Interview with Gina (pseudonym), animal technician

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

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: So, what motivated you to choose this career?

P: I would have never. I used to be a vet nurse and so, obviously, trying to save animals. Also, I'm vegan so my... It goes against what I sort of believe. And then I left university, I worked for a year in my practice where I did my placement, absolutely hated it. After a year, I was just like I can’t do it anymore. The head of my university course contacted me because I'd always been quite interested in research, and that there was a job available here. I came down here and the woman who managed the facility said, “before I even come for an interview, before you do anything, I want you to come look at the pigs”. I literally had no idea what to expect and I turned up, I already had tears in my eyes for some reason, and I thought I'd be really emotional. Then all the pigs when you go in, come up to you, see if you have anything to give them, start making little noises and yeah. So, I joined. Obviously it’s really different to what I used to do, but I’ve been here for three years now.

K: Did you have any experience with pigs before?

P: Nope. Apart from going to maybe like a petting farm or something.

K: So, what have you learned about pigs here?

P: Just how they all have such characters. I think when I've met pigs before, you’re there for like five minutes and you don’t really get to know them. Sometimes, we deal a lot with when the pigs are anaesthetized so you don’t get that relationship with them, but before they come in and when they wake up. But there are things we do where we do have more interaction with them. We had one study where we had to give the pigs drugs every day. You go in with the food bowls and they know the food is coming, the last lot we did knew they all had their own individual places to stand so you’d open the door, and they’d walk to their own spots. The minipigs are... I do like them. The fact you can stroke them, and they roll over on their backs because they want their bellies stroked. Yeah, it’s cute.

K: So how do pigs compare to other animals you’ve worked with?

P: It’s difficult because they are large animals, so you tend to be more hands off when anaesthetizing or... when you get them, some of them come from the meat industry and they’re not used to being hands-on with people. They’re not aggressive, but I was going to say they’re like an aggressive dog and you need to be a bit hands-off, but they’re not. Yeah, you do get attached to certain ones.

K: What makes you get attached to certain ones?

P: I don’t know, some, I mean definitely with the mini pigs they can be a bit skittish. It’s normally the ones you can see aren’t really scared of you and they will come up to you. They can be quite friendly, and eventually the rest of them warm up as well.

K: So, when the pig comes in here and you have to anesthetize them can you describe that process?

P: So, they come in a big crate and normally have a quick anesthetic check, they will listen to the heart, because that’s a lot of the stuff we do. If they haven’t got any murmurs or anything they will inject into the muscle in the neck. Then they will wait about ten to fifteen minutes until they are sedated, and then they will put an IV in the ear. Then, anaesthetize them and intubate them and give them gas. They will then be in recovery, extubated. Once they are awake the first thing they normally want is food, so we cut them up pieces of apple or banana or depending on what they like... we have to find what they like sometimes. Like one pig was not interested in apples, bananas, grapes... so, someone had some cabbage, and that was the thing that she wanted to eat! So yeah, they are such individual personalities from their tastes as well and what they like. Most do like Polos though.

K: We gave them some earlier. The studies at the moment, one on the heart and one renal? What happens to them?

P: Same thing, they come in and are anaesthetized. They will have erm, a virus injected into their kidneys and then, well some do, and some have it just systemically and then they get woken up, and then four weeks later they come back to be terminated.

K: What are they looking for when they are terminated?

P: Erm, so changes in the kidney. I don’t really know how much I can say.

K: That’s ok. How do you describe your relationship with the pigs when they come in?

P: I treat them no differently to how I would treat a dog or a cat. The way that I talk to them, like, when you talk to a dog, it’s like nice and calming things like “hello my darling!’. Just baby them really, I call them all my babies. I mean it’s hard not to, I feel like if you don’t have any feelings towards the animals then you’re not in the right job. I guess the expectation... not expectation, the... I don’t know, like how people feel about research animals, like it’s cruel or whatever. I mean my opinion has changed, like, if it was cruel or horrible, I wouldn’t do it.

K: So, what kind of changed your mind about research animals?  
  
P: Because I think when you think about research, it’s a lot of shocking pictures that you’ve previously seen, and people say this is what research is and what have you. I mean, I do understand that what we do is all classed as moderate, and I know there are things that are severe, but I don’t think I would work in something like that. It’s just the way the pigs are treated, and once they are anaesthetized, like if any pig is suffering, we won’t have it. We’ve had a couple that became unwell and unfortunately when they are not well, that’s it. But once they are injected with the premed, they have no idea what’s going on. They have such great pain relief and anesthesia, they never wake up during or anything like that. And also, sometimes I think compared to being in the meat industry where they have nothing, six or seven months then they are just killed, whereas here, they have interaction, they get treats, they get affection. Like, I don’t know if you saw the mini pig play pen, with the balls and toys.

K: Yeah, I have. I think I had the same opinion about research and it was changed.

P: And also, when you weigh up the good it can do. In an ideal world, you wouldn't use any animals and you wouldn’t cause anything to lose its life, but unfortunately, it’s what has to be done and it’s only done with the amount of numbers necessary.

K: So, if you don’t mind me asking, is it in conflict with your veganism?

P: Yeah, it was at first. Because I don’t know how people react, I tend to not tell people what I do unless, I mean all my friends know what I do. But I remember saying something once about what I do, and someone told me that I was absolutely disgusting, and I should be ashamed of myself and what have you. But also, his son had a life threatening, endocrine condition, and some sort of disease and lots of medication and I was like... well how do you think this has come about and your son is alive? And also, he ate meat, so I was like, you don’t have a leg to stand on! Erm, yeah. Like what you’re doing is for a five-minute taste and we’re doing it to help people’s lives. But some of my vegan friends, I don’t tell them what I do.

K: Because they will react strongly?

P: I know one might, I think it’s just one that doesn’t know because she is like maybe a bit militant. When I was dating as well, I was like, I want to date another vegan but then it’s like, how will other vegans feel about me doing this sort of thing? I didn’t tell my current partner until like two dates in, and I was like ‘oh god how is she going to react?’ because she works in conservation so she’s all about saving animals. But she was quiet for a bit and then was like ‘well fundamentally I don’t agree with it but....’ and now she is fine. When you realise it’s not all the horrific stuff you see online, it’s easier.

K: Yes, there is that perception of research in society.

P: yeah

K: How would you describe the approach to pig care in this facility?

P: Anything that we can do to make their lives nicer, then we will. I say lives, but when they are in the building. Our radiographer, in humans when they go to MRI, they get earplugs because it can get quite loud, so she started stuffing their ears with cotton wool just in case when they woke up afterwards their ears might be ringing. So, things to try and minimize that. Some of the mini pigs have hairy ears so I bought a spray that dissolves the sticky things from the IV, so I bought that to use when I take the IV’s off, so I won’t hurt them. With, especially with the pigs here for a longer time, you want to make this a least stressful and painful experience because they are going to be coming back in multiple times. You don’t want an upset pig when it knows something bad is going to happen.

K: So, it seems a lot of those adjustments to make their lives less stressful are driven by individuals rather than written into study design or are more formal requirements?

P: yeah, in the study design it’s literally just what drugs they have, because it all has to be, I guess, universal. Some of the welfare things in there, like if anything happens call this person, but the individual on the ground things is down to us and we are all.... I mean one of us is a vet nurse, our radiographer has got a mad animal house, we all love animals here.

K: Do you think it would be helpful to have some of the things you do at individual level implemented into regulations universally?

P: I mean we just do it for everything. I don’t know how you would go about writing a set of things, but also, when anybody new starts, we say this is what we do, so it is carried on by everybody.

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

P: Erm, well we give them food. So, I feel they do like us. We go down to see them sometimes like with the next lot of minipigs we were gonna go down and give them food, make a fuss of them. But sometimes the pig screaming... like they’re just so excited about food! Even if you go down to see a particular pig for a blood sample or whatever, you will get distracted by all the other pigs. They can get a bit naughty as well, I don’t know if they [other ATs] said. They know that polos are in your pocket, and they will start pinching at you or whatever [laughing]

K: So, you start building up a relationship with the pigs before procedures?

P: We don’t most of the time, the only times we do that is with the mini pigs. On one of the studies we had, it was having to get them used to eating a drug in some porridge. It started two days after their procedure, but you can’t just suddenly give an animal some porridge and expect it to eat it. They are individuals, so what happens if they don’t like what we give them? So, yeah, we would give them porridge and apple juice five days prior to them having the procedure and then they will have it with the drug added in. But otherwise not really, but I know the other animal technicians do make an effort of having positive interactions with them.

K: Do you like that they have names?

P: I wouldn’t have it any other way. It would be weird just being like, ‘pig’. And obviously it’s better for the research when you can know them by name. And always asking things like “oh how is Maisie doing, is she feeling better today?” if they haven’t been well. I think maybe there have been some instances where people who come here to do the research have said things like ‘oh it’s just a pig’, or maybe just not treating it like we would, and things have been said. This is an animal at the end of the day, and it is losing its life for something, so it’s not to be treated as if it’s nothing.

K: Have you witnessed that personally?

P: Erm, I haven't but it was someone who did work here who got upset.

K: Right, I see. Are there any other challenges or barriers in caring for research animals in the way you would ideally want to?

P: Sometimes they can be a bit... because we do work with heart stuff... in humans if they have a heart attack you keep going, you shock them however many times. In the pigs, you have to think “if I keep shocking them it’s not going to be very nice when they come back around”. You must get to a point where you have to stop it because it won’t be fair to the animal when they wake up. There can be, sometimes researchers want to keep going because it’s their research, but everyone is good here.

K: Is that because you’re more detached from the actual research?  
  
P: No, because it is still an animal at the end of the day, and it is what is best for the animal. When I first started there was another lady who worked here, and when the animals were terminated she would say ‘thank you’ and now I do it too. Like, you did a good job.

K: Who makes decisions on whether an animal needs to be put to sleep before the end of the study?

P: Erm, so if something goes wrong it can be down to the researcher. If the researcher isn’t around, we can try and get hold of them, or speak to the NVS and then he will give us advice on what he thinks, and we will go with that. If it is down where the pigs are, like recently we had one who wasn’t doing very well, they called us and we tell the researcher, we need to do something now if you want any data, because she needs to be put to sleep now.

K: What signs would you be looking for?

P: Well, down there they will like, even if they have an infection, they will get someone to have a look. If they’re not quite themselves the vet will be called, as soon as they are not acting like their normal selves. One of them had a chest infection where it had a wound and they would wash it every single day to help. Yeah, in here also it depends on what they’ve had done to know whether you should call. One of the studies recently, they go into heart failure, so heavy breathing and looking thin, not eating... so it’s anything that’s slightly wrong. In here, it will normally be when they are anaesthetized so there would normally be a researcher here. Unless something has had a heart attack, I don’t think anything has been sick or a reason for anything to be put down.

K: Is the way they are culled at the end study dependent?

P: yeah. It can be a few different ways, so either overdose of anesthetic and then the tissues get harvested, or some of them when they are already anaesthetized, some will have surgery where they open up the chest and clamp the heart and give drugs to stop the heart, then just cut the blood vessels to the heart, so exsanguination. But yeah, they don’t know anything about it. Either scenario they have no idea.

K: Do you personally deliver the anesthetic?

P: Yeah

K: Do your feelings towards the animals shift at that time?

P: No, I guess not that I'm necessarily used to it, but when I worked in vet practice, a lot of the times I was assisting with put to sleeps of dogs, cats and things. So, I guess you are a bit desensitized to a certain extent. But here, you have a different mentality because you know the animals will not be leaving here. I guess it is desensitized, because when I first started, I was actually quite upset when we put the pigs down, but now I guess it is the same in the vet world and you get desensitized to it.

K: Do you ever follow a study after?

P: Erm, sometimes people give us a little presentation or what the outcome was so that’s nice to see it. Yesterday, someone said that a study is moving on to clinical trials now so that’s cool. It’s slow progress, but it’s progress.

K: How does that make you feel?

P: You see that it’s doing something good.

K: Are there any other tensions you find with the research scientists and your priority being the animal?

P: [long pause, thinking] no, I think maybe we’re just lucky that we have good researchers here, there’s not any issues.

K: Is blood sampling done with anesthetic?

P: For pigs, yes. With sheep you can get away with doing it in the pen. But yeah, pigs are put on a trolley on their back, sometimes we will go for the neck or femoral.

K: Is giving them the anesthetic a difficult process?

P: Sometimes they can get a bit worked up, so premedication sometimes you have to repeat it. And yeah, then we tend to turn out the lights, keep quiet, really leave it for as long as possible. Sometimes when they get worked up it’s not nice, they always try and jam their noses in the corner and have a tendency to just rub their noses on the metal crate, and sometimes it makes them bleed. Pigs bruise really easily as well. So, if they are not really completely with it, they can get bruises and stuff rolling around. We have kind of like a bean bag to stop them from knocking themselves, or just trying to pull them back into better positions.

K: How does it make you feel if a pig is struggling?

P: I don’t want to say disappointing, because the pig isn’t being a disappointment, but then sometimes that is just what happens. You inject a pig, it’s a needle. Some don’t feel a thing. Ketamine can sometimes sting, so they can scratch at it, but others aren’t bothered at all. Some are a bit more twitchy so if they move slightly, it moves out and comes halfway out, so it’s not always straightforward. The majority of the time it is though.

K: Yes, I guess like any animal with injections.

P: Yes, you see it in [vet] practice with dogs and cats, some do not care what you’re doing, and others are just nervous, twitchy...

K: What is your favourite thing about pigs?

P: Erm, the mini pigs and even some of the big pigs, they are really gentle when they take food from you. I talk to them sometimes, and I say, “i wish my dog would take food this gently out of my hand like you do”. Erm, also, the big pigs don’t have such big tails, but the mini pigs do and when you go in and call them, all their tails start wagging like they are happy to see you.