Interview with Zack (pseudonym), animal technician

15th March 2022, in-person at participant’s place of work.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: What is your job title at the moment?

P: Animal technician is my long-term title. Throughout my time here I've done a bit of everything, I've been here 16 and a half years now. I’ve been to every facility, also done a few areas like 18 months in post mortem and in other areas. But yeah, animal technician, I have quite a lot of licenses so, like schedule 1 and I can help out in other areas where they are short and needed.

K: And what made you pursue this kind of career?

P: Just the aspect of working with animals if I'm honest. I left an animal college when I was 17, I just wanted to work with animals but because of the area we live in, there’s not many farms or zoos in the area so this place popped up and I applied for it, not really knowing a lot about the place, not understanding it was so science based. Just kind of coming and going, oh you’ve got animals here and I want to work with animals. They actually said they hadn’t got any animal positions open, so they moved me to postmortem, so that’s actually where I started, and later moved to the animal facilities.

K: What kind of experience with pigs did you have before?

P: Literally only what I had done at college, they only had two or three pet pigs on the little farm. No one really worked with them, they were just there. So, I didn’t have much interaction with pigs at all. But when I started here the place was a lot different to how it is now, a lot of the people we don’t have anymore. We’ve gone much more to science and lab work than animal-oriented work and staff. A lot of the older guys who specialise solely in, say a sheep person, or a pig person, they’ve kind of moved on now. People like myself and some of the boys up at the other site, we’re the only ones left of the older eras. Now everyone who comes in is more science based. If it wasn’t for the older fellas sharing their knowledge.. I mean now you’re given a two-week run through kind of on... ‘this is a pig, this is how to feed the pig’ and so on, then... Well to say you’re left to deal with it is harsh, but you’re left to gain your own experience. When I started you shadowed someone for a number of times, maybe up to three months to make sure they and yourself knew exactly every aspect that the animal could potentially show you. They don’t seem to do a lot of that anymore.

K: So you learned most of pig care from those people who worked here back then?

P: Yeah

K: Do you think the nature of the way you care for a pig here has changed over the time you’ve worked here?

P: Erm, yeah massively. When we used to care for the pigs, I mean it sounds stupid, but we used to care for a pig the way pigs need care. So, you care for a pig as a pig, sheep as a sheep. Now I feel more like people don’t think of so much the animal needs, more what I believe they want, what I believe they need. I think people treat them more like pets. So, you might think a pig only needs a decent bed of straw and it’s happy for the rest of the day, but then newcomers who come in they don’t quite know, and they’ve probably worked with pets before, they will want to make it tidy and neat, make it look good, put some extra straw in, extra shavings in. In the end you’ve spent an hour on a little pen making it look immaculate, but you’ve probably used twice as much bedding and everything else. In the morning you’ll find the pig wasn’t thankful for that extra bedding but now you’ve got to rake it all out. I think now, things are leaning more towards ‘this is how you treat animals’ rather than ‘this is how you treat a pig, or sheep, or cow’. It's more across the board. Like, we used to have particular bedding for the pigs but now we just use all the same stuff.

K: Did you prefer it when it was more species-specific?

P: Yeah, I thought it was better back then. It was more... I think it was more beneficial for the animals. We use a lot of things now and the animals don’t need it. I love them all to bits and I want the animals to have the best life for as long as they’re here, but there is quite a bit of waste and I'd like to cut that back. Pigs are awesome in letting you know exactly what they want. If you just spend the time paying attention to them, they’ll tell you exactly how big they want their beds. You might think, I'll give this pig a whole bale of straw because they’re going to love it. For the first twenty minutes, they are going to love it, they’re going to run through it and kick it about. But when it comes to sleep, the pig will say that it is too much, it will be too hot. They will push all their bedding right back up to the door. You come in at the morning and realise, a lot of the time I'll say to the new guys “listen to the animal, they will tell you how they want it”. With pigs I do feel we could save a lot of money on bedding and stuff like that if we paid more attention to what the animal needs rather than... But it’s hard to say... no one wants to get in trouble. A manager might look in and say, ‘you haven’t put enough straw down!’, but yes, I have, because I've worked with this animal for quite some time, and I know... but hands down if I could say to people ‘spend more time with the animal, learn it’s ways’. People will say all pigs are different, they’ve all got their own personality and whatnot, but they’ve got similar traits, how they want their bed, how they want their feed and all of that, it’s all the same. You need to spend time with the animal and listen to them. You’ll get a gist of working with an animal day in day out of how it likes things.

K: Why do you think that change happened so now it’s more caring for an animal rather than pig?

P: Maybe it comes down to lack of experience. In recent years we’ve had a large turnaround of animals. Across the board, they’ve said they don’t want animal techs anymore, they want science-based techs. So, now, they only employ people who have got a high level of education, but they send them here and a lot of the time we’ve got people with massive educations, and they come here and think ‘what science-based work am I going to do?’ and we’re like, well we’re an animal facility so here’s a shovel! They’ve done years at uni, that’s not what they wanted to accomplish, so they leave. We have a huge turnaround on leavers at the moment, people come in and get licenses, like their pill licenses and stuff, and then they’re off. Or they chase management. They will come in and say this isn’t the job for me and they will go for a promotion and get it. Then they tell people how to do a job they don’t know how to do. Learn the groundwork if you’re going to be manager. So yeah, we get managers who are seriously lacking in experience which then clashes with people’s personalities and opinions. Yeah, it ends up causing a rift in the team.

K: How do you think that staff turnover effects the care the pigs receive?

P: Erm, the problem we had is that all the [using air quotations] ‘professional’ animal techs, they weren’t high educated people... we had this guy and we literally called him sheep guy. He had no education, grew up on a sheep farm and knew everything there is to know about sheep. He is retired now, but I feel lucky that I had the chance to learn from someone like that. Learning from the experiences he learnt really helped my job. He could look out to a field of 150 sheep and tell you exactly what they’re doing and what their plan is. Talk to him about anything else, I mean the man could barely spell his own name! But all these guys who had specialised in areas, we had a pig guy too, then more science-based staff came in and they were being told they had to do courses in like pathology... I mean these guys had never been to college. So, they don’t want to know about pathology, they just want to work with the animals, so they just left. I do feel the company crippled themselves a little bit in letting them go.

K: So how could having more specialised species knowledge help?

P: Well, with pigs, when one misbehaves or even just showing too much interest in staff and biting. You want animals to show an interest in you, but you don’t want them to be overfriendly and you can’t get rid of them. If a pig becomes over friendly, it can become a biter and it causes problems with things like sampling. A problem we had a couple years ago, they were pathology staff, but they got put with us for a week or something to learn about the pigs. So, when a pig bites, I might lift my foot sharply, not to hit them or anything, just to give them some wariness. You might even use the shovel, not make contact with them or anything, just to shoo them away. That sets boundaries so they know not to bite. What I noticed with the newcomers, they don’t have any of that and they’re not taught that. I am noticing now, it’s only getting worse the animal behaviour. The animals kind of act like children, where they’re spoilt because they’re given treats, allowed to get away with bad behaviours, and people think it’s funny. It’s funny now, when the animal is small, but when it gets bigger it becomes a totally different scenario. It’s fine with like the FMD pigs because they’re not here that long, but with the bigger pigs you need to be careful. I am noticing throughout the years that it’s becoming more and more apparent, but I've got to the point now where it’s like where do I stand to help that? I feel like maybe because I know too much, I don’t want to step on peoples toes... I'm definitely not one to upset management.

K: Do you think that has an impact for the animals on study?

P: I think so, I do notice a difference between the study animals and the sampling pigs who might get sampled every 2 weeks. A study animal gets sampled a lot more, it can go two ways. They either get very friendly because they’re interacting with you more, or it can go the other way where you’ve sampled them so much that they want to stay away from you and don’t want to know you. Even the sight of you can stress them out because they remember I caught them, and they were sampled. Some of them, that stays with them for a while. To fix that is another level of experience. You will always notice when you have an experienced handler on the snare when a pig is being sampled, the animal is so much calmer because it is braced. It’s better to be firm and in control of the animal, even if it might look a bit shocking, because it’s loud and it’s a lot of screaming and the pig is kind of fighting. You have to manhandle a little bit and push it into the corner so they can take a sample. To a newcomer, that can look very brutal, the pig looks very stressed out, very upset. Yes, in a way it is, but it’s acceptable. If you have a good handler that can hold the animal quickly and firmly, which normally means they can release it quicker, you will notice the animal probably runs back to the pen, has a breather for a couple of minutes, then comes back to you. In my mind, that is like the animal has forgiven you for that little bit of trauma because you’ve not extended it and it’s not gone on for a long period of time. An inexperienced person, they tend to struggle more with the rope, turning the pig, fiddling with it. People are very nervous about causing harm to an animal, which is hands down... well I don’t want to harm an animal for any reason, but they won’t hold as tight. It’s kind of like you’ve got to be cruel to be kind, that person is going to stick a needle into a main vein in their neck, if that animal has got any give or leeway, something bad could happen. You have to pull them tight, it might look brutal and harsh but for the need of the animal, the welfare of the animal, a firm hold, a good grasp, is better. There will be less movement from the animal, they can take blood quickly, the animal can be released quickly, and they come back to you quicker too. If the animal moves the bleeder can’t get the blood so she’s got to do it again and again. After time, the pig remembers that. It’s like they don’t remember what happened, but they do remember how long it took and the length of stress it went through. You will notice that animal will go to the back of the pen, and it will be a little while before she comes back up to see what is going on, because she’s just lost her whole trust. Snaring is a mind-blowing aspect for people, you never want harm to come to an animal, but when you are snaring a pig, it puts that in a grey area. It’s the best way we can use to hold an animal, but at the same time, it’s not comfortable for the animal. So, for some of the techs, it’s like well the animal isn’t enjoying this, what should we do? You need to relax and see the gray area. At the same time, you need to be aware of what can go wrong. If the animal is stressing on that rope, you need to say, ‘this pig is underway too much stress, we need to stop.’ because a pig is one of the only animals that I know that can give itself a heart attack, they will stress to the point where they just keel over. In my time I have seen it more than once. It’s heartbreaking. All you are doing is to do your best for this animal. When it unfortunately happens in your care it is soul destroying, but it is part and parcel of working with animals. You’re going to see death at some point. But yeah, I've been reported a couple of times for animal cruelty when I've been snaring. That actually really, really hurts me. Really hurts me. Then I'm, well this is the only way I can do it. If anyone can point out a way of doing it better, I'm happy to learn, but unfortunately snaring pigs has been the same way for a long, long time and there’s no better way of doing it.

K: Who has reported it?

P: New staff. They’re here to learn, and this is it. Unfortunately, because it goes as a report it gets put on your record, so I've had it I think 3 times. It’s soul-destroying each time. Management apologise for it but it’s procedure and they have to put it on your record.

K: So you said there’s an acceptable level of stress when you’re snaring?

P: Yeah, so when you see the animal screaming with everything it’s got, you will see it fight with everything it’s got. But some are a little calmer, they will always scream but they’re not actually fighting, they kind of give up and you can push them around. Others might fly around like a fish on a hook, flapping around all over the bloody place, so watching them acting out like that, that’s not normally a stressor, that’s just them trying to get off the rope, try and run away. But that is normal. The stressers are normally colour changes. Pigs can actually change colour like a chameleon. They go from pure white to suddenly bright purple in seconds and that is normally a huge indicator... I mean once they are on the snare you see them go a bit pink and that is just the stress of that, but if they go from pink to darker, to red or purple, they are suffering. The stress level has gone way too high. You’ll even start seeing patterns on them, like a real blotchy, like tie-dye effect across them. If you see that, that’s normally stress levels have reached too high and you’d normally say to the bleeder, if they are getting blood, you might hold on for another second, so the tube is full. But if not, you have got to say to the bleeder to get the needle out and let the pig go. If you let the pig go, we’d normally all get out the pen, give that pig its space but monitor them for ten or twenty minutes to make sure her colour goes back and her breathing rate goes back to normal. Their breathing rate can get erratic, and they can start to choke on themselves. You notice a bit of coughing and choking, they can get quite salivary. They can defecate quite loose. You can get to the more extreme versions, like the pig could throw up. Which is a big alarm bell, because that is not a normal thing for a pig to be able to do. So, if you see it, massive alarm bell. If I saw that or the heavy blotching or saw a pig go to the purple, I'd call the vet. They will probably say to watch them for x amount of time and if it gets worse, they will come and see it. You can also sometimes get it where a pig wants to go lie down. Depending on the animal, it might not be abnormal. Some might want to go have a sulk in the corner. But some might want to go lie down and go to sleep... and you have to watch those ones because they shouldn’t want to sleep when there’s anyone around. Even if I wasn’t in the pen, they wouldn’t be asleep, they’d be listening to what I'm doing in the building. So, I will watch an animal if she’s curling up in a corner trying to sleep somewhere whilst we’re all in there taking samples, because that probably means she is suffering from the after effects of the stress. If she starts to have any breathing issues, she might be having a cardiac arrest.

K: Can it be difficult to stop a bleed and make that call if you feel the animal is too stressed?

P: Yeah, yeah. It can be. Especially if the pig has, let’s say I'm holding a pig and bleeding is going well, but the pig has turned purple. We need to get this pig off the rope. She’s obviously having breathing issues and isn’t getting enough oxygen. If the bleeder hasn’t got enough and they’re getting it, they say ‘hang on hang on, let me finish, just hold on’. It’s like, is a couple of seconds more so bad? But in the animal’s eyes, those few seconds are the seconds it needs. So, it can be a bit of a toss-up with who is going to call it, especially when the holder is normally AO sort of grade. The sample take could be EO or higher, maybe NVS. So, it can be... well if it’s NVS who comes down, you can say what you like to her, and she is good at taking cues. There are sometimes, you might have other people in here, maybe people who are training. They might not quite get the cue... there is no ‘hold on a second’, I've told you what needs to happen, we need to act on it. Then it can be difficult if that person hasn’t got enough blood, they have to go and tell pathology, or whoever has asked for the sample, and say we haven’t got it, or we’ve only got a bit, which obviously makes it difficult. Pathology don’t understand what we’ve gone through to get that sample, to them it’s just a sheet of paper. It would be an idea to get them here, to watch how the samples go. With animals, you can’t predict how it’s going to go. You might have an easy day where you get the samples early, but you might have a really difficult day where nothing is going right, the animals are not playing ball. And when we are stressed, the animals can sense that, they feel it straight away. I notice it as soon as I walk in the pen, the animals read what your intentions are.

K: So there's tension with getting good data and giving the care you want to give?

P: Yeah, it’s a bit of a toss-up. Whoever has the welfare of the animal in mind is probably in charge, because that is the priority. That person might find it difficult to speak up when the bleeder might be a higher grade. The sampler might not even know what is going on because they’ve got tunnel vision and are focused.

K: So there are conflicting priorities.

P: Yeah, it can be tense but we’ve got good bleeders. Actually, the last few years we’ve had a new breeder and his stock of animals is really good. It sounds sad being impressed by how an animal is naturally, but all his animals coming in are really good temperament, excellent for a lab animal. If we can teach them to be chilled out from the get go, it makes our lives as well as their lives so much easier.

K: So what makes a bad lab animal or bad lab pig?

P: A bad lab pig... to be fair to the animal, it would also be the person who works with it day in day out. Pigs are naturally flighty. You will find every morning, even your favourite animal will go ‘oh! Oh, it’s you’. They’ll dart away, but suddenly come back and won’t leave you alone for the rest of the day. So, yeah, a bad lab animal would be one that is very scatty, hard to hold on to. Constantly running away and once you get them on the snare, their stress levels are already high, so it’s hard to restrain them without pushing their stress levels over the mark. When you have a chill animal, they will be stressed, but you can hold them firmer and support them more as they aren't thrashing about. The whole thing becomes quicker. Another bad lab animal would be one constantly biting, they have no fear of people. I do want all my animal to have no fear of me, but they also need to know their boundaries, biting shouldn’t be accepted. You’ll see the days where we’ve only got two people to hold an animal and if they have been taught bad behaviours, not treated like a pig but treated like a pet, those animals will be biting and getting involved with everything the bleeder is doing. Even if you shoo away, the pig doesn’t care anymore because they’re having fun. If the bleeder is trying to get blood with a needle in the neck of another animal, they don’t want another pig coming up and biting their arms and stuff. A good lab animal will just stand and watch. They will keep their distance and sit and watch you, but they don’t fear you, they just keep a distance. That only comes through with an experienced member of staff working with that animal.

K: A joint process?

P: Yeah, if the animal is left to its own natural ways it will be a very flighty animal, hard to catch. So that’s why when I'm in there I am always talking. I’m talking to them, I'm not expecting an answer from them, but I'm keeping them familiar with my voice and interactions with people so it’s not a fear factor when someone comes in the room and interacts with them. At the same time, I want to show them that I will interact with them, but they don’t interact with me. So, when they come up and bite the boots or whatever, I give them a clear indicator to get back. They learn that in days. It makes your life and their lives easier. They're so much happier and chilled out. They don’t have to be taken out of the pen when I'm doing stuff, they can stay and watch. It’s more fun for them and for me. I can talk to them, give them scratches, especially when we start temping. So, to get them familiar with you, when they allow you to put your hand on their back and scratch their back without them running away. When it comes to temping, that is so nice. You just throw some food in front of them, and you temp, like you saw this morning. They’re happy, they know who you are. If you don’t build up that rapport with the animal, trying to temp is a nightmare. Even if you have an animal that doesn’t have fear, it will still not want you near it. The thermometer might go in, and he will run off. You end up doing silly things, you might snare an animal to get its body temp, but then the temp isn’t going to be correct because I've just stressed them out by snaring them. After that, that pig won’t let you come near it with that thermometer again because they will think it’s a stressor, a negative activity will take place afterwards. So yeah, I really feel strongly it’s good to get this experience and knowledge and put it back into the animals, as it were. It makes their life a lot easier and makes everyone's life a lot easier when the animal is working with you. I mean, you never expect an animal to do you any favours. At the end of the day, you’re catching it to take a blood sample. If someone tried to do that to me, I don’t think I'm going to stand still for it either. But yeah, if you can get this rapport with the animals everyone’s life is better, especially the animals.

K: Do pigs ever get taken out of a study if you can’t work with them?

P: Yeah. Unfortunately, if we can’t find any need for them, because if they can’t be sampled and we don’t really have a business need for them... unless we need a pen buddy they will just go be destroyed. Which for me is just destroying life, it’s a waste of life. I mean that rarely happens, if you do have a stressy pig, maybe one that won’t take body temp without being caught every time, they may just say that’s okay do it like that but write on the comments that you had to catch them on a snare each time. They will keep going but I can’t imagine they’re getting the results they need. Usual things when a pig would get destroyed... lameness is our biggest issue. There’s nothing we can really do for lameness and if you want to give them medication it’s got to be a medication that won’t affect the study, otherwise they can’t give it to them. I think the best one we’ve got is Metacam. Then, I've spoken to [NVS] about this, and she says it’s difficult because Metacam will affect the study so you’ve got to weigh it up with the study holders if they’re happy to give the animal Metacam, if it needs it as an Animal Welfare Act. Then they’re like, we need to carry on with the study. If the pig can’t carry on with the study, what do we do with it? Well, there’s no point in paying for the medication if we’re not going to put it on study, then we will bump it off.

K: Would you like it if there were other options for those animals who don’t reach the end of the study?

P: Yeah, I definitely would. Reuse animals or... granted, I'm not part of the lab section, so being part of FMD here, would that affect them if they then got moved on to somewhere else? But I definitely would like it if we had like an animal that wasn’t on study yet and we could put them somewhere else, but normally they just say ‘no, we’ve booked animals to go to that project, so he’s booked for this project. If he doesn’t work on this project, that’s it’ there’s no moving. I’m sure there's cross contamination of things which is probably what we are preventing with animals being reused.

K: So, there’s not really much discussion on what else could happen to that animal?

P: Erm, to say that... I mean I do know [NVS] and I know she wouldn’t just put an animal down for any reason, but at the same time, the company does tend to be more... it has to have a business need, if it doesn’t have a business need then yeah, we will destroy it so it’s not costing more money. Which, I can totally understand. But yeah, from our aspect when we see animals just going off to be culled, as animal techs we do get a little bit frustrated by that because we don’t quite get why they are being destroyed. Why can’t they go off and do something else? I do understand there are probably very good reasons why they aren’t being reused but yeah, I probably would say it is more of the go-to to just destroy it rather than finding ways around moving it somewhere.

K: would it help with that discomfort the animal techs feel if it could be rehomed somewhere else?

P: yeah, yeah. If that was possible... I mean sometimes we get say 30 pigs in, 6 are coming here and 24 are going to another unit. Theirs might be study animals and ours are stock pigs. Say one of the study pigs was lame, but say the vet said it was only a sprained ankle, a bit of Metacam and rest and it will be fine again... if we couldn’t then try and pull it out, heal it, and then it can be put back on a different study. But by the time it’s healed it’s probably too late to go back on a study it was originally bought for, but we could move it to a different study somewhere else. I definitely would say that’s morally better, because I just don’t agree with any unnecessary loss of life, especially as if it’s a clean animal that’s being destroyed, not even for food or anything, then it’s a little bit soul destroying.

K: Yes, I know with rodents they are exploring more avenues for rehoming as pets after study but that it obviously more difficult with a pig.

P: I wouldn’t even know if they can be reused into like the food industry, I mean if they’re still clean... I mean there used to be a policy that any animal that comes on to site is classed as infected just because it’s part and parcel of what goes on in this facility. Unfortunately, if there is no outcome for it that animal will go. I don’t know if that is still in play. But I don’t know, if we had a stock of clean animals, why couldn’t they be given to a farmer? Or sold? I’d definitely be behind moving animals to a better place and reuse them somewhere else. We definitely don’t though. I very rarely see animals move, once they’ve been allocated a building, it’s rare for them to be moved anywhere else unless there has been an issue with the building or something.

K: So over the time you’ve been here, have you seen shifts in the general culture of care towards animals here?

P: Um, yeah. As I say, it’s moved... I'm not going to make out like one is better than the other, but it has definitely changed from being more animal based to more lab based. I do sometimes think to myself, especially on sample days, we do kind of focus a little too much on the sampling and dosing over the animal. Obviously, everyone is like, this is the important bit, this is what everyone’s going to be watching. If you muck this bit up, you’re going to have the higher-ups from science come down on you. I always think, don’t forget, we’re animal techs. This pig we’re holding on to here is our priority. If all their samples got destroyed and ruined and everything went bad, I would still say I apologise for that, but the welfare of the animal is still 100%, so I'm happy. I would just have to apologise that their samples went pear-shaped, but the animal is still our priority and... As time goes on, we are getting more worried about what is going on with sampling than the animal. Not to say people are consciously saying ‘sod the animal, we have samples to peg down’, definitely not but I think it’s just who asked for samples, like a high-grade, I think people do tend to panic more on sample days and the animal welfare aspect gets overlooked. There have been a few days where something has not gone quite right, and it’s gone on a lot longer than people expect. We’ve been working on these animals since 8am and now it’s 11am, I'm like these animals... because obviously we have to sample before feeding and husbandry duties, we’re focusing so much on the samples, that no one is thinking the animals haven’t been fed this morning, they’re all starving and hungry. We need to think of ways of coming back to samples in those instances, maybe starting even earlier. I mean, I hate coming in super early anyway but if it’s to work for the better welfare of the animals then I’m up for it.

K: And do you think there are other barriers to providing the care you’d ideally want to provide?

P: Personally, for me I think these facilities need to go back to the way we were and remember we are animal facilities. I agree with the company wanting everything diverse, everyone knows what everyone else does, but they need to be realistic. An animal technician focuses on the animals, a lab technician focuses on the labs and samples, there are two different jobs going on here and we need to focus more on our priorities, not try and cover the whole board because that’s where we’re starting to find we have a lot of people who have a lot of skills everywhere, but no one really knows how to do a specific job well. I do think that in our industry, it does make a difference to the animals having someone who knows what they’re doing. It comes down to even just walking into a pen of pigs, you can tell someone who has experience and someone who doesn’t in just that moment of walking into the pen of pigs. The pigs will always jump because that’s just what they do, but if the person doesn’t have experience, the animals will act a bit erratic and that’s because the person is moving quite deliberately. When they walk into a pen with a shovel, all they are focusing on is the job at hand, cleaning the pen. Whereas, someone with experience, they look at the animals, how are they looking? Is their posture good? Is their colour good? All that sort of stuff. But you can always tell the way the animals react that they have experienced, because they come in and focus more on the animal than the job they have to do. He’s slightly slower, and people might complain about being slow, but I think the more experienced person will be quicker actually because he has the animals working with him, not fighting with him. Trying to pull bins in and out and you’ve got animals fighting with gates, it’s a nightmare. If you have calm animals, there’s less of that. I am noticing that it’s something we are falling short on. People are like instead of getting advice from more experienced staff, people are going on to google and saying ‘i’ve just found a webpage saying pigs should be cleaned out like this, so that’s how we’re going to do it’ and I've been here for many years doing it, I don’t need to look at google. No disrespect, but I don’t think google knows how to clean out pigs and that’s where we are getting our information from. And like, they might say a pig of this size needs this much food, then can’t understand why our pigs are getting obese, and it’s because you’re reading it from google who’s got it from a pig farmer who’s probably got a few hundred acres for pigs to roam around, so when he puts his feed down, the animals eat it then run around. Our animals eat their food and go sit in the corner. Then we start getting animals with joint problems and stuff, down to the fact of being overfed. But google has told us this is our correct level of food, but someone with experience will know and recognize if an animal is getting a bit round and can cut the feed down in the mornings, and you don’t see that much anymore. When I speak to [less experienced ATs], they’re more nervous with these things because they don’t want to be called out by a manager who might say this pig needs more food and you’re not doing it correctly. It’s very hard... then you’ll get a vet come in and ask why is your animal obese? Why has it got joint problems? Well, I've been feeding it how I've been told to. So, it’s kind of like learning from a script rather than hands-on experienced people.

K: Let’s talk about your relationship with the pigs in particular. Do you feel you gave a bond with them?

P: Erm, yes and no. Me personally... I like animals and I do have my favourite breeds and species but I don’t tend to befriend an animal. I've been here so long and I see animals come and go, you get too attached to an animal, you’ve got to remember you have to say goodbye. They’re not pets, which is hard for some people. But I will always try and build a bond with the animals I work with so they know me. With pigs I will always talk with them so they get used to me, familiarise themselves around me. If it’s animals I’m regularly sampling, I will take the time to interact with that animal, especially with the big girls. If they don’t know you, it’s very hard for them to interact with you. I’m the only person who snares though and unfortunately they know that now, so it is hard for me to have a good relationship with them. So, every time I’m in there I'll make the time to stand at the gate for 5-10 minutes so they can look at me just knowing I'm not here to do anything wrong to them. Hopefully, they come to the gate and allow you to give them a scratch and tell them it’s okay. With pigs I had this morning, when they come in fresh off the lorry, they are very scatty and there’s very little you can do to calm them down. You’ve got to give them 48 hours at least to calm down from the transition of being in the vehicle, being thrown in somewhere else to live in. They go off their food for the first 24 hours, won’t eat much at all, then you will notice after about 72 hours they suddenly go from having a couple of mouthfuls to clearing the bucket. It’s normally that point onwards they will just be their characters again, they’ve lost all fears and hopefully the world is good for them again. At that point, I will start my interaction. Before that point I won’t interact that much, I'll stay out of the pen and won’t walk past the door much because they jump. I want to keep them as quiet as I can and once I notice the food is being devoured, that’s when you can start going in there, making noise, moving round a bit and getting them used to your routines and that. Within a week they know you, then it’s just a case of learning each others boundaries. Some pigs want to come up and stand next to you, walk between your legs. They want to know what the shovel is. What the bin is. Or you just get other pigs who just stand and watch you, that’s just them and I'm happy with that. Once they are past their first week and I've got them to the point where they don’t panic every time they see me, I will just tickle their back if they walk past me, stroke their back and let them sniff my hands. Sometimes just touching their ears and getting them used that. Because as soon as you touch them they think you’re going to murder them, so that’s it they scream and panic and fly round the pen. After a few days you’ll find, well some pigs just like a good scratch! Like a dog. If they are still fresh, they might look up and realise it’s you scratching and run away. But if you keep doing that and getting them familiar, you will have nice and calm pigs. Always try to avoid the biting, if you can control that... I mean I've never hit an animal but you have to give them a bit of a knock to tell them they can’t bite the back of your leg. You’ve got to swing your leg around and they quickly learn that that is an aspect of you being in the pen that isn’t fun for them. Once you’ve got that barrier with them and they know where you stand with them, that’s when you can go on to more stuff, scratching and teaching them the snare. The snare doesn’t have to be a scary thing for them, just carry it around, let them smell and chew it without putting it on them. Let them get familiar with it, I sometimes do that with them if I know we’re going to be doing a lot of sampling. Just so they don’t panic and if I can avoid that I will at all costs. It really doesn’t take a long time. Especially temping, that can be the worst job in the world if you’ve got a pig that won’t let you take its body temperature, you will spend probably half hour – forty minutes for a job that should take one minute with one pig. You get to the point where you’re suicidal, you want to do anything else than chase that pig around. It’s important to have more trained staff working with them, they’re much more intelligent than most farm animals and can pick up anxiety cues and stuff like that. So when you’ve got someone fresh who doesn’t know much about the animal or the job, I think the animals do pick up on that and take the mickey as well! If they think that. If you don’t control them biting your boiler suits, they will turn into piranhas. So, working with them it’s for the benefit of the animals as well as the people working with them. It can be stressful if animals are constantly biting on sample days, so yeah, a happy pig is a happy sampler.

K: so you mentioned there are instances where you might have a stronger bond with an animal and it’s more difficult when they do go, can you elaborate on that a little bit?

P: Some people give them names, I never give them a name. Sometimes it happens but I tend to call them by the last two digits of their tag number. There's a little female here at the moment, 78, she is quite a character and it’s hard to ignore her character because she wants to come and stand next to you while you’re digging out, she wants to come up and just kind of talk to you, she’s quite a vocal pig. She’ll come up and nuzzle up next to your boot and she’s constantly making little squeaks and chuffs, and that’s normally a pig just saying ‘hey, how’s it going?’ just trying to interact with you, trying to be nice. It’s very hard to ignore her, especially when she wants a scratch so she’ll start scratching herself on your boot which indicates that she wants you to scratch her, so you do, and then she will do something silly like roll over onto her belly and you’re like... [sighs] I'm not meant to... but then you can’t ignore an animal. She’s just so sweet, it’s brilliant to watch. As I say, a happy animal is a nice thing. But you won’t get that, it’s literally only every now and then when you get one individual with a little more personality than the rest of the pen and they’re hard to ignore. So yeah, you do, now I've got to the point where I get excited to say hello to her. I know when I walk in there she’s going to come running straight up to me to say hello. Erm, then yeah, we have a good scratch. She’s even teaching the others to come up and have a scratch as well, so it’s helping the rest of the pen, but then it can go the other way. You can get a pig that is so friendly they will ignore their boundaries and start to think every day is a play day. Then they will teach that to other pigs who will become biters when they weren’t biters before. So yeah, it happens with all animals, you get the odd character that will just be a nice pleasant animal. Especially pigs, they come in with quite unique markings. My personal favourites are the ones we nickname badger faces, because they have badger like stripes up their faces and they just look like more interesting than the average pig. They tend to actually be more difficult to work with, it’s strange. Same with cattle. Throughout my years of working, we’ve always said if there’s a pig that’s got patches it’s going to be a problem. If there is a black and white cows in a pen, I’ll put money on it that the white one is going to be a problem. I have no scientific evidence to prove that, but you talk to anyone, and they will say the pig with one pig with a blotch or badger face in a pen of five other white pigs will be a problem, the problem pig when you get that one on the snare.

K: So when ones like 78 do go, is that different for you?

P: Um, this is where I stitch myself up... people nickname me, the girls say I'm a bit cold because I can make friends and then say goodbye. I mean, I worked in the PM room so unfortunately I've had to PM a lot of animals in the past, which I didn’t like or agree with that. But, no. Personally, when I see an animal go, I've told myself from day one that this happens and I don’t hold on to it. Hands down, if someone said to me ‘do you want this animal to go to post mortem?’ I'll say no. If I could let all the animals out and they could live a happy life, then yeah, I'd be much happier with that, but that’s not part and parcel of the contract I signed. So yeah, it can be emotional. Especially for the girls, they get quite attached to the animal and once they’ve been working with them for like 3 weeks in a row, give them names and spend time, especially if one has had an injury and you spend time caring for them, you do sometimes see tears. Unfortunately, it is part and parcel of the job, if you can’t handle it then you’re probably in the wrong area. I say to anyone who works with animals, if you can’t understand the loss then you shouldn’t be with animals because it’s going to be too painful in the long term.

K: Do you think working in PM helped you understand that more?

P: Yes and no. When I got the job I was made to understand that all the animals in your care will be destroyed, so don’t give them names and stuff. The higher-ups always said it’s nice having friends and making a bond with an animal you work with, just for your own health and safety aspect so you can trust the animal you’re working with and it can trust you. But no, it was kind of explained and drilled in to me that this is what’s going to happen so if you don’t like it you will have to deal with it. Then I worked in the PM room and found I could do the job well, I've got a good way of separating myself from the task. It’s kind of like the tunnel vision. I’m lucky I can kind of switch off and focus on the task in hand and come ‘back into the room’ as we say it. So, there won’t be a lot of communication from me when I'm euthanising, because my mind is focused on that. Once you come out of that and talk to others and the realisation does start to build up on you and it’s hard to then focus back. It’s easier for the pathology and lab staff, but for me I'm here for the animals. In this industry I've been lucky in who I've had train with me, and I've been able to visit and work other sites. When an animal does go, it is a hard thing. We try to make it a quick process. This morning you saw, those pigs went. You may have some people, like Jacqui, if she knows animals are going that day she might take the day off so she doesn’t have to say goodbye. Most of us will just say goodbye and that’s it, gone. The girls have had a little bit more of an issue with saying goodbye, but I don’t really say goodbye. If you say goodbye it’s making more of an emotional interaction for yourself. The animal doesn’t know where it’s going, so giving it it’s last food and stuff, that’s actually just for you. The animals have no idea what’s happening so in it’s world... I do feel that people shouldn’t get so emotionally bonded with the animals, but then I don’t want people who are uncaring.

K: How are animals euthanised here?

P: There’s a number of ways, depends on the project and samples they are after. If we are taking heavy samples, it will probably be intravenous injection which will be mostly ear vein. The process of that is we inject them and knock them out, once they are all asleep we will take them into the lairage and then put them down with IV there and they go into the post mortem. If they’re just being straight culled, it’s a different scenarios. We use a system called shock and stick, where we electrucute the pig, then cut it and bleed it out. If you see it, it is one of the hardest things especially for an animal lover to watch, because it is a massively... I don’t want to say violent, but when you stun the animal, the animal is out. You're using aboiut 20,000 volts of electricity which you smack against the back of the ears and they’re brain dead for about 18 seconds. In that time, you’ve got a speed winch which you will hook the back leg of the animal, it will go up to about head height and you can stick the animal. When you do the bleed out, that has to be done very correctly because it Is the bleeding out process that actually kills the animal. So, the bleeding out process takes seconds and you do everything within that 18 seconds, If you have any form of hesitation, or something stops, anything that may extend you working on the pig, you will just stun again. There is no way on earth you would risk that animal waking up. That’s they key thing in post mortem, once you start working on an animal you make sure your entire focus is on that animal until it’s dead. Then you bleed it out and a lot of people can’t get behind that because it’s a very brutal looking image. The animal is hanging upside down and you take a very big knife. A lot of people think you’re trying to cut the throat of the animal, but you’re actually not, you’ve actually got to go up into the heart cavity and cause as much massive bleeding as you can so it goes in seconds and it’s dead and never wakes up to see anything. Then, the way the body reacts to that, there’s a lot of nerves and that kicking off. So, you do tend to find if you've got new members of staff and that coming in they are just like ‘oh my god this looking like a horror film’ and honest to god, the animal has not felt or seen anything that has gone on. It was standing still one second and gone the next, it is that quick. They just get piled into a bin and that goes into the incinerator, the PM room is connected to the incinerator so it literally wheels through one door and another guy takes it and it goes through to the incinerator.

K: Do you have anything else you’d like to say about the themes we’ve spoken about, particularly about the barriers to care you want to give?

P: It’s not really pig oriented, but I've got more experience than some of the managers here, but sometimes it does become difficult when things are happening, and you can see it’s not going right. It’s difficult to turn around and say you’ve done this kind of project before, sort of thing, this is how you do it. They will want it done their way, and I’m not trying to step on anyone’s toes, I'm just trying to help. So when it comes to sharing your experience, I am a little bit on edge now. I want to help everyone and any newcomers, I want to teach. I tell you the truth, I really like teaching. I like explaining what we’re doing and why we’re doing it and what the needs for us and the animals are. Obviously, the priority is the animal. With experience becoming limited and having limited opportunities to share what you’ve got... if I was going to change anything for the welfare of the animals, that would be my go to point, to get the level of experience shared across the board and then see how that affects the animals again because as I say, you do have good lab animals and bad lab animals. I don’t think we have any bad lab animals at the moment, but we do have some that I'd say are a bit spoilt. Because they’re spoilt, it does make it a bit more difficult to handle them. Especially those big girls, if you get an opportunity to watch us sample you must. It’s mind-blowing, like going to war. You might have 6 people holding her and she can throw all 6 off. Those girls have muscle that people don’t understand and I really do believe the health and safety of these animals are being overlooked because even though our intention or care to the animal is at our max, but no one without experience has seen a pig when it loses its temper. If you’re caught in that pen when an animal loses its temper, the injury aspect with an animal like that, I mean she can break arms and legs without much effort. The potential for injury is high, especially we do have now some showing aggression to staff, partly because of stress. They’re just so big and they’ve got their own personalities and attitudes. But people say ‘oh I love that animal and I don’t want her to go’. Well no one does, but I also don’t want to see someone injured. If a piglet bites, you might get a big bruise. If she bites you, I don’t know what’s going to happen. When we do the snaring, we have a couple who are fine, well not fine, no pig is fine on the snare, but they put up no more of a fight than I expect. They try and run away from the snare, they try and tell you to get away. It's when they start to fight the snare, that’s when it gets difficult, I can probably put it on but she will yank it and pull my shoulder out. Or, she’s showing aggression to the sampler. When she’s snapping and biting, trying to get you, she is now telling you... because pigs will tell you, I always say you need to listen to the animal, the animals are very good at telling you what level of stress they’re at, what level you have to approach them at. When you’ve got an animal of that size warning you to stay clear, you really need to listen or someone will get caught. Unfortunately, it probably will be someone with less experience who don’t understand and can’t see the signs. If you see something go bad you realise there’s nothing you can do and pray the animal gives up the fight, you can’t fight back, they are 300 kilos. That’s something I say in management they’ve not seen the extremes, it’s like people don’t believe they can happen anymore. With modern health and safety, there is a lot less, injury rates and so on. At the same time, it still can happen. Especially when you’ve got animals they’re going to bite you and they’ve had enough. I have spoken to other higher-grades like [names colleagues at NVS level], they’re in agreement but didn’t know they are capable of that. But then, people say ‘oh if you say that someone might say it needs to go to PM now’. Well, I don’t want to kill anything, but I also don’t want to see anyone get harmed. So, it’s a question for someone with higher authority. I’ve seen people kicked, bitten, arms pulled out of socket. I’ve actually had, I don’t have the scars anymore but I've lost the feeling in this finger, from those girls. I got the snare on her fine and as I went to tie the rope, she just went ‘I'm not doing that’ and pulled away. The rope burn, I just knew from the get go that’s serious. I couldn’t take the glove off, the way the glove had ripped through my skin, it was entwined into my skin. I got the glove off and realised the flesh from that joint and that joint had just ripped straight off. So now, when we handle those girls, the snarer has to wear safety gloves for that reason. But the safety gloves are really difficult to snare in, so we don’t use them for the FMD because they’re so small, but yeah I'm not snaring those girls without safety gloves. She did that without any aggression, she just didn’t want to and pulled away. That little action was all it took. But yeah, with management they just don’t get it sometimes. I’ve been for a management role myself before, but I have no higher education and there are people with masters and stuff. And also, I think pigs get more emotional with things. So like, with cattle you can move them about and as long as they’ve got stuff to eat and a place to sleep they’re alright, but pigs stress way more and need that 24 hours or so of calming.