As a 15-year-old struggling to find his footing in school, Matthew was faced with an unconventional suggestion from a teacher: “Why don’t you skip 1 day a week?” With that time, Rendle was instructed to find something that sparked his interest and that he could see turning into a career down the line.

**CLINIC CHAMPION:**

Matthew Rendle, RVN
Tari Vets, Essex, United Kingdom
Wildlife Vets International, Yorkshire, United Kingdom
As a lover of reptiles—and a proud owner of garter snakes and other exotic species since the age of 10—Rendle reached out to a family friend to volunteer at a local veterinary practice on his free Thursdays. He has not spent much time away from veterinary clinics in the 3 decades since.

“This was the first time I realized what veterinary nurses do and that this was an option for a career,” he says. “At the time, the advice for a man wanting to work with animals was working on a farm. But I was blown away by how good the veterinary nurses were; they ran everything and their standard of care was amazing.”

Rendle found his purpose, and ultimately his career, at a time when his studies did not come naturally—all thanks to the counterintuitive advice from his mentor.

“What my instructor showed me was empathy. He had a huge insight into how I was struggling, and once I got that foot in the door, it gave me motivation and pushed me back onto being well behaved and studying for exams,” says Rendle. “So, I try my best now to support anybody. Anybody who contacts me with an interest in wanting to be a veterinary nurse, I will absolutely support them as much as I can. Because you just need that spark, that first person who inspires you.”

Rendle went on to work at that practice for 13 years, seeing horses and cows and continuing to stoke his fascination for reptiles, avian species, and other exotic species. He accepted a job at the London Zoo in the early 2000s, where he learned valuable lessons working with a wide variety of species, although his favorite patient may be a Komodo dragon named Raja.

“He taught me loads because Komodo dragons are much smarter than you think and they have the ability to learn very quickly,” says Rendle. “I was fascinated by him because he was this massive, beautiful lizard, and I spent a lot of time training him to have voluntary blood samples taken, to stand on scales, have ultrasounds done, have his nails clipped, and things like that. This was an incredibly smart animal.”

Rendle carries an appreciation for what he calls “the unsung heroes,” intelligent animals such as vultures, every day, veterinary nurses/technicians make a positive impact on their clients, patients, coworkers, and greater community. But the stories behind each and every one of these professionals are often overlooked due to the selfless nature of working in veterinary medicine.

Today’s Veterinary Nurse aims to shine a light on some of these stories with its Clinic Champions series. Each issue, TVN and Midmark will honor a veterinary nurse for their contributions in community service, scholarship, advocacy, or innovation. This series will highlight unsung heroes who make a lasting impact on their patients and community. At the end of the year, 1 of the 4 honorees will be recognized as the Clinic Champion of the Year. This individual will receive a trip to VMX 2024 in Orlando, Florida, including registration, hotel, and airfare, or an award of equal value.

To nominate a veterinary nurse/technician, visit bit.ly/ClinicChampions.
bats, and lizards that may get overlooked or a bad rap at first glance. Rendle, after all, understands what it’s like to stick out. He recalls sitting for his secondary exam at the age of 18 as the only male in a room with 150 females. Less than 3% of veterinary nurses in the United Kingdom are male, according to the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons. However, Rendle glows about the support and kindness he received from coworkers as he found his footing along the way and has made it his mission to pass that along to others. He’s gone on to become the chair of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons’ Veterinary Nurses Council and is the first male to hold that position.

“Any diversity in any veterinary team is positive—everybody brings a different angle to it, a different skill set, and a different approach. I think that’s really healthy,” says Rendle. “We need to work toward making this an accessible and sustainable career for as many people as we can.”

Rendle’s experience at the London Zoo led him to opportunities working on projects with Wildlife Vets International (WVI). His first international work involved emergency nursing for birds in India that were injured during a kite flying festival. The event saw thousands of kites being flown simultaneously, many with sharp strings called manja, which led to a large caseload of birds needing anesthesia for treatment.

“There’s nothing better than having an impact on a case and then it getting released back into the world. That’s the best thing I’ve done by a mile,” says Rendle. “Matthew has a great sense of humor together with being very compassionate, which makes him wonderful to work with,” says Olivia Walter, executive director of WVI. “I really enjoy our catch-up meetings because invariably I end up crying with laughter, which is great for the soul.”

*Today’s Veterinary Nurse* had the chance to speak with Rendle about lessons he’s learned throughout his career and his experiences abroad.

**TODAY’S VETERINARY NURSE: How have you tried to integrate the concepts of empathy and emotional intelligence while working with others throughout your career?**

**MATTHEW RENDLE:** One simple thing I’ve found that’s incredibly powerful is telling people that you’re having a bad day and being open about your mental health. It’s a funny thing to talk about, but I’ve won a few awards along the way in my career. People would typically focus on those, but I’m much keener to tell people that, actually, I’ve had bumps in the road and my mental health has been up and down over the years. It’s good to talk to people that have started in their career and tell them, “It’s OK to not be OK.” There will be days when you’re not on your absolute best form, and as long as we talk to each other about that, we can support each other and explain to each other that, “Actually, I feel like that too.”

The last time I was involved in trying to resuscitate a road traffic accident dog, it died. The veterinary nurse that was helping me was incredibly upset, and I was upset too. But I took the time to just say to her, “I’m really upset right now,” and she was surprised. She was like, “Well, you’ve been doing it for 30 years, why are you still upset?” And I said, “Because it still hurts, it still feels like it’s something that you’ve let down even though you’ve done your best.” In the U.K., we have quite a few egos in veterinary nursing. We have lots of people who only ever talk about the positives of our profession and make it appear that they’ve had a completely stress-free career, which I don’t think is possible. It’s important to make sure that you look out for each other and are honest with each other. I think that’s what makes good leaders: listening to what the other person has to say without judging them. There’s nothing worse than people saying to you, “I
know how you feel,” because they definitely don’t. Everybody feels these things differently. You have to work at these things, and you get better as you go along.

TVN: How did you deal with the low points in your career and what have you learned from these experiences?

RENDLE: The most important thing it taught me was that when you need help, you need to pull on the people around you. I’ve been incredibly lucky that I’ve had a circle of friends that will support you, be honest with you, and support you through that process. I also learned that not everybody understands it—some people are still very judgmental and think that struggling with mental health isn’t a thing. They will say you just need to pull yourself together and get on with it. Actually, it makes you think that you have to look out for your own mental health.

We’re very quick to talk about our physical health in veterinary nursing. You know, we’ve got bad knees and bad elbows from wrestling with dogs and lizards. But it’s important that we just talk about the fact that we have mental health issues going on as well. And it’s not detracted from my career at all. It’s made me make some decisions that have been hard, but I don’t regret those. It’s made me a more empathetic veterinary nurse to both our clients, the patients, and to the students and veterinary nurses around me. As long as you embrace these issues, and don’t ignore them, they can help improve your ability to deal with situations.

TVN: You spoke about making hard decisions in your career. What would be your advice for someone who’s going through a struggle and is contemplating how to make a change or take the next step forward?

RENDLE: One of the things that took me a long time to learn is: “Where you are is not who you are.” For a long time, I thought that I needed to be in a certain role to get adulation and kindness and support. That is not true at all. You find your own path. And I’m a huge believer in being nice trumps being smart. I don’t consider myself particularly smart, but I’ve always tried to be nice and supportive to everybody around me. It doesn’t matter where you work, you can have a positive influence on your caseload every day. So, wherever you are, that’s a hard lesson to learn. I also think showing weakness—unfortunately, as men and as professionals, we try our best to not admit that we’re having a bad day or we’re having burnout or we’re feeling emotional fatigue. And I think it’s important that we just talk about that stuff clearly. Another thing that is really important is to continue learning. Sometimes we can get past our exams, take a sigh of relief, and then stop and think: I learned everything. However, I still learn something every day I work. I learn from the students I work with and I learn from the animals. It’s important to reflect that nobody knows everything; you’re constantly learning and your skill set changes. We just need to make sure that we’re continuing to grow as a
profession. This helps us get better client recognition, but also in the general public. It’s hard work, but it’s incredibly rewarding.

TVN: What is it like to work in the field with wildlife? How would you describe the differences for someone working in a clinic?

RENDLE: These trips are not as glamorous as people think (laughs). At the first center I worked in India, it was 12- or 14-hour days, and you would do maybe 30 bird anesthetics in a day. And 10 of those would be fracture fixations—it was a really high caseload. It teaches you a lot about improvisation and about how lucky we are in most clinics. I’ve worked in places where euthanasia is not allowed in any form. That means you have to be able to provide analgesia and keep those animals as comfortable as possible. But it also teaches you that you have to rely on your core skills. For example, arriving at one of the centers in India, I was given an anesthetic circuit that was a massive circle circuit, which would be ideal to anesthetize a 70-kilo dog. But we needed it to anesthetize 30- to 40-gram owls and these tiny bats. So, I had to go to a hardware store, have a mix-around in their cupboard, make a T-piece, make a scavenging system, and then get that to work. Then, at the next center we went to, their anesthetic machine wasn’t working at all. I had to rebuild the circuit and sort out the leaks in it as well. These experiences make you reflect on how effective and incredibly knowledgeable U.K. veterinary nurses and American veterinary nurses/technicians are. It makes me realize how much of a positive impact you can have, but you have to be aware that you might not necessarily have all the bells and whistles that you have in practice. But you’re the best person in that situation. — By Andy Zunz TVN