Interview with Sam (pseudonym), animal technician

16th March 2022, in-person at participant’s place of work.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: What motivated you to pursue this career?

P: Well, I worked in labs before, so I went into microbiology. Didn’t like it, so I moved and ended up working on a beef farm for three years. I did a Masters’ in anthrozoology, then a friend of mine suggested I apply here so I did and I got it.

K: What’s your title here?

P: I am senior animal technologist, so I’ve got a pill license and I'm a NACWO, well I’ve done the training but haven’t got an official area yet. So, I'm more cows, then I’ve got horses outside of work too, I’ve done goats, but pigs are brand new!

K: So, you didn’t know much about pigs before?

P: Just that they were clever and that you could teach them to sit.

K: Have you managed that yet?

P: No, I would like to. I haven’t really had the opportunity, I'm not as husbandry based as the others, so I chip in when I can, but I like manage staffing levels and stuff. I am more office-based but get out as much as I can.

K: What have you learned about pigs since you started working with them more?

P: Noisy. Really noisy. They get into trouble a lot, in a nice way. They’ve got so much character, so much. They like to chew things, mostly our boots. I’ve learned loads from one of the guys here who has done loads of courses on pig husbandry about their estrus cycles, their hierarchies and all that sort of stuff. Learned a bit about the breeding and stuff, did a bit of farrowing too. We had a herd of Babrahams here, they’ve now gone to Reading and they farrowed just before they left.

K: They were saying they get a lot of complications and health issues?  
  
P: Yeah, and really small litter sizes. I think our average litter sizes with them in the last farrowing was 3 or 4. You don’t have to wear ear defenders at all with them either, obviously commercial pigs are so loud, but... I also never realised how strong they were. I knew they were, but when you have to handle and bleed one.... I get several bruises!

K: What were the Babrahams used for?

P: I'm not sure, I think they were here for 5 years. But I think they were being bred for potential studies, but they were never pushed as something that people could use. They were great, they were so funny.

K: How would you describe the culture of care here?

P: Brilliant. I think in general, it’s brilliant. The people who look after the animals genuinely care and want to do their best. I know there’s bureaucracy and stuff and sometimes people think that gets in the way. Occasionally, worried about bringing something up to someone higher up just in case the repercussions are bad on them, but in general, that’s only one or two people, but people will talk about stuff and if they think they can do something better they’ll just implement it.

K: What kind of challenges or barriers there are to caring to the pigs in a way you’d ideally want to?

P: Well, from my limited knowledge, and I know it’s not always scientifically possible, but I'd much prefer if they had some outdoor space. Although we try to give them as much enrichment as possible, some studies don’t like it and some scientists prefer we don’t, which I think is ridiculous. But I think outdoor space is the thing I wish they could have all the time. Just somewhere to properly dig around, roll around in some mud like on a nice day.

K: Why might scientists not want enrichment?

P: I don’t know. They never say no if you ask, but you have to ask and they have to say yes. So, at some point that means someone has said no. It’s the way they want things done, but when you’re not doing the science and have to deal with the ins and outs of what they want, it can be stressful sometimes. Like when they want things done, they want this done first and this done after. We had one sampling where one lot of pigs came in for a study and they wanted them to have their bloods and swabs done prior to them being inoculated, which meant they had to be snared twice in a day, obviously very stressful. We were like “do we have to?” but they insisted on it. We did it, but we weren’t overly happily about it. Even the vet said it wasn’t great, it’s ok but not great.

K: How would you describe working with pigs to working with other animals?

P: Really different, I was a bit scared of pigs. I had been told they can be aggressive, whereas I'm super comfortable with cows. Boards I find quite difficult, I don’t know what it is, maybe maneuvering the board so they can’t get under it, that sort of thing, but I guess we’ve been lucky that we’ve had chilled out ones, nothing too aggressive or dangerous which is nice. I suppose they’re just different, really stubborn. If you want a cow to move you can quite often walk up to them and they will move. Pigs quite often will come up, look at you and be interested in you. You’ll be like “come on!” and then they will just bite your boots. Yeah, probably more stubborn than cows and a lot less aggressive than goats!

K: How would you perceive the relationship you have with the pigs in your care?

P: I like to think they like me, because I'm providing food. I don’t think there’s necessarily any acknowledgement on their behalf that I am one person in particular, I think they just see a blue boiler suit and food bag and think “great!”. I think there are some that do have more of an inkling, because they will come up to me more than the other team members, but I don’t know, it could be accidental. I want them to like me. I see my role very much as almost the mother hen of the pigs. So, my job is to make sure they are well looked after and happy.

K: What does a happy pig look like?

P: Noisy. Making little grunts and chatting away. Sometimes they charge around and get the pig zoomies, that’s my favourite. Lots of burrowing and like, sometimes they just lie there and just look content. Like, no pain, nothing. I like them to be relaxed and happy.

K: Do you think your relationship with them changes as a research trial progresses?

P: Yeah. I think we have sort of standard ways we do things when we sample, so they will be put into a catch area where it’s easier for us to get them, then as soon as they know that’s happening, they are a lot more wary and skittish. Otherwise, they just don’t care. I think it’s the process we go through that changes how they react, I don’t think they change their perception of us, but they anticipate something is happening which may have caused them stressed before.

K: Do you think there are ways to mitigate that stress?

P: I think it’s hard because of the size we get them in. We get them quite small and have to snare them and that, snaring in itself is a stressful thing, then you’ve got someone holding them still while someone blood samples, or does nasal swabs. I think in order to do the science, I don’t know of any way that can be done unless you like crate them, I don’t know if that would be better for anyone because they’d have more space to move around, whereas snaring can be quite quick. So, it’s not great. It’s possibly the lesser evil. As they get bigger, like fully grown, they can go into feeding sections so we don’t have to snare them for certain things like temping. You don’t have to chase them round with a thermometer, but because of the size they are I think it’s harder. We have a long term study and they are here till June, so in a few weeks they will be big enough to use the normal feed face and then we don’t have to faff about with them so much. That’s a covid trial.

K: What is the aim?

P: I can’t remember, we do get told about the trials and given all the information, but it’s kinda irrelevant. What I'm here for is to look after them and whatever is happening to them isn’t compromising their welfare.

K: Do you think there’s a way to make the experience less scary or stressful for them?

P: I suppose you could do some training with them if you’ve got them in for long enough before the study. That depends on when they have to start and stuff. They have the 7 day acclimation when they come in, it gets them used to you and who is coming in and out, and the routine, but I don’t think it gives enough time... one of the groups we tried to teach them it was ok for their bums to be touched so we could rectal temp them, and it wasn’t long enough. It took them 2 to 3 weeks to accept it and even then some of them wouldn’t accept it. Even while they were feeding. I think that would be possibly one way of doing it, but if it’s feasible I don’t know.

K: would you like to get them in earlier then?

P: Yeah, particularly if they wanted something like rectal temps, I think that would be better.

K: So how would you identify a distressed pig?

P: So, when they are younger, they quite often go red. Like the whole body goes red and they’re obviously very vocal. Sometimes, they even go silent. They either increase vocalisations a lot of they go silent, and that’s when I like it the least when they go silent. Respiration rate goes up and you can just feel them getting hotter while you’re holding them. They often defecate when they’re stressed too. It sounds ridiculous, you can look at their face and you can tell. Their eyes go wide, they go tense. They quite often sit down and that makes sampling harder, so you have to lift their bums up. But yeah, it’s the quietness that scares me. Sometimes when you put them down, they might go into a corner and sit down and just pant. Like “that was too much”. You give them five minutes to recover, it’s not nice to watch.

K: Have you ever had pigs not make it to the end of study?  
  
P: Not yet, we’ve had some that have made so much noise they’ve given themselves a rectal hernia where they have strained so hard screaming, that’s not nice. It doesn’t really happen more than once, it might be the same pig if it does. All you can really do is pop it back in.

K: Do you think pigs make a good lab animal?

P: How we house them, I think they’re okay. They’re not particularly difficult to deal with, the big ones are probably harder, but the ones we have had have been fine. I think in a perfect world no animals would have to be in a lab, but the world is not perfect, and we can’t test on humans. Biologically, they’re great to use instead of humans, but because of the fact they’re so intelligent, that makes it harder for them. With cows in particular, not as clever, so I think they find it less mentally taxing, I think pigs find it more taxing. I certainly don’t think they’re a bad lab animal from what I've seen.

K: What level of comprehension do you think pigs have in terms of what is going on around them?

P: No idea... erm they are really aware of change, any change in routine. We always go in first thing in the morning, and they get fed and cleaned out. If it’s earlier I think they know, like a dog that expects its meal and then asks for it when it knows it’s about that time. So, they know that something is different, whether they have any perception of what is coming, I don’t know, but they know something will happen. They know something has changed like “last time when something changed, something happened that made me stressed so maybe that thing will happen again”. I think that’s probably the level of comprehension they have. I don’t think you can put that much of a human aspect on them at all.

K: Why not?

P: Because they’re not people. I don’t think they have the ability to rationalize like we do. Humans are something weird and special, but I think they [pigs] have self-awareness, to a degree, but I don’t think they rationalize their actions or thought processes like we do.

K: And they are quite social animals

P: So social! They know when one of them isn’t there. We take one out to sample it, and one or two of them will start making noises and it’s like a call and response type thing. Erm, then it comes back in and they quieten down. We have 12 at the moment and they have, well I'm going to call it friendships, I don’t know if that’s the word but they have little relationships within the group and it seems like they look out for those particular individuals more than the others. So, they definitely have a social structure of some description.

K: Are you able to tell two pigs who are friends?

P: If I was spending more time with them probably.

K: at the end of a trial when they have to go to PM how does that make you feel?

P: I tend to disassociate myself from it and remember it’s for a bigger purpose, sort of like a utilitarian stance in that sense, but I do feel sad. Not only is it, I've spent so much of my time and my team have spent time with them, you do get to know them, and you do get to know them, it’s hard not to. I think that if you don’t, it’s possibly not the right job, you have to be able to love them in a sense or you wouldn’t do your best to get their welfare as best you can. So, I think there is a fine line between sensible attachment and over attachment. When you start naming them it’s when everyone says you’ve got problems because you start personalizing them and they become... you’ve got a relationship with them. I did name one of them, but I named it because it was annoying, and it was just so I could be like “oh my god stop it!”, instead of naming it because it was sweet and cuddly. I’ve always found it quite easy to see this is the process, the end of the process is this. Even on the beef farm I worked at, some of those cows I hand-reared. I would have a cry when they go but that is the process, that is why they are born, to go off to be slaughtered for meat. I eat meat. I know where it comes from and I'm fully aware that some of it isn’t looked after that well but I know the ones that are. So, I get it from where I know and I can follow the chain. I know what welfare standards they’re at and I feel that’s a really fortunate position to be in.

K: So you have a sort of closer relationship with your meat?

P: Yeah. Still wouldn’t be able to kill it though. I’m fully aware that some people think if you couldn’t kill it you can’t eat it but I don’t necessarily agree with that, at least I'm aware of all of it before. I knew which abattoir it was going to, I've been there and spent time there, it was horrible but they treated the animals fairly and did it quickly. It was as stress free as I think that sort of thing could be.

K: Do you think working here has changed your relationship with food at all?

P: No

K: You said you become quite detached from the animals here, is there a specific point that happens?

P: When you lock up the trailer. That is when they don’t exist anymore, now we have to go clean up and tidy up, then I busy myself in other things. I make take myself off to the toilet and have a little cry but I think that is quite normal to get upset. I don’t think that’s necessarily a bad thing. If I get to a point where I stop caring that they’re going, then I need to stop this job because I don’t care enough to look after them properly.

K: What do you mean by not caring enough?

P: I wonder if that means for me that they become just objects and not living. They become inanimate objects, yes for a purpose, but it would mean they don’t have feelings. Even if they do but you’ve got to the point where you’re numb to it. If that happens when you’re numb to the idea that something could have feelings, you’re more likely not to notice if they are feeling something.

K: On the other side, do you think there is caring too much?

P: Yeah. I think if you care too much, you would... and I don’t think caring too much would effect the welfare, but I think it would be too emotionally distressing for the person to go through the process of getting animals in, having them for a short time, and then them going. It would just take such a toll on someone emotionally, it wouldn’t be okay. Then they’d have a breakdown.

K: Would you like to care for pigs in other settings?

P: I’d quite like pet pigs. A friend of mine has two and they’re hilarious, they are just in the garden. I’d like a smallholding, couple of cows... not to keen on sheep, but some pigs, maybe an alpaca. Bit of everything.

K: Do you think there are differences between a pet pig and a research pig?

P: Well, they’re exactly the same animal aren’t they really, just in a different setting and therefore, it’s a relational difference. There’s an emotional connection. If I could take one of the pigs that had been here on study, I probably would. I’d rescue it. I don’t want a micro pig, I want a proper pig. I don’t see them as any different, just their purpose is different.

K: What is the purpose of a pet pig?

P: Companionship, or I mean some people would say they have a pet pig which is intended to go to slaughter and feed the family. I would say if I had a pet pig it would be a pet, it wouldn’t be going to slaughter, that would not be the outcome. It would be living out its days in a bit of woodland or something and me going over to it for a cuddle. Maybe I would end up teaching it to sit [laughs]

K: Why in that setting would you not want it to go to slaughter?

P: Because I think my brain would find it too hard to cope. I reckon because I want it to live as long as possible, the meat would probably be a bit rubbish. It wouldn’t be worth killing it for meat. If a person came up to me after I said it’s old and going to be put down and asked for the meat, I'd say yes probably. It’s one of those things, the idea of something going to waste isn’t great for me. I think if you’re killing an animal for food, you should use it all, or as much as possible. I wouldn’t be able to eat it though.

K: At the end of a study here do you think it would be better for you if a pig could be rehomed?  
  
P: Yeah... I mean, partly. It would make me feel better about it, but obviously scientifically if they’ve been infected by something it’s not possible and I get that. Often, they want tissues which they can only get if the pig is dead. Erm, I’d like to think if they could be it would be beneficial for my mental health and would be nice for the pigs to live out however long they had left, even if they went to somewhere were they could be culled for dog food or something, I don’t think they would ever be signed off for human consumption, but if they went somewhere they could have outdoor space. I think that is the most important thing for most animals. It’s more of a natural environment for them, even though we do quite well in enriching them so they can do their natural behaviors, the only place they can actually do is outside. Then they have more control over their environment, they can go to one corner for a snooze, go over to the branch that they like, or eat, or scratch.

K: Do you think the regulations and frameworks there are for welfare here are enough?

P: No, if you’ve got framework and legislation, you need the people doing the care and husbandry to want to achieve better. You’ve got to encourage people to do the best they can for the animals. The frameworks are all just the minimum standards. I think they may be too low. Most places, not just here, exceed them but I think as a framework they are probably a bit low. So, day-to-day care is very much tech-driven. So, I've been trained by someone who has had years and years of experience with pigs, knows them inside and out. During the farrowing we had someone from another unit who had done hundreds of farrowing before and he was teaching me what to look out for, what’s right and what’s not alright. It’s all transfer of that knowledge that is very important.

K: Yeah. So unwritten knowledge.

P: Oh yeah, it’s all verbal. It’s quite classic old, like, I think it’s the oldest way of transferring knowledge, writing has not always been around. I do then write it down, so I’ve got a little book of different signs to watch out for different things. But verbal is the only way, if you wrote it down people wouldn’t read it all. It would be hundreds and hundreds of pages, people wouldn’t read it, they’d maybe skim it or pretend they read it. And people speak with such enthusiasm and passion behind it when they tell you these things that you can’t not get on board with it, so that certainly helped me remember things. So, I'll be like oh yeah he was talking about this and then he said this about this... and put it into a context a lot better, you can think well he saw that with a pig, so I'll do this. Better than reading a boring old text book!

K: Are you able to speak up during procedures if you have concerns?

P: I'd like to think so. I've never been in a position where I've had to. I think quite a lot of that would depend on the relationship you have with the people around you. I know if the guys on my team had an issue they would speak up and that gives me the confidence to think if I have the same issue, they probably do to and we would be on the same page. So, I think that support network is quite nice. i feel like here the vets would listen if you said you weren't sure about something, they’d ask why and get you to justify it but would probably think it’s fair. I’ve known vets before who are more like “No, I'm the vet and I know what’s right, you don’t know anything”. They're not like that here. If I'm right, it is part of our culture of care that people should feel OK to speak up. Whether everyone does, I think that is partly due to personality, some people are shyer than others and don’t feel comfortable doing that in any situation, others are more brash and don’t care. I’m somewhere in the middle. But I like to think that if I'm not sure, someone else probably isn't sure. Therefore, someone's gotta speak up, and if it's not going to be them, it'll be me.

K: Would you be able to speak with vets about how a study is run, maybe about having more time with the pigs before?  
  
P: it's something I've been thinking about. Maybe in the last week because we've got another one coming in, so it's something I might bring up. If we couldn't, I'd want to know the reasons behind it. Probably financial from the study point of view, but it would be interesting to know whether we could. If we could, whether it could be made a site wide thing. even if there was a cut off, like if the pigs on a three week study couldn't but those on a longer term study could, that would be good.

K: Are there a lot of financial barriers to providing care?

P: I’m sure it all comes back to that whatever way round you go. Someone will be like ‘but the money’. Which, it sucks but that’s the world we live in, money drives everything.