Interview with Peter (pseudonym), animal technician

31st March 2022, online.

Conducted by researcher [K].

K: What motivated you to pursue this career?

P: it was a bit of an accident really. I've got no animal background. Never worked with animals, I've got a mechanical engineering background and I just kinda got bored with my job. This job came up when I was looking and I went for it just to see what would happen, and that’s it really.

I’ve always had an interest in animals, like pet-wise, and my wife, up until recently we had a horse. So, I've always been around animals and a couple friends of mind are farmers so I've helped out with them in busy periods. When I was at school, it was never something I wanted to get into, yeah so, it’s just happened. A fluke or fate, whatever you want to call it.

K: So you didn’t have any experience with farm animals at all?

P: No. Nothing official. I helped a friend out on a farm who had a small beef herd and I'd help him move them around if I wasn’t working. He’d rope me into little jobs, but nothing official. No qualifications, no real skill or expertise.

K: Still some experience in some capacity I suppose!

P: Yeah, maybe a tiny bit of knowledge but very minimum when I first started. Started here in 2015 and I was looking after larger pigs and cattle. It’s just slowly progressed, I'm a supervisor now and I've got a home office license.

K: I guess you didn’t have too much experience with pigs before, but what were your perceptions of pigs before you started working here?

P: Erm, kinda just the basic perception that everyone has when you’re growing up and you go to petting zoos or you see farm animals. To be honest I probably didn’t think much of them, or the farm thing because it wasn’t a field I was interested in. I was surprised when I started working with pigs. People say things like “it’s like a pig stye in here” and how they’re dirty, so I was surprised with how clean they are. How intelligent they are and how quick they learn stuff, their routines they get into and things like that. The pigs I first started working with were here for clean blood supply, like the Durocs you saw. They all had their own characters. Pigs are apparently social animals, one of them hated the other pig and had to be housed on her own. If any other pig walked passed the entrance she would lose it. She was so gentle for everything else though, so it’s like learning their characters is interesting. Sometimes a challenge.

K: So you worked with cows before, how do pigs compare?

P: Cows are very docile. Again, they do have their own characters so you will get a boisterous cow or an overfriendly cow. Pigs seem to be a bit more intense. Moving cattle is a relatively simple task, it’s all just body position and things like that. Pigs, there’s a lot more in it. They dart around a lot more, quite flighty. Obviously, the noise they make. Them screaming ramps up stress levels for the pig and the worker as well. Same sort of rules apply when you’re moving pigs and cattle, but I find pigs a lot harder to work with.

K: In what ways?

P: The handling. The work we do here, to bleed a pig to get like 10ml of blood, even just a little 10ml blood sample, is quite a task. There’s no specialist equipment you can have to hold a pig still. You have little cradles and stuff but they won’t suit the work we do. So, you’re snaring a pig and holding it against like a wall and then you’re in the neck area and getting the blood. Whereas, with a cow, you have a purpose-built crush that goes round the neck and squeezes in on the body, completely immobilises the cow for you. Then in the meantime of you snaring that pig, you’ve got the pig screaming at you. That’s one of the things that gets me the most, the scream of the pig just hits a button with me. When we’re doing lots of pig work, I come out of doing it quite agitated. I don’t want to say stressed, but I could go bleed 20 cows and walk out and everything’s lovely. 20 pigs and I'm a bit like ...[sighs]…. I think a lot of that is down to the noise. When we bleed the big pigs it’s a job I don’t look forward to. I’m down on my knees in front of this 250-kilo pig with a syringe pulling blood from it. It’s face is that far away from my head and it’s screaming at me. I think how have I got to this point in my life where I'm this close to this angry creature? I find that quite stressful, not in a... it doesn’t give me nightmares, it doesn’t make me hate my job or anything like that. It’s my least favourite task, blood sampling pigs.

K: The noise does cut through you!

P: I’ve heard, I don’t know how true this is, but the noise of screaming pigs was used as interrogation or torture because it’s a similar frequency to children screams and cries and we’re programmed to react to that. We hear a baby cry and as adults we’re programmed to react to it. I’ve heard the pig is similar, it puts you on edge and it’s used to unsettle people, maybe not now!

K: I’ve heard they use pig noises for dinosaurs in films too! But yeah, I saw sampling but they used the pig troughs.

P: Yeah, with the smaller ones are not too bad. Sometimes with the small ones and even with the big ones sometimes it all depends on, obviously pigs have their own character. We could come in today and they’re like us. We could come in today and everything is lovely, we could come in tomorrow and one of them has got the hump for whatever reason. Could have had a bad nights sleep or didn’t get enough food because the other one pushed it away or when they’re in season you can tell. So, sometimes when you grab them and snare them, they panic, they stress, they shout, they scream. Then when they realise there’s nothing they can do they do give up. A lot of the time they just stay perfectly quiet and you do what they want. I find it quite funny when you pick a pig up off the floor and they just scream murder at you, the minute you put them back on the floor, they give you a little snuffle and trot off like nothing happened. It makes me chuckle, they have like very short memories when it comes to holding them. Soon as you let them go, everything is lovely and they’ll snuffle on the floor looking for food.

K: So how would you describe pigs to other people?

P: Erm, well when we do the training with new starters and I explain about the animals, I think I say you’ve got to be careful with them. They look cute, when the little piglets come in at 6 or 7 weeks old, you can’t help but love a little piglet, they re sweet little things. But even when they’re little they run round in little groups and they can wipe your legs out. The big girls, they’ve got big teeth and they can snap. Also, they’re so heavy. If they wanna get past you, they will. You can’t be lulled into the thing that it’s just a pig, they’re not docile and they can turn on you. No malice though. Just how intelligent they are too, that was the big surprise for me. And how clean. When you go in you see they have set up their own latrine area in one corner. Just very intelligent, very crafty. They work things out. They know how to undo gates. They will lift the gates until they find a weak one. The minute they find a weak one they are on it. Intelligent, crafty. Also really caring, you watch them interact with each other and they all cuddle up together and see them rotate, keeping each other warm.

K: So how is their relationships with each other?

P: Again, it differs amongst groups, and we have many different types of pig here. So, we have the big girls, the durocs you saw, our long term pigs. They have a proper hierarchy in there and you’ve gotta manage that very carefully, just mainly to do with food. They will push the weaker one off. There is always a matriarch in there. With the little ones, not so much because they’re not here long enough. You’ve gotta be careful about the group. We get them in, and they come in on one truck, with say 30 pigs. We then house them, and they will be split into smaller groups. You’ve got to be careful because some ways the study goes... you might have a lame pig or a pig that doesn’t meet requirements. You might have to swap it out. You shouldn’t really be swapping, you can break groups down but you can’t build them back up really. That just causes... you’re just putting unnecessary stress and upset on them. The pigs have now formed their group, and then you've just chucked another pig into the mix. Then it's like you just reset the pecking order again.. But you can do it. We have swapped pigs before but you need to do it very carefully. Usually do it, like we’ve done it under sedation, so when they pigs wake up they all wake up slowly and we’re always around to make sure one doesn’t wake up first and starts bullying the others or one who can’t defend itself. We’ve used the scent from their own feaces to make sure there’s plenty of that around, we’ve even used citronella oils so they all smell the same, they all smell of lemons. That seems to work pretty well and there’s no instant attack on the newcomer. You do get, especially with the boys, as they get the older they tend to get a bit fighty, a bit boisterous and throw their weight around a bit. I don’t really know how that will progress though because they’re not here long, on the short studies they might be here for a month, possibly two. So, it’s quite hard to see how the groups develop. They’re usually in groups of possibly 8 at a maximum and yeah, you’ve got to keep a close eye on them to watch out for tail biting and ear biting. What we’ve done before in the big square pens is set up hay bales, like solid ones and made a cordoned off area so if a pig is threatened there is a place for it to go and get out of sight. What I've seen before is a pig will start a fight because they can see someone and it’s attacking a pig, the minute that pig is distracted by food or can’t see the one it was bullying, it calms down. So, we kinda give them lieel refuge areas where they can get out the way out of sight and give themselves a bit of a breather, but it doesn’t last that long, the initial... once they’ve got their pecking order sorted everything seems to be fine. You get the odd scratch and if one of them is injured, we look at them 2 or 3 times a day and note down any injuries of issues we see for the next person to come have a look, so we cater for any needs we see.

K: What kind of instance would a pig be moved to another group?

P: Only really if one was continuously getting bullied, or if the study dictated it. Usually if we had a group of six and if one was bullied we probably wouldn’t move that pig, we would probably just split that group into two groups. We’d take the one who was being bullied and maybe one of a similar size who we know isn’t doing the bullying and put them together. We had two bigger pigs who lived together all their life though until they got really big and then the trouble started. What we did, we housed them separately but we housed them in pens that were like open so they could see each other and everything was perfect, they were happy, there was no fighting. What was really cute, we put their beds in the top corners next to each other and every night they slept next to each other right next to the railing. It was nice because they were still social but there was never any issue with fighting. Once we let them out to the paddock, everything was lovely, there was no aggression. That only came at night time through closed doors, so we just yeah, split them into two pens and it worked really well, they were social and there was no chance of anything happening without us seeing. When we see them in the field, they’re right outside the office so we can watch them and intervene if things get too much.

K: So, you can intervene and make adjustments if need be?

P: Yeah, we’re constantly observing them and coming up with enrichment. [Another AT] probably mentioned that she is working on an enrichment plan at the moment. I think a lot of the aggression or anything like that is probably done through boredom. You’ve got to think of what a pig’s natural environment is, that’s why we keep the big girls out in the field. They wanna be out, they wanna root, they wanna be pigs. Unfortunately, in some of our studies they can’t because they’re basically shut up in a room. So, we’ve got to give them what we can for them to be pigs. Ropes to chew on, there’s balls they can move around, kongs that we can fill with treats, we can fill things with hay and edible treats like fruit, we can scatter it around and they can root through it, or play with a carboard box. When I worked with the big pigs at Christmas, we got them boxes and filled them with fruit and veg and wrapped it in Christmas paper, when we came to work Christmas morning they all had Christmas presents! So, if you stop them getting bored you kind of have an easy life with pigs.

K: How would you describe the general approach to pig care here?

P: I think it is really good. We had issues a couple years ago where the people doing the procedure work were doing it a certain way, the way they had been taught a long time ago by someone who knew pigs like 20-25 years ago. Then, a new person came in who didn’t work with pigs before and made a comment that it doesn’t look great. So, there was a discussion about it and there is a pig welfare like a review board and someone from each unit goes and they meet occasionally and discuss what works and stuff, and it came up that when you snare a pig you kind of cup the ear. So, to someone who doesn’t really know it looks like you’re grabbing the ears, you’re using that as a handle. So, they refined the technique and now you don’t put your hand up by the ear, and also, if you’re by the ear, there is a tendency to go firmer and just grab it without even thinking about it. So, that was noted, and they refined the way to snare pigs and they do it in a slightly different way now. So, there is always a lot of adjustment going on and techniques for doing things. We do a lot of temping and a lot of swabbing and when you are doing a number of pigs that can be an issue because you do a couple of pigs and then they get wise to what’s going and they will tear around the pen and stress each other out. You can give them some treats. It’s all about if the pigs are calm and we’re calm, then the data we’re getting will be good. If you’re stressing the pig out, that’s a factor that could be a variation in the data, so it’s all about keeping them calm. With all the animals here, there is always room for improvement and [the facility] are happy to listen to people’s ideas and move on. A lot of the bigger stuff like the enrichment study takes a long time to go through. Your animal welfare issues if you raise any are through in sort of click of the fingers. So, yeah I think [the facility] has a pretty good view on it, probably not perfect, there is always room for improvement. We’re in discussion at the moment about the big girls. We keep them for two years while we bleed them and it’s kinda coming to the end of the 2 years and it gets harder and harder because they’re getting bigger and stronger. They know what you’re doing, so when you first go in and snare the pig, for the first couple of months it’s lovely. Now, the pigs know if they put their noses flat to the floor you can’t get a snare on. Or they put their noses through the bars and stand there still, like mocking you “what are you gonna do now?”. So, if we don’t keep them... do we keep them? Do we use more pigs? Or do we use less pigs and keep them for longer? So, we’re trying to find the balance. There are pros and cons to each so there’s a bit of discussion on that.

K: And who makes the final decision?

P: The NVS will. But as animal techs we do have a say, I know I can’t say that today is the day, but I can put a case forward and I'm listened to. If I can justify and I'm correct, the NVS and the NACWO will back you if they agree. But the final decision is one by the NVS and heads of departments, who are all vets anyway. We’re not going to someone who’s just a manager, they’ve all got years and years of animal experience. When the NVS comes down, they will bounce ideas off and get involved in conversation. Maybe they’ve seen something that we haven’t and we come up with a plan together. So, I'm quite confident with the way the animals are handled and developed.

K: How does it make you feel when the clean pigs in particular have to go?

P: yeah, when I first started I did struggle. Like I said, when I first started and I was down on the other farm... You do get attached, we know you’re not supposed to, we know they’re not pets and we know they are here to do a job. The way I personally see it, if you’re in this job and you don’t care then you’re in the wrong job. So, you’ve got to come in and kind of switch off sometimes and agree to give them the best care you possibly can while they’re here and when their time is up, unfortunately that’s it. I had a cow down on another unit that had really bad pneumonia. The vet, we were unsure whether he would be put down. The vet decided to keep him another night so I stayed over and stayed in the pen and made sure he was having food and water. By morning, he had perked up a bit so the vet decided he was doing alright and to keep an eye on him. Then they decided to keep him and instead of putting him on to trial, he became a stock animal. He finally got moved on to another study for clean blood supply and I had him for about 3 or 4 years and I really did get attached. He felt kind of personal to me, he was a pet. I know I shouldn’t say it, but when I went in the pen he recognised me, the woman I worked with, he hated her, wouldn’t do nothing for her and would chase her out the fields. Me, it was like a dog. He’d come up and he’d have to be stroked and when he went, it was a tough day. The same with the pigs I work with, I spend a lot of time with them and you get to know them, especially the one who didn’t like other pigs, then they all have names and... well we don’t name them anymore, because as soon as they have a name they are a bit closer to you. So, when I moved up to here and I knew there was long term pigs here, I went in and to me, they’re just, they’re here on study. They are as equally important as the ones I have for three weeks. They mean the same to me. They get the same amount of care, I don’t take them for granted but we do put a bit more effort into the big ones because we’re very conscious of their surroundings, obviously we’ve got the outdoor area for them and we’re trying to think of ways to like manage their diet. With the little ones, you don’t need to manage them as much because they’re not here long enough and they’re still growing, whereas these ones are grown so you’ve gotta balance it and keep them a good weight. For me, no matter what animal is here they get treated the same and gets the same respect no matter how long it is here, like my dog at home. Every animal here I would treat how I treat my dog, That’s just how I feel about animals, that’s my view on it. Well, I treat them like my dog but I try not to get as attached to them as I do my dog, that’s the thing, but it is hard. Sometimes with the little pigs it’s more of like a revolving door, they’re in, they’re out, they’re in, they’re out. It’s like three week rolling studies. Sometimes that gets hard, just because of the quantity. You’re driving down to the PM room and you’re waiting for the gates to open and you just look in the mirror and you see into the trailer with a load of little pig faces just looking at you, and you think “what am I doing?”. It’s just, I think... as long as you realise, like you do the research about why we do this, what the bigger picture, the reason why I've got X amount of pigs on study, X amount of cows on study, what is the end goal? That for me does tick most of the boxes and tells me I'm not doing a bad thing. The other people I work with you see very similar attitudes, they are here to look after the animals. It’s, if we weren’t looking after the animal, who would be? We feel like we can do it properly and make sure while that animal is alive, with us, whatever procedure it’s going through, it’s going to at ease and it’s not going to want for anything and it will be at its best health and have someone to stand up for it.

K: Do you come across any challenges in caring for the pigs in the way you’d ideally want to?

P: On some of the studies it can be very intense and very brutal on the pig, like a lot of the blood samples and that does wear you down. We’ve had studies where we are blood sampling pigs every couple of days. You’re just... yeah, that’s a challenge. You can raise, we raise concerns about studies and anything you don’t agree with. You can challenge and you do get feedback if you raise a challenge, you’re not ignored. There’s an AWERB, ethical welfare review board, every study has to go through that and on the chair there is a chairman, an NVS, a statistician, there will be NACWOs and there will be lay people as well. So, scientists will have to go in and say “i want to do this study, I want ten pigs and do X,Y and Z to them”. Basically they have to prove that what they are doing is ethical and right. They go through the 3Rs and make sure it is as nice as possible and they’re not duplicating any work. I’ve been to a couple I've sat on and they’ve questioned it by saying “there’s been this study done by so and so, what are you going to gain from this study?” and people get their studies turned down. I’ve sat in and observed some and you’ve got to have faith that what you’re doing is the best way to do it. Like I say, when we do question things, you do get responses and things do change. We can change things if we are not happy, we have the power to stop things if we aren’t happy. If we see people not carrying out a procedure efficiently or correctly, we can stop it and we are listened to. So, it’s, I’m confident in that.

K: Is there anything in particular you’ve raised as a concern about the pigs?

P: The only thing with the pigs was the frequency of bleeding with some of the studies. That did get brought up, it got questioned. Erm, it got reviewed and unfortunately that was just part of the study, they needed the blood at specific points to get the information they needed. It was good that they listened, just a shame they couldn’t do nothing about it. I can’t think of any other major ones, as I say, because of the AWERB it’s pretty much all dialed in. There may be the odd thing like the facility they’ve chosen isn’t fully adequate or.. We have meetings after each study too like about what went well, what went bad, it might get brought up there that the building wasn’t quite what we wanted, if a similar study came in it might be suited to this building instead... or... if we found out we needed more water drinkers because of the amount of pigs. We have the code of conduct and code of practice to follow, and that tells you how much space and water. That is your bare minimum, sometimes having more is better. You’ve met your legal requirements, why not go that bit further? We’ve said it before where we’ve only needed two water drinkers in the pen, that’s what the law tells us. Why don’t we put four in? That will just make it better because four pigs can drink at once, especially with hot days and pigs have to thermoregulate it would just be better. They listen to comments like that. It’s not about having the code of practice, it’s about having a platinum standard. You need to be better than that. When you raise them points a lot of the time you are fully backed because the more you can do for the pig, the calmer it is, the calmer it is for us working, everybody wins. If you can justify it, they are more than happy.

K: It seems you have quite a lot of faith in the ethical review process.

P: Yeah. You have to. When you go and listen... as I say, I have no formal qualifications and when I go and listen to these people, they are scientists... the statistician bloke just blows my mind the way he pulls out numbers and questions things, he’s got a massive brain. When you listen to these people, you’ve got to believe they know what they’re talking about because it’s a room full of rocket scientists basically [laughs]. You need to have faith in the system.

K: Do you think your experience being more hands-on is sometimes in contradiction to the science?

P: Yes. There’s a lot... scientists are very data driven, they want results and they want it now. Sometimes, it doesn’t work that way. If you’re bleeding a pig and that pig doesn’t want to be bled and they’re stressing and stressing and stressing, and starts thrashing about, you’re going to do damage to that pig so you stop. I have butted heads a few times where I've turned up with half the amount of blood they wanted. Where is it? Well, it’s still in the pig. We can’t get it out, it was traumatic. We’ve had staff worn out, pigs warn out, we’ve called it. You get a few moans but the minute you go with animal welfare, I've called it on that... we can get you all the blood now, but you probably won’t have a pig tomorrow... the minute you bring them down to that level... I'm probably painting them all with a bad brush, there are scientists I've worked with who don’t see them as animals, they see it as tubes of blood or swabs or whatever tissue samples they want. We went to a meeting one day and they did a lovely powerpoint presentation about what they were going to do, The pigs were going to stay here on a hepatitis study, they were gonna be here 3 months and be bled, it was quite intense, so we weren’t looking forward to the amount of work we were doing on the pig and the physicality of it. This woman had done a lovely PowerPoint presentation and she’d made this little flowchart of a little cartoon pig, you had him coming off the truck and going into the pen, there was a cartoon picture of a syringe and right at the end there was a picture of the pig with angel wings and a halo going up to heaven, and that was meant to be the PM room. It was... we were speechless. The NVS there lost it and was like “what do you think you’re doing?!” and she went “what?”, she said “these people sitting in front of you are looking after these animals, they’re caring for these animals and you’re making a joke about them dying?”. The woman didn’t realise, so we invited her down to come and meet the pigs and she spent a day working with us and it completely changed her outlook on it. She was really taken aback on how lovely the pigs were, so yeah that was good. A lot of people just don’t realise and until you tell them, they don’t know. It was nice to see her reaction and after that, we got constant emails from her and it was like “how are my pigs doing? Can you send me some photos?”. All of a sudden, they were *her* pigs, they weren’t blood samples anymore. That was just through, I guess ignorance. She had made this lovely PowerPoint presentation with cartoon pigs thinking she was making things light and fun, and it had the complete opposite effect, so when she came down to visit the pigs her outlook completely changed. The study was a tough study, but it was really nice working for her in the end, it was refreshing to have someone that kinda got your end of the story as well. So, communication is probably key on that, we try to get the scientists involved and we need to understand why it’s so important that the scientists get the samples they want and at what time, so we need to try our best to get what they want, but there needs to be a bit of wiggle room in the middle. But a lot of the scientists now, I mean the same faces come in now, we’ve got two on the flu studies that wanna get come down and join in. It’s nice.

K: And how would you describe your relationship with the pigs on study in general?

P: I try to, with all the animals, I try to keep distance and not get too attached. It’s virtually impossible not to get attached. There’s one that always... one with funny markings that just looks cute... one that’s just got character and tries to bite your wellies as you’re cleaning out... so you’ve got to see them as what they are. Even if you’ve got pigs in there, you’ve got your favourite one with a little character, he’s not your favourite because the one that bites you every time you go in needs exactly the same amount of care and attention and looking after and protecting. So, you can’t get involved too much, but I think I've got a healthy relationship with the pigs here, I'm not stand-offish, I'm not “it’s just a pig”, but they’re not pets. I try and sit on the fence a little bit, they get all my attention and all my care and everything they need, but both me and the pig is here to do a job and the only way we can do it is working together and me looking after them, if the pig is happy and trusts me then I will get what I need from the pig and pass that on to the scientist and the study is a success.

K: You say the pig is here to work as well. Do you think the pig makes a good worker in a lab setting?

P: Scientists will tell you yes because they are perfect for their models. I think that the sampling of a pig is quite a labour intensive tasks, again I have to believe all other options were exhausted and this is the best of it. Every one is doing work on pigs, not just us, you read about pig studies all the time in other countries, there’s documentaries on netflix where pig studies have come in and I can see they do exactly the same as what I do at work, so using that logic, then yes the pig is right for the job. It’s hard, it’s taxing, it’s strenuous and at times it can be emotional, but again that is part of the job.

K: Am I right in saying there were some that were bred on site?

P: Yes, we did have a herd of Babraham pigs that were bred on site on one of the other units, I had nothing to do with it. I’ve always worked with pigs and you needed to be 72 hours clean to go to them, so I was never 72 hours clean. They’ve moved on to Reading Uni I think now, but I don’t know about them.

K: Ok, you get your pigs from the same supplier?

P: Yes, and I also have a license to transport so I do pick them up so I see them from the very beginning to the very end, which I kind of like because I feel that because of what we’re using the animals for... I have to be... so, I'll take them to PM as well. So, I pick them up from the supplier, do the work, and then take them to PM. So, I feel like I’ve done every part of the job. I’m not trained in the euthanasia and if I'm honest it’s not something I want to be trained in because that’s one step too far for me. I feel like if I do everything, if I’m involved in all of the situations then that is the right thing to do. We’ve had small calves here, they are adorable and you can’t help but melt when they come, and it was hard to take them to the PM room because we were bottle feeding them as well. I’ve done lambing here as well and it’s hard when they move on and it is hard because you do get attached, but if I finish the job, then it’s only fair, that’s the way I see it.

K: Do you think that throughout the pigs time here, from when you pick them up, throughout the study and when you take them to the PM room, does your relationship with them change at all?

P: Erm, only as you get to know them so as I say, pigs will come in and to me they’re 20 pigs, as time goes on you get to know, so you’re relationship does change. Not professionally, definitely not on animal welfare, but you will sort of have your favourite group, your favourite cows, sheep, pigs, whatever they are. Yeah, it does change but only for the positive, unless it goes too far and you get too attached. But the relationship of looking after the pigs, no matter what’s getting done to it in the study, should never change. As it was, it should always be super high. All our animals, all the bedding and that is so clean, You won’t find pigs on farms that have the cleanliness and stuff we have. While they’re here, they want for nothing. We get fresh fruit and veg orders weekly, [other AT] probably mentioned we get them bananas because that seems to be their favourite. We get them whatever they want, chopped watermelons, pumpkins, all sorts. They don’t really want anything, the animals in our care. When you see the people here as animal techs, especially the newer ones, there is a certain type of person and they are very, very caring. We’ve got a very high, we’ve got a lot of female workers and we had a talk, an RSPCA work, and some sort of statistician guy came on and said the reason you’ve got a lot of females is because it is a caring job, like nursing and sort of because females have that larger caring instinct than males. You can definitely see that when you walk through the door. Especially compare that to the older... I mean we do a lot more procedures than they used to, the animal techs didn’t do procedures, it was all scientists, so you can kind of see it’s nice when you see the new starters and you hear about their background, that gives me a bit of faith as well. The people coming in to take over from the likes of me are good people. Yeah, so it’s a funny place because I always say well, I work in animal research and that’s the devils work, that’s a horrible thing to say but I do! I do it, and everyone here does it, to look after the animals and make sure they are OK. We are not going to be one of those horror stories you see in the Sunday Mirror where someone has snuck in with a camera and you can see people hitting cows and pigs. We are not going to be that place. Over my and every other animal tech’s body that would happen here. We’re not them people.

K: And when the pigs get ill from the study they’ve been on, does that change things?

P: Yeah, that’s quite tough. We’re quite lucky at [This facility] because we don’t really have anything that goes downhill that quickly. We aren’t a containment facility so the worst thing we deal with is flu, maybe a few high temperatures, lethargic... bits like that, similar to us when we get flu and feel rubbish, that’s how the pig feels. Obviously, that is still tough because you’ve been involved in making this pig ill on purpose, it wasn’t just out in the field with his mate. So, you’ve got to grin and bear that really because it’s your job. I have worked in a couple containment facilities where they do get nasty things, and it is quite taxing. It’s draining when you see them. Again, each study will have a humane endpoint, you get to a point and you have clinical score sheets. If it gets to a certain point or certain characteristics are shown, the pig is done and we will euthanize it. So, nothing is kept suffering. You will look at the protocol and say if it gets to like... level 5... we have to score it every day with things like it’s temperature, whether it is eating, it it’s part of the group, the colours, is it pink? There’s a thing where the extremities, like ears and stuff, kinda die off, so is any of that occurring? Is it labored breathing? Are there any hemorrhaging things? With the more severe ones, we will end that pig on study there and then and phone an NVS, euthanize it and then it will go to the PM room.

K: Are the factors for scoring the same across different studies?

P: They’re study dependent. Generally, you’ve got basics like feeding, temp, it’s general character in the group, how it acts. Depending on the study you will then have the more severe things like any respiratory things, but yeah it’s study dependent. Like I say, down here, all of the studies are pretty tame. I don’t think we’ve put one down for a humane endpoint because of the study. We have done some because of accidents, lame, we had one with a hernia or prolapse, things like that we’ve ended their life on study early, but we haven’t had any down here where the study has caused the pig to die.

K: And how does that make you feel when there is an unexpected death or illness?

P: Erm, it’s disappointing, it’s sad, but it is part of the territory. Animals are unpredictable, anything could happen. I could trip on my way out of this meeting and break my leg. Obviously, I'm not going to be put down for it, but you have to expect, well not expect it but when it happens, you find out why it happens. Did it happen because of anything we caused? That will also come up in the wash up meeting, we would say we lost a pig say through a broken leg, stumbled down a drain cover that was lose. Well why was the drain cover lose? Then you’d fix it like that. If it turned out it was a pure accident there is nothing you can do and just move on but anything that could have been avoided would be sorted out, maintained and fixed so it doesn’t happen again.

K: Okay. To finish, do you have a favourite thing about pigs?  
  
P: I like when you get the new piglets in, like a 6 week old pig and you open the truck up and they’re all wide eyed like “where am I?” and you get them off the truck and in the pen, load the straw in and they all burrow in there and they are gone. Then, there are these teeny little petrified animals and they come out over the next couple of days as they acclimatise and they turn into little menaces. You walk into the pen and they’re all round your feet, biting your wellies, they’ve nicked your shovel, they’ve follow you out, they’re tripping you over and yeah, it’s comical. I like how much fun they are. They are very fun animals to work with. It’s the thing when you come in and open the truck doors and you’ve got these little eyes looking at you and you instantly melt for them like “you’ll be fine”. Then you see them later and they are not the same pigs that wouldn’t get off the truck because they were scared, they’ve nicked your shovel and have bitten the bottom of a bag, I've got a bag of shavings and they’ve ripped it up. It’s the little things like that. We had some proper young ones come in and we proper over-bedded their pen. In the morning it would look like the pen was empty, you could sneak up to them and you could hear them snoring. Then a little nose would appear and when they realise you’re there they will pop up and be starving hungry. So, yeah the playfulness of pigs, that keeps you going. You do look forward to the new pigs arriving because they’re pretty cute. I work mostly with cows, for some reason they’ve always been my favourite animals, they nibble you and stroke them, but nothing beats the new arrival of pigs. Where we get our pigs and by the time they get back here it’s always lunchtime. When we’re expecting a pig delivery, they will all sit there at about 12 o’clock and see the truck and everyone comes up “oh, I'll come help you get the pigs in”. Even if people just stand there they just watch them because they’re so cute and sweet.

K: That’s sweet, I like to end on a good note!

P: Yeah. So in your talk you spoke about the sanctuary and the people weren’t happy with the vets who said to put them down, I guess because at the sanctuary that animal is a pet. So, that really got me thinking and my friend is a beef farmer and I spoke to him about how he feels about his animals. For him it’s money, how much money he put in and how much money he gets out. I know with his sheep, if they’ve got bad feet they will probably cull it because they don’t want the bad genetics and things like that. So, that’s how a lot of vets are. Especially livestock vets, I mean livestock are generally there for a purpose, to go to food or to make us products, so a farmer wants the best bang for their buck. When you go to the complete opposite end of the spectrum, where you’ve got pet pig owners, like a pot-bellied pig, or a sanctuary, that’s like their pet. I think we see it kinda in the middle, on the fence. The animal is here to do a job, you have to do that job because at the end of the day, money is involved. There is a lot of money in vet medicine, pharmaceuticals, we’re doing a lot of covid studies... so there is a lot of money in it. Lot’s of important stuff that has to be done right and there’s lots of money in it, like farmers. But I think we kind of, especially with animal care staff, are more of the sanctuary side of the fence looking over at the farmer side. It got me thinking about how do I feel when vets come and put animals down? We’ve had both, where the vet has wanted to keep the cow over the weekend and I've gone “no it needs to go now”. I’m not coming in on the weekend to find the cow... we had one with a hernia and the vet said he was okay to send him to PM on Monday and I said no. If I had come in and found one of the other cows had jumped him and he’s on the floor and his stomach has split open, that’s on me because I haven’t made the decision. So, it’s doing what is right for the animal. There is a tendency where, I mean I've had the same things with pets, are you keeping that animal alive for you or for the animals welfare?

K: Yes, sometimes killing is a form of care.

P: That’s it yeah. I had a cat that had kidney failure and they said he’ll be fine but you need to bring him in for treatment once a month. She was really old and I just thought she’s not her, she’s not a cat anymore. That’s not what she wants. I’m not keeping her alive for me, if she wants to stay alive, she will do it for herself. So, it’s very interesting hearing you talk about sanctuaries because, well I've got two kids and we go to petting zoos and things, but I've never put myself in their shoes and thought about how they feel about their animals. Until you bought it up, I'd never really given much thought about how I feel about the animals here, it’s been an interesting discussion to myself. I think I knew, but no one has ever asked me “what’s your relationship with a pig?”. I laughed at one of the questions, “how would you describe pigs to others” and I was like... pink, four legs? I was like what do I say! I’ve never been asked these questions and it’s not until you think about things that you realise.... I wouldn’t even, it sounds a bit strange, but I wouldn’t have even thought I had a relationship with the animals here, it’s work, but obviously I do have one, I've just never used those words.

K: Yeah, it’s like getting at those subconscious thoughts and feelings.

P: Yeah, that’s it, so it’s been quite eye opening for me. Thinking about the sanctuary, I took my boys to a little petting farm the other day and I was looking at the staff there, watching them more than the animals because I wanted to see how they reacted to them. It was nice to see, they were chatting away to the animals, sneaking a carrot to a cow, like one guy sneaked it as he walked past with his hand behind his back. That brought me back to what you said about the sanctuary and I thought, what would happen if anything happened to that cow? How would that guy feel? It must be devastating. So, I think we put a barrier up here because of what we do. It’s a good shield to protect you because we know what is going to happen, it’s like you’re prepared for it.

K: If in the sanctuary they are seen as pets, and with a farmer it is more money based, do you have a word to describe how you would view the pigs here?

P: They’re not money to me. I try not to get too close. I don’t know... I can’t think of a word.... They’re not, I don’t see them as a tool or a means to an end like the science kind of thing, I try not to see them as pets because that’s too much one way, so kind of in the middle... like colleagues in a way. They’re like me, I'm here to do a job but fortunately I can go home at the end of the day, unfortunately the pigs don’t. So, yeah, it’s a strange one.