to give them medication, we can just pop a pill in there or whatever and they will take it no problems. It’s less invasive and they can just take it straight from us. They are good little things.

K: How would you describe the general culture of care towards pigs in particular here?

P: Oh, it is high here. [Kimberly] is like, always trying to give them the best enrichment we can, fresh fruit and veg, they get loads of different types of apples, pears and carrots and whatever. So, it is quite high, I think.

K: In terms of enrichment, I saw the toys and things. Do you notice things they particularly like?

P: Yeah, so [Kimberly] will like put chains on the door and stuff. Just a piece of chain and they love it. One in particular absolutely loves it, chews it all the time. So, yeah, Kimberly does try and change it around a bit, but it is hard to think of different types of enrichment for pigs. We give them carboard boxes but within 15 minutes they’re dead really. But yeah, they love all their toys. Well, they like them to start with, but if you give them something new, they are interested in it. It’s like a kid isn’t it. Kimberly does try to think of different things to give them which is nice.

K: Are there any challenges or barriers to caring for the pigs in a way you’d ideally want to?

P: Erm, I mean if we had the space, it would be nice to have bigger pens obviously, but no, I think really what we’ve got is pretty good. At the moment we’ve got work going on in this building, but normally there are like sheep and bigger pigs her because they’re a little bit bigger the pens. Erm, so the bigger ones are here which is nice for them.

K: If you are doing daily checks what’s your routine?

P: So, basically go in and feed them, check them all from the gate. Then we go in, play with them, clean them out, checking them. Then usually get called away to do something else, then go back… so they sort of see us throughout the day.

K: And at the end of the research are they culled in a particular way?

P: It’s dependent on study, so most of them are taken away to be put down. If they are too big, they get done somewhere else. Because sometimes they are really big or just a bit of a handful and get a bit worked up, so we don’t want that and will do it differently.

K: So, there are times where you can adapt procedures to make it less stressful?

P: Yeah, we try to. Especially with the type of research we have here, it’s a lot of heart work so we try and keep stress down.

K: Towards the end of a trial do your feelings towards the pigs shift at all?

P: Mine doesn’t. I don’t… I’ve never had any feelings, none of the, change for any of my research animals. But I’ve been doing it so long.

K: What’s your favourite thing about pigs?

P: how friendly they are really. You don’t really realise that unless you work with them.

K: Does that make you bond with them in a different way to other animals?

P: I think so, yeah. For me personally I can bond more to a pig than I can to a rat, but that’s just me.

K: I have two rats at home, no pigs though.

P: That’s it, if you like rats you might sway to them more! But no, I prefer pigs any day.

K: A lot of people say pigs are their favourite to work with.

P: A lot of people if asked what animal they want to work with they would say pig, I think.

K: Why?

P: I think it is because they just seem to give you a bit of affection. It’s our largest animal here, so personally, I love dogs… it’s a larger animal so that’s why I like pigs. I do prefer larger animals to smaller animals.