Interview with Nicola (pseudonym), animal technician

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

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: Can you tell me how you came into this career?

P: So very bizarre, actually I was actually working in a care home for people with disabilities and basically, I was stuck in a rut, and I was like do I do I stay in the job? I saw there was a position here and my brother got me the job basically, and I went to obviously the interview process and everything else but yeah that's how I got into the job. I've lived on farms, so I've worked with animals all my life pretty much.

K: That’s interesting you were in a care position before. Did you want to continue with that?

P: Well, I've done a variety of jobs before, I worked with children, erm I worked with dementia, and I worked with people with MS, brain injuries, strokes. I was in that role for years and you get to a point where it’s like, do I or don’t I continue? Then my role came a little bit more, so I was covering the cook when they were on holiday, covering the cleaners and driving them everywhere. Erm and they became a bit reliant. It was like, ugh. Well, there was a position here going so I thought I'd give it a go. But yeah, so I did. I’ll have a complete change, I won’t get beaten up or verbally abused in this job. So yeah, I'll give this a go. I’ve been with [this facility] 3 years now.

K: So, you’ve lived on farms before, did you have much interaction with pigs?

P: No, that’s one animal we never had. We never had on the farm, erm, but I've always dealt with large animals, like cows and horses. So, pigs, I was like... Can't really be that much harder. So, yeah.

K: is it that much harder?

P: No. They’re fine.

K: What have you learnt about pigs since you’ve been here?

P: They can be quite affectionate. They can be really affectionate. At first, I thought, oh, pigs [shrug], but I found they are actually really affectionate. The older and the bigger they get, the more they are, and the more gentle they are. They don’t snap food out of your hands or anything like that. They’re happy to... they will still have belly rubs. Yeah, originally you think “it’s a pig, what can a pig do?” but actually they are quite affectionate animals.

K: So, what were your original thoughts about pigs?

P: Erm, I was a bit unsure really because I hadn’t had any dealings with pigs. They are cute.... yeah, but the more you work with them the more you know them. You know the animals, and they are quite affectionate. You know they’ve got their own characters, some are playful, some are a bit more laid back, but yeah.

K: And how long are they typically here for?

P: Our larger pigs are here for six months, and at the moment we have mini pigs in who are only here for four weeks. So, the larger ones are here for six months, and you do get attached.

K: What are they here for?

P: RVOTs

K: And are you caring for them consistently over the 6 months?

P: Yeah.

K: Can you talk a bit about how your relationship progresses with them over the six months?

P: Obviously over time, when they first come in, they don’t have much human interaction. When they first arrive, you get them settled in first into the environment. Then, slowly we will go in and we will sit with them for a bit at a time, let them come up to us. We might take in some apple or some fruit and then slowly and surely, they come over and take it out of your hand, yeah then now, they kind of build up that trust. They associate goodness with you, we go in with food, so they associate us with goodness. So yeah, we go in and literally they greet you, they jump up on the pens and they’ll come up to you and nudge you for cuddles and hugs. First of all, food. Food is first for them to be honest. Yeah, so they like their polos and their fruit and veg.

K: So, do you feel like you develop a bond with them over time?

P: You do, you do yeah. Especially as you bring them in because when they come in, the RVOT’s come in at 18-20kg so by the time they’re done here they can be anything up to 150kg. And you do get to know them, you do get to know their temperament. We’ve got two up there now, one is so laid back, she will just sit and watch you and play when she wants to play. The other girl that’s with her is very playful. She’ll jump, nudge everyone, eat your wellies. So yeah, you do get to know them, and you do get a bond because they do get to know you. Yeah. They know they always get treats. I say ‘you’ve had your operation, so you can afford to put on a kilogram or two!

K: Do you think there is an emotional bond on their part with you?

P: Um, I'm not sure. I’d like to think so. I do like to think so. They do associate us with goodness because obviously we clean them, we give them affection. Erm, and obviously other people come in and they need to be injected. But yeah, I like to think they do.

K: How do they demonstrate that with you?

P: I'll go in and automatically I'll say, “morning girls” and they will come to the gate and get straight up for a nice bit of fuss and cuddles and then they will wait for me to go to the other girls, I say “morning girls” again and give them a hug. Then they will start screaming at me for food. So, I go in and they’ll come up for more cuddles when I'm in there cleaning. So, if I go in, they do like to come up for affection. They like to be attached. So yeah, I like to think they do.

K: And how do you describe pigs to other people who don’t know what pigs are like?

P: Very affectionate. When I say pigs people are like [shrugs], but actually they are affectionate, they’re very gentle. Just giant soft animals really. So soft and gentle. Mini-pigs on the other hand, are more food-oriented. They can be quite a bit more snappy with the food, but the larger whites are a bit gentler

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K: Does your bond with the minipigs and the large whites differ?

P: Yeah cause, with the mini pigs they have quite a variety of attitudes, shall I say. You have a sassy one, a really confident one, a really shy one that doesn’t like to be anywhere near you or touched. So, you’ve kind of got... the more confident they are you get more of a bond. They will come up to you a little bit more. The trouble with mini pigs is that they are a bit more sketchy in a way. We get on their level, but they are a bit more wary of humans than the larger ones.

K: Why do you think that is?

P: I don’t know if it’s a size thing, I'm not sure. [Other AT] could probably tell you a bit more. But I don’t know if it’s a size thing. Even when we’re sat on the floor sometimes, they can still be a bit wary of you. Large Whites are at first but within two days they’re there with you. Mini pigs not so much, they’re just a bit more wary of humans. Takes them longer.

K: Does that affect when you have to do procedures with them?

P: Er, it does yeah. With the large whites, we will get them out of the pen, and they will just walk into the crate. Mini pigs, sometimes, you’ve kind of got to go in and get them in, they’re a bit more wary with going in and coming towards us or going into a crate, so yeah. We do put the weigh crates in there, in the corridor, so they can run through and get used to it and everything, but they are still a bit wary.

K: So how do you describe the general approach to pig care in this facility?

P: Very good. Literally, obviously I don’t know if it makes a difference that we’re not a big unit down here. There's only two or three of us. The facility, at the moment we’re having work done down here so unfortunately, they are all up there and there’s not any natural daylight at the moment until our windows are fitted. But the facility is really good, I mean, they’ve got play pens, toys everywhere, obviously human interaction. Unfortunately, like I said there’s no natural daylight up there, but yeah, the facility I think it’s great, but for me I just think “oh, I wish you could go into a field” but obviously, for research purposes they can’t unfortunately.

K: And are there any other challenges or barriers to providing the care you’d ideally want to?

P: No, not really. Like I say, I'd love to see them in a field, but for research that’s not happening. But otherwise, no. They do get a good life really, they are always having treats, they get their food, they’ve got loads of toys. The mini pigs have a giant play pen, so they have a run around. But yeah, I don’t think there are really any issues that way.

K: How might your relationship with a pig change as a trial or study progresses?

P: It gets harder because you know, obviously, the end is coming. But you know it’s got to be done, it’s all for the greater good and it’s all for research. You do become quite attached, you do, because you’re with them every day for six months. Erm, so it is harder and at the six month mark it’s like, oh, time to go. But you know, you’ve kind of got to toughen up... [laughs]. For me, I find it hard. Not quite as hard as I think [other AT] does, because being on a farm, you know, like... the cycle. Whereas [other AT] comes from a city, and I think she finds it a bit harder than what I do. Also, in my time or career, I've dealt with humans and their passing, so I've kind of hardened up to death. That sounds awful, but I've kind of hardened up to it. It is still sad, but you know it’s coming. You say to yourself “oh here we go, this is going to be a bad day” And you’re quiet for a bit, but then you know you have to get on with it. There’s probably more pigs coming in to look after. Yeah, I do find it hard. But working on farms I've kind of hardened up to it.

K: So, what kind of procedures might you be involved in?

P: Obviously, for me, I literally just feed them, clean them, I take them over for any of the procedures but that is as far as I go. Then I help them get on to their trolley and then we leave. We then give them the aftercare, they will call us, and we will collect them and bring them back. Medication-wise we give them that, usually just antibiotics or Metacam if needed. But yeah, for me, I don’t deal with that side. I’m here purely for the before and after care.

K: So, they are given to new people for all of that?

P: yeah so, they will put them to sleep and then basically, yeah, we are there when they come round. They call us and say “they are coming round now” so, we will go in and let them know we’re there. Then we will pop in and out until it’s guaranteed they can go back.

K: So, when you are bringing them to and from how is their stress managed?

P: Yeah, so, they’re in this giant trolley and they will come in this trolley. Erm, then literally we will wheel them over, wheel the trolley into the suites and sit in there and wait for them to be ready. Some of them will get up and come straight out, some will be a bit more wary, so we sit and wait for when they’re ready. So, they’re not stressed. Usually, 9 times out of 10 they come in and once they’ve seen the other girls they are up and out, a bit wobbly on their feet but they are fine.

K: How do you identify a pig that’s distressed or maybe in pain?

P: Erm, well with the pigs usually there will be a colour difference in the pig. In the ears, they might be back a bit. With our girls, usually if you call them, they will come straight up to you. If they don’t come up to us straight away, we know there is a problem somewhere. So, we will come into the pen and see if, maybe she’s just a bit quiet, but if it continues and she is lethargic we will call the vet.

K: What happens when you call the vet?

P: Erm, usually they will come down, have a look check over. It might be a case of give her a couple days of antibiotics, see what happens. Sometimes, maybe separate her off, just to see. But usually 9 times out of 10, sometimes, after a couple days antibiotics, usually... we’ve not had a mega issue that hasn’t resorted in anything major. It’s purely just, couple days of antibiotics, separate her off for feeding just so she gets fed. Erm, yeah. Usually, pretty good.

K: And are there times where maybe treatment might interfere with a research trial?

P: We will always inform everybody that they need to be antibiotics. Everything is a trail, there’s paperwork, there’s emails, everybody is informed. So, we will say to them they are on antibiotics for vet’s advice for a few days. Usually, it’s fine. We’ve never had any issues to affect the research, so yeah.

K: And do you ever find out how the research has progressed afterwards?

P: Erm, I haven’t personally. I’m not sure if [other AT] gets anything. We will see the odd thing but personally I don’t get any information.

K: Are there any ever unexpected deaths?

P: I’ve not come across any dead, yet. Um, we’ve had one that we’ve have to rush to get in and get scanned because she was quite poorly and unfortunately, her heart was really bad and she just, died on the table. She didn’t make it. But, I've not come in and found one dead. Yeah, never come across that. But yeah usually... I think we only had the one, she became really unwell and we had to call the vet and rush her in for a scan, but she didn’t make it. But yeah, so that’s the only one since I've been here.

K: How did that make you feel?

P: it is sad, you think she was only here 3 or 4 months and didn’t make her full term. It is sad, because you think she didn’t make it. You know, but obviously she is here for heart reasons and hers didn’t take well and that’s what happened. You think, oh that’s so sad.

K: So, when they come in do they have an acclimatization period?

P: yeah, they’re usually here, we usually give them a week or a week and a half, a week to two weeks for them to get to know us, for us to get to know them. We give them that calming period. You don’t want a large white pig having a paddy. So yeah, a week to two weeks and so far, so good, that’s worked.

K: And how do you refer to the pigs?

P: They have names. They do them... so the RVOTs are in alphabetical order, and they have different themes for each batch. So, at the moment we’ve got a Nancy, a Luna, Penny, Stacey and Ruth. But they all tend to be in alphabetical A-Z names, you’ve got to google some. We’ve had car themes, boys names, girls names, perfumes. So, that’s how... then we mark them, so we have sprays to mark them with colours.

K: Do you like that they have names?

P: Yeah. It makes my life easier if they’ve got names. I’m not sure if they really know their names, you call them, and they will come running up to you anyway. Erm, but yeah, I think it’s nice they’ve got names.

K: So they are personalised in a way.

P: Yeah

K: Do they get nicknames at all?

P: Well, like Luna will be Luna-Loo, otherwise not really, unless it’s like a really long name they’ve come up with so you have to shorten it because I’m not gonna be standing there for five minutes calling their name. But yeah, usually they’re quite short names.

K: Who comes up with the names?

P: It’s a joint effort between everybody. Sometimes, they’ll say “let’s do this” but actually we’ve already had that name, especially [Kimberly], she has a really good memory and has been here longer, so she remembers a lot of the names. It’s like, no we’ve already had a Harry or whatever.

K: So you like to have new names?

P: Yeah. It’s not too bad for me because I've not had as many pigs as what [Kimberly] has had here. But yeah, we’re always on Google like “quick! Find a new name!”

K: Use those baby name lists

P: Yeah, we do! Googling perfume names in alphabetical order and then car names in alphabetical order. We did have boys' names so you were like “Kevin, good girl Kevin!” and it just didn’t sound right, can’t call a girl Kevin. It’s not right [laughs], but yeah that was a bit confusing.

K: Do you get attached to individuals more than others?

P: No. I mean, I like them all the same. For me, the larger whites are more what I call my babies than the mini pigs. Erm, but yeah, yes.

K: And does the care you give them change towards the end of the trial?

P: Erm, you kind of, it sounds awful, but you know they’re going so you give them like... the last supper. You're like “yeah, have the lot”. Otherwise not really. Usually the night before, they have a good old feast and then, yeah.... Because they go through an MRI scanner and if they get too big it’s a bit of a squeeze to get them in, but yeah, so we try not to get them over big, but you can’t often help it. We’re like, you’ve had your op... here’s a snack [mimics fussing over a pig]. But otherwise, no. They all get the same.

K: Do you help with the transport over to the abattoir?

P: Yeah, depending on the size of the pig, we have like, a trolley. So, either we will walk them down, or if it’s a bigger pig, we will forklift them down. We put them on that and take them down that way. ‘Cause I'm not pushing a 150kg pig down. A bit much! But yeah, we will literally take them down. We take them there and then they take over. Nothing to do with us after that.

K: Would you like to be more involved in the procedures?

P: We’ve been offered if we wanted to go watch procedures, watch the scanner. They said we can if we wanted to have a nose. But I just haven't really, one day I will. I’m not in a rush to see it but it would be interesting, it is interesting to know, but also, I'm not in a rush, you know. Not yet.

K: Final question, what’s your favourite thing about pigs?

P: They are just so affectionate. Just like having a dog, so affectionate and yeah, they’ll jump on your back, they’ll come up to you and have cuddles. Just generally affectionate and I love it, absolutely love it.

K: Do you feel you get a lot back from them?

P: Yeah

K: Is that different to other animals you’ve worked with?

P: Yeah. Er, we got sheep as well and obviously sheep are so ditsy. They are cute and they are lovely but you don’t get that back.

K: Sheep are like, in their own world I often think.

P: Yeah, and very focused on food. So yeah, not quite as affectionate.