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REFLECTING ON PARALLELS OF PROFESSIONALISM: LARGE ANIMAL VETERINARY TECHNICIANS, *DEER WARS*, AND *SEARCH AND RESCUE NEW ZEALAND*

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INTRODUCTION

This reflection arises from my Doctor of Professional Practice research at Otago Polytechnic, which examines how the role of the Large Animal Veterinary Technician (LAVT) in Aotearoa New Zealand might be developed to support long-term career sustainability. Reflective encounters with stories outside one's own profession are themselves a powerful mechanism for professional learning.

While travelling recently, I listened to two Radio New Zealand documentary series—*Deer Wars* and *Search and Rescue New Zealand*—that unexpectedly illuminated the professional journeys of those in other New Zealand fields. Both documentaries depict a shift from *ad hoc*, community-driven activity toward structured, ethically accountable, and technologically sophisticated practice. Listening to them from the perspective of my own field prompted a deeper inquiry into what professionalism means, how it evolves, and what sustains it over time.

Although prompted by documentary storytelling rather than formal educational activity, these reflections represent a form of work-based learning. They illustrate how professional understanding can develop through critical engagement with experiences beyond one's own discipline, enabling practitioners to question assumptions, recognise common patterns of professional development, and re-examine their own identity and practice. From a work-based learning perspective, these stories demonstrate that professional becoming, and therefore professional identity, is shaped not solely through formal education but through reflection on practice, participation within communities of practice, and continual adaptation to changing workplace contexts. This reflective article does not report empirical research involving human or animal participants. Ethics approval was therefore not required.

REFLECTIONS ACROSS PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Deer Wars describes how the introduction of deer to New Zealand created a thriving wild population that demanded management. What began as a loosely organised, often dangerous industry of government shooters and private cullers gradually matured into a regulated and profitable deer-farming sector.

There are striking parallels with the development of the Large Animal Veterinary Technician profession. In the early days, veterinary work relied on whoever was available—a farmer's wife, a junior vet, or a spare farmhand—to lend a hand. Over time animal welfare standards rose. As practices such as the routine use of sedation and pain relief during calf disbudding, together with herd teat sealing for mastitis prevention, became commonplace, the need for trained allied veterinary professionals emerged. Like the deer industry, we have moved from being informal helpers to skilled practitioners guided by best practice, regulation, and a strengthening professional identity.

Search and Rescue New Zealand tells a related story. What began as small groups of locals with area knowledge evolved into a coordinated national network supported by advanced communication systems, trained extraction teams, and technology such as drones, GPS, and personal locator beacons. The pattern is familiar: grassroots collaboration transforming into professionalism through experience, training, and innovation.

Today, the LAVT profession is experiencing its own technological revolution. Livestock wearables, remote monitoring, and data-driven herd management are reshaping how we work. Like the New Zealand Land Search and Rescue community, we rely on communication, teamwork, and the ability to adapt in unpredictable conditions. Across all three stories lies the same thread: professionalism is not static. It is built through experience, shaped by technology, and refined through reflection.

These parallels remind me that being a professional is not only about competence or credentials; it is about evolving responsibly, maintaining ethics, and contributing to something larger than ourselves. On a personal level, I recognise that each of these industries—deer management, search and rescue, and veterinary technology—has had to confront ethical questions as it matured. What once was acceptable practice has shifted as our collective understanding of welfare, safety, and responsibility deepened. In deer recovery, that meant moving from exploitation to sustainable management. In search and rescue, it meant balancing personal risk with duty of care. In the veterinary world, it has meant embedding pain relief, animal owner or client consent, and welfare at the core of every decision. For me as an LAVT, reflecting on these parallels reinforces the idea that professionalism is an ethical stance as much as a practical one. It means acting with integrity even when no one is watching, acknowledging the trust the public and clients place in our profession, and striving to do better as our tools, science, and understanding advance.

EXTENDING REFLECTION THROUGH A DOCTORAL INQUIRY

As my doctoral research progresses, these stories resonate strongly with my inquiry into how the LAVT role in Aotearoa can evolve sustainably. Each of these narratives charts a movement from informal, community-based practice toward structured professionalism, a process that, while often messy, has been essential to securing both ethical integrity and vocational survival.

Professionalisation as socio-cultural evolution

Like the early deer cullers or the volunteer trampers who became trained Land Search and Rescue personnel, LAVTs are negotiating a space between necessity and recognition. We have long carried out complex, skilled work on the margins of the veterinary profession, often without the structures that safeguard wellbeing or acknowledge expertise. My doctoral work aims to articulate what sustainability looks like for LAVTs—not only in terms of workforce numbers, but in the sense of being able to thrive within our practice rather than merely endure it.

Professionalisation also involves navigating power. As with deer farming or search and rescue, legitimacy in the LAVT field is shaped by those who hold institutional authority: veterinarians, regulatory bodies, and agricultural policymakers. Yet, as Evetts (2013) points out, there is a crucial difference between organisational professionalism, imposed by institutions, and occupational professionalism, which is generated collectively by practitioners themselves. My doctoral work aligns with this latter conception, advocating for a distributed professionalism that emerges from practice itself. This challenges traditional hierarchies and repositions LAVTs as active agents in their own professional evolution, much as nursing once did as it developed from a profession historically positioned as subordinate to medicine, moving beyond medicine's shadow and into professional autonomy.

Ethical evolution

Ethically, these comparisons between professions are revealing. *Deer Wars* relates how ethical practice evolved from an unregulated pursuit to one governed by welfare and ecological awareness. In *Search and Rescue*, we hear how the moral imperative to help others became embedded in formal systems of safety and accountability. In both cases, professionalism involved ethical maturation as much as technical development. Growing attention to pain relief, consent, welfare, and emotional resilience illustrates how values that may once have been expressed largely through instinctive care are becoming consciously articulated, shared, and ultimately codified as professional expectations. Much of this ethical practice is embodied and relational. Our work takes place through physical acts of care such as holding an animal, reading its behaviour, or supporting a farmer in distress. These are not simply matters of abstract ethical decision-making; they are lived moral encounters that echo what Tronto (1993) calls the ethic of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness enacted through relationship. This resonates with Mol's (2008) notion of the logic of care, which emphasises continual adaptation and context-sensitive ethical action rather than static rule-following. Both frameworks help articulate what I see daily in LAVT work: the ethical texture of practice that unfolds through embodied response to living systems.

PROFESSIONAL RESILIENCE AND THE NARRATIVE OF ADAPTATION

Across all three contexts, resilience emerges as a defining feature of professionalism. The deer recovery teams adapt to shifting economies and environmental pressures; search and rescue responders learn to work under extreme conditions of uncertainty while minimising risk to themselves; and LAVTs continually adjust to new technologies, diseases, and ethical expectations. My doctoral research situates resilience not as endurance but as adaptive professionalism—the capacity to evolve, learn, and sustain care in changing contexts. Schön's (1983) idea of reflection-in-action describes this process: professionals think through doing, improvising ethically and technically in real time. This ongoing calibration of professional judgement and response, moving continually between thought and action, forms the flexible backbone of professional resilience. From a te ao Māori perspective, this resilience also carries a collective dimension. Professional strength arises from whanaungatanga, the relationships and trust that bind teams together, and from kaitiakitanga, the notion of guardianship that underpins our ethical responsibilities to animals, land, and community. The whakataukī "Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini" expresses this beautifully: my strength is not that of one but of many.

METHODOLOGICAL RESONANCES AND REFLEXIVITY

Methodologically, the parallels between the documentaries reinforce my use of reflective and practice-based inquiry. Each of these podcast narratives functions as a form of public reflection or collective storytelling that documents how professionals learn, adapt, and define meaning in their work. Listening as both practitioner and researcher, I recognise my own field within those narratives: a community negotiating legitimacy, identity, and sustainability. Rather than treating the podcasts as data sources, I use them as reflective prompts through which to view familiar professional questions from different perspectives.

As an insider researcher undertaking phenomenographic inquiry, which seeks to identify the qualitatively different ways in which people experience or understand a phenomenon, I acknowledge that my interpretations are shaped by my lived experience as a working LAVT. This dual position requires continual reflexivity, recognising that my professional identity both informs and constrains what I am able to see. Finlay (2002) describes this as "negotiating the swamp" of practitioner research—maintaining critical distance while embracing the insight that comes from being immersed in one's own field. In the Aotearoa context, this reflective stance aligns with Macfarlane and Macfarlane's (2019) call to "listen to culture": acknowledging relationships, context, and reciprocity as integral to ethical research practice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE PRACTICE

This reflection reinforces my commitment to building frameworks that support not only technical proficiency but also wellbeing, belonging, and ethical reflection within LAVT teams. Just as Land Search and Rescue and deer management achieved sustainability through structured training, shared language, and mutual trust, so too must LAVT practice formalise the relational and reflective dimensions of our work. These insights will inform the next phase of my doctoral project, particularly in designing interventions that strengthen professional identity, ethical confidence, and long-term career satisfaction across the sector.

Seen in this way, professionalism becomes not a badge conferred by external authorities but a living relationship between competence, community, and conscience. The parallels I hear in these podcast stories remind me that professionalism grows strongest when it is grounded in shared purpose, ethical integrity, and the courage to redefine what our work can be. Ultimately, these reflections suggest that professional learning is not confined to one's own discipline. Sometimes the most powerful insights emerge by recognising familiar patterns in unfamiliar professions.

For work-based learners, these reflections highlight that professional identity is not acquired at graduation but evolves through experience and ethical reflection. Rather than an optional extra, reflection becomes an essential component of professional learning, just as work-based learning moves beyond the acquisition of technical competence towards the continual reshaping of professional identity through reflection, relationship, and practice.

AI statement

The author confirms that this work was independently written and that no generative AI tools were used in its production.

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