

## StreetVet Bristol team lead Dr Gabriel Galea

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### Where did you undergo your veterinary training and what is your current field of work?

I did my vet degree at the University of Bristol, which is obviously the best vet school in the world. Obviously. I also did my PhD in Bristol and am now a Principal Research Fellow at the UCL Great Ormond Street Institute of Child Health. My research group studies severe malformations of the central nervous system in children, identifying the genetic and environmental factors which cause them and working towards stem cell therapies to rescue damaged neurons.

### How long have you been involved with StreetVet and where do you volunteer?

I started helping provide free vet care for homeless pet owners in 2016, right before StreetVet was officially founded. My initial role was to establish stations in London, where StreetVet started. As we grew, I launched StreetVet in several cities outside of London, including leading the first ever outreach in Bristol. My current role is StreetVet Bristol team lead, although I also volunteer once a month in London.

### What aspect grew your inclination towards working in this field? What aspects of it do you particularly enjoy?

As a vet walking through London, I often saw many homeless pet owners and wondered what I could do to help if I thought their pet needed treatment. Providing vet care is not as simple as handing out a coat or food. What I appreciate most about StreetVet is that we have an established system of work, covering everything from Veterinary Medicines Directorate requirements and out of hours provision, to public liability insurance, which means we can help when needed. That's important because many of our service users would not be able to make use of established practice-based charity practices, for many reasons.

### What is a 'regular' day like in the life of a StreetVet?

Most of our team volunteer one session every two to three weeks. In Bristol, our weekly session is on Saturday morning. A regular StreetVet day starts around 10am in our lockup, collecting a trolley-full of pet supplies ranging from food to coats. Our volunteers get used to stocking stuff they are likely to need, although it's hard to predict what types of dogs (and the occasional cat) we may see. I remember being really worried about stocking harnesses: vet school did not prepare me for the complexities of which appendage goes through which hole in all the different harnesses styles. Once stocked, they head over to a park where our service users know we'll be. We do not use an appointment system, so you never really know how busy you'll be or what the next patient will need. Our team are good at thinking on their feet! Any patients that need in-practice care are booked in during the week, typically to an amazing Vets4Pets practice in Emersons Green who have been absolutely lifesavers (literally). In a typical session we will see three to six dogs over two

*The bond between people and their companion animals is profound, mutualistic and provides numerous physiological benefits. In light of the homeless population these pets provide aspects of safety, responsibility and improved emotional and mental health. The socio-economic status of being homeless does not negate one's ability to care for their animals. In the simplest of ways, it teaches us about unconditional compassion and care. The stigma surrounding homelessness and dog ownership can be overcome by understanding the importance of such a companionship to both animal and human health.*

*StreetVet is a charity aimed at supporting lives of the homeless population and their companion animals across the UK, making often vital-yet-costly treatment affordable and accessible to people experiencing homelessness. Such a charity goes far and beyond to reduce barriers to essential veterinary services such as providing daily essentials, medications, prescriptions, surgery, follow-ups as well as owner education; and helps ensure homeless pet owners are not forced to choose between access to resources and their pet – which for many can potentially perpetuate their homelessness. StreetVet is supported by several renowned organisations. With over 900 current supporters and a great team of qualified professionals, the organisation is always looking for more involvement. Support can be given in the form of donations, volunteering or notifying them of a dog or owner in need. Such will increase outreach, enable delivery of this much needed program, and ensure that people without access to resources to care for themselves and their pets can continue to enjoy the pivotal companionship their pets provide.*

**Dr Gabriel Galea, the Team Lead of StreetVet Bristol, shares his insights with us.**

hours, usually giving us a chance to also have a bit of a chat with their owners, providing a bit of companionship and social interaction which is so important for some people. After the session we return the kit and type up our clinical notes to upload them to our cloud-based practice management system. Once a month we then reconvene on Zoom late in the evening for "continuity of care rounds" during which we discuss all the patients receiving treatment from us to make sure we have a joined-up approach. We're very lucky in Bristol that we work alongside the fantastic Bristol Paws Project who coordinate our clinical rounds and present the cases (special shoutout to Holly!).

## **How has being involved with such a community shaped your perception of the homeless population and their companion animals?**

What I did not appreciate before getting involved in StreetVet is just how costly it is to care for a pet when you are homeless. Having a dog automatically excludes you from most housing options, day centres, soup kitchens, hospital appointments, etc. We do our best to help homeless pet owners access services they would otherwise be excluded from because of their pet, for example through the StreetVet Accredited Hostel Scheme. The stigma associated with pet ownership is also heartbreaking and completely unjustified. It is not uncommon for our service users to be verbally abused by misguided pet lovers. I particularly remember an elderly dog with a papilloma on its head for which surgery was not clinically indicated, but passers-by would occasionally berate its owner for leaving his dog with 'cancer'.

## **Any specific current or growing challenges faced? What changes would you like to see in the forthcoming years?**

The biggest challenge we face is ensuring we have volunteers at every scheduled StreetVet session. That's critical: we cannot call our clients (many do not have phones) to tell them we may not be around if we do not have enough volunteers. Some may literally spend all the money they have left to get to us. As volunteer's personal lives and jobs change, we regularly lose experienced volunteers from the team (some end up moving to other StreetVet cities) so it is important that we constantly recruit new vets and vet nurses maintain our care provision.

## **How would volunteering with StreetVet benefit clinical practitioners and veterinary students?**

StreetVet is stripped-back vetting. We never have to worry about turnover, or the number of clients in the waiting room, or cutting corners because of owner finances. Whatever is in the animal's best interest, StreetVet will get sorted. I often say it reminds me of the answers I used to give when asked "Why do you want to become a vet?" It was always about that one-on-one connection with the pet and their owner, and it is really fulfilling to see the impact we have on both their lives. I do also enjoy the novelty of it – I love problem solving and thinking on my feet to adapt to new situations (top tip, corn blades are great for removing sutures). The vet students who work alongside us certainly get involved in providing care to our patients at a very early stage. We do need more vet students to help us, with tasks ranging from helping with medicine stocktakes to our monthly StreetVet/Bristol Paws joint session. Our student helpers also get to be part of a welcoming and friendly group of caring vets and vet nurses, expanding their network and meeting future colleagues.

## **What advice do you have for the new and evolving generation of veterinary students today?**

This may be a cliché, and difficult to get used to doing, but I really think it's important to take the good stuff home with you. The patient with an easy diagnosis that you were able to make a quick difference

to, the client who is still grateful for your empathy when you euthanised their previous pet, being able to bleed to beagle nobody else could – take those thoughts home with you. Write the rubbish, bad stuff down in a book and understand why they happened. It's possible you need to learn from the bad stuff. Sometimes the lesson is that you need to upskill at something, but sometimes you realise that the practice environment you're in sets you up for failure. If you can't change it, get out of there...

**Find out more:**  
[www.streetvet.co.uk](http://www.streetvet.co.uk)



## **Anoushka Agarwal**

Alongside my passion towards the veterinary profession, I took a keen interest in working as an editor with INSPIRE Student Journal earlier this summer. For me, this paves way for the increased dissemination of veterinary-related knowledge across readers and creates opportunities for collaboration across various

medical domains that work cohesively to add to an ever-expanding body of knowledge.