

# the companion interview



Jill Moss grew up in North London where her father ran a property business and her mother was a housewife. She trained as a child actress, appearing in film and on television, and took a BA in Broadcast Journalism. Jill has worked as a journalist and presenter, and also trained as a group facilitator and role-play performer for corporate companies. In 2004 her Samoyed dog Bella became the first recorded dog to die of MRSA following cruciate surgery on her knee. Bella's death inspired Jill to develop the Bella Moss Foundation in 2005. The mission of the foundation is to work with the veterinary profession and pet owners alike in improving knowledge of MRSA and other serious infections affecting companion animals.

**Q** When you started the foundation you said your aim was to work with veterinary professionals in raising awareness of MRSA – how easy was that?

**A** In the beginning it was difficult to develop a link with the veterinary profession, mainly for two reasons.

The first; I was deeply immersed in the emotional loss of Bella's death and simply wanted to get the message out there regardless of who I upset. I was fortunate to have my partner who helped me understand how the profession needed to be approached, and that led to a number of relationships that have become

important to the Foundation. The second problem was the understandable suspicion with which I was viewed by some. Here I was, a pet owner with no clinical knowledge, telling the veterinary profession how it had failed my dog and other animals with serious infections. What made the difference, I think, was that the people I spoke to came to understand that I was more interested in solutions than blame, and it was good timing, I suppose, that MRSA in animals was becoming an important issue in academic and research areas. I believe my involvement with DEFRA's Darc committee on MRSA in animals has greatly advanced the work of the Foundation.

#### **How do you continue to pursue that relationship with the profession?**

Our basic philosophy from the start was to be collaborative, and that continues to this day. The people in the profession we work with know that we won't misrepresent issues or tailor things just to suit our needs, and we can trust them to give us good, clear advice and guidance. We respect deeply the knowledge and experience of our board of clinical advisors and they respect our position as representing the needs and anxieties of pet owners. Since 2005 our clinical advisors have also become dear friends. Not a day goes by where I do not consult at some level with them on issues of science of strategy.

#### **What have been the key milestones for BMF?**

The most important advance had been the move away from an almost purely empirical approach to infection control and management at the practice level. When we took CPD seminars on tour in 2006/7 we saw attitudes change *in the room*. This was quite amazing, and only possible because of the calibre of speakers we had. We've also been fortunate to see the



Jill with Clarissa Baldwin and Chris Laurence of Dogs Trust

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veterinary associations, both national and European, take up the challenge of improving infection control practise. BMF is the only lay member of DEFRA's committee on antimicrobial resistance in animals and we are now involved in FECAVA's working group on hygiene and responsible use of antimicrobials in veterinary practice. BMF is also collaborating with the Department of Health for the 2012 National Antimicrobial Awareness day on 18 November. Collaboration between human and animal health organisations is the greatest milestone that we have achieved, considering our humble beginnings.

#### How have things changed since you started the foundation?

In 2004, I searched in the internet for facts on MRSA in animals and there was very little available. Due to the international scientific conferences we have held, latest research from academics has helped practitioners to take on board some of the important issues that we promote in animal health.

I think the big change recently is in how much attention individual practitioners have given the issue of hygiene in veterinary practice and how they've adapted their own work as a result of our CPD alongside with BSAVA, BVA, the RVC and University of Liverpool. We have all been working for some time to bring to vets up to date evidence based information that can have practical implications for protecting practices against resistant bacteria.

#### Have you developed any veterinary heroes in this time?

In the UK, Professor David Lloyd and Anette Loeffler at the RVC have been key supporters and advisors, as have Tim

Nuttall and Susan Dawson at the University of Liverpool. BSAVA Past President Mike Jessop has helped us enormously as has Chris Laurence of Dogs Trust and Paul Manning. The tragic deaths of Nick Mills and Tracy Mayne have robbed The Foundation of two inspirational veterinary mentors. In North America Dr Scott Weese at the University of Guelph has done an enormous amount to support vets and pet owners in contact with us. All of these are our heroes because of their willingness to help and give up their free time to commit to the issues.

#### If you could go back in time, might you choose a veterinary career yourself?

I had, when much younger, dreamed of becoming a vet, and I wonder how my life would have been different had I done that. I did toy with the idea of training last year at the Royal Veterinary College. I discussed this with our advisors who thought I would be best concentrating on the Foundation moving forward as a charity that can make a real difference, so I am now doing just that alongside taking a business degree.

#### What about communicating issues around infection with pet owners?

Pet owners need to know the facts, but they also need to know how to use these facts. Although the relationship between vet and pet owner is between two equals, they do not approach a consultation in an equal state. Pet owners are subject to a range of negative emotions when concerned about the health of a pet and this affects their ability to absorb and act on information. This makes the job of being a vet difficult because it complicates the way they approach giving information. This is where BMF can help. On a daily basis I am dealing with the public who contact

BMF for support. I always tell every owner no matter how distressed they are, that it is futile to try to pinpoint where the bacteria came from, they need to communicate with their vet on clinical management of serious infections. The majority of pet owners appreciate transparency from vets, through our work they understand there are no guarantees, infections do occur, but early detection and targeted treatment is the key to reducing the risk of fatality.

#### You often focus your educational resources on VNs – why is this?

Vet nurses have massive influence on the way work is carried out in a practice, and a trusted nurse is of immense value to a vet. Vet nurses know that their standing is supported by their knowledge and understanding and are hungry for more. We also want veterinary nursing to be a properly recognised and regulated profession, and knowledge is the key to achieving that. BMF have built a great relationship with veterinary nurses and we hold lectures every year at BVNA.

#### What are the best resources available?

We direct vets from all over the world to the BSAVA website, and to BVA. I am proud to say that we are re-launching our website 1 October. At [www.thebellamossfoundation.com](http://www.thebellamossfoundation.com) we will have video recordings of our clinical advisors speaking about resistant bacteria, aimed at both veterinarians and the general public. The new BMF will have separate portals, pet owners, vets, livestock, and we are collaborating with DEFRA and the VMD, as well as other human health organisations to ensure the information is up to date and evidence based. The new BMF website will be formidable resource for vets, and we continue to rely on BVA and BSAVA for support in making sure all of our information is accurate and helpful. ■