



TOP LEFT: Veterinary nurses Auckland-based Kirsty Colley (left) and Palmerston North-based Danielle McCabe work with the Animal Dermatology Clinic. Danielle is enrolling in a dermatology specialist accreditation course through the Academy of Dermatology Veterinary Technicians in the US.

OTHER PHOTOS:

The author's dog Hazel, who suffers from recurrent allergies, gets a good going over from Craig Griffin and Helen Orbell.

SKIN in the game

When New Zealand's only specialist veterinary dermatologist announced plans to retire, it threatened to create a significant hole in services. But as **Bette Flagler** reports, some creative thinking has resulted in an innovative new dermatology residency to plug the gap.



IT DIDN'T SEEM likely that Massey University Community Practice veterinarian Helen Orbell would be able to complete a dermatology residency. It wouldn't have been impossible, but there were kids to pack up and a husband who would need a new job – all the usual things that come with relocating. As it turns out, however, another option presented itself.

When Orbell, who graduated from the University of Queensland in 2001, came to work at Massey in 2011, she was already interested in dermatology. That fire was lit during a stint working at the Veterinary Teaching Hospital at Washington State University, and further stoked when she practised in Melbourne from 2008 to 2010 and spent all her CE time attending dermatology seminars and seeing practice with dermatologists.

With no dermatology specialist on Massey's staff, she wasn't sure where her interest would lead when she arrived here. Auckland-based Allan Bell was supportive and invited her to spend days with him at his practice on the North

Shore, but he wasn't at the point in his career where he could take on a resident.

Orbell also worked with Mandy Burrows, Associate Professor at Murdoch University, Perth, when Burrows came to Massey every two years to teach the dermatology paper for the Master of Veterinary Medicine programme. Dermatology is a really small specialty so it goes without saying that Burrows knew Bell.

When Bell contemplated retiring a few years back, like most veterinarians he was troubled about the disruption it would cause his clients. His main concern, he says, was succession and continuity of service. He didn't want to leave his clients high and dry, itchy and scratchy. At the time he was the only specialist veterinary dermatologist in New Zealand, and his retirement plans reinforced the significant gap in our collective knowledge.

Let's face it, if you're going to hand over the keys, why not pass them to the person who wrote the book? Literally. Chances are you've got a copy of *Muller & Kirk's Small Animal Dermatology* somewhere in

the clinic. Co-written by William Miller, Craig Griffin and Karen Campbell, the seventh edition was published in 2013.

Griffin founded the Animal Dermatology Clinic (ADC) in 1980. Then based in Garden Grove, California (about 55km north of Los Angeles), the ADC now has more than 30 specialists working at full-time clinics throughout Southern California, Georgia, Kentucky, Oregon and Indiana, as well as at satellite clinics in those states and in Maryland and Washington. The ADC became an international company when it partnered with Burrows in Western Australia in 2013.

When Bell was scouting around for someone to buy his practice, he made it known to Australian dermatologists (including Burrows) and also approached the ADC.

"Partnerships seek us out," says ADC Chief Executive Sharon Peterson. "Dermatology is a small world and Mandy Burrows approached us [to buy in to her Perth practice] and then Allan Bell



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approached us. We could see that the client need in Auckland was great."

Peterson presented the opportunity to the 10 main ADC partners and asked if the group was interested in doing something in New Zealand.

"Mandy was very interested and I was interested," says Craig Griffin. "Right off the bat we were told there was a chance we could do something at Massey as well. I've always liked academics, and several people in our group are academics [who also work] in practice. Our group teaches all the students at Murdoch University, [and] the opportunity of having that type of relationship in New Zealand was attractive to us."

While negotiations were underway, Griffin was contracted to run courses at Massey. "I was told, 'We have this Dr Orbell who likes derm, and she would like to help you'. I met Helen and we talked about the possibility of doing a residency."

"Mandy is passionate about teaching and providing good dermatology services to New Zealand," says Orbell. "You could say she groomed me to put my name forward as someone who would be a good candidate for a residency."

Things started to fall into place.

"Allan was interested, we were interested, the opportunity of being at Massey as well as in Auckland was really encouraging, and at that point in time there would be no dermatologist in New Zealand. Allan was leaving, and there was nobody left," says Griffin.

The ADC bought Allan Bell's practice (providing services in both Auckland and Hamilton) in January 2015, and initially contracted two specialists to provide services, including Debbie Simpson, a Massey graduate who had completed her dermatology training at the Melbourne Veterinary Specialist Centre.

Earlier this year Simpson opened The Skin Vet, and sees clients at two Auckland locations. Bell did, indeed, retire, but he hasn't fallen off the map. He is currently operating an online consultation practice available to anyone south of Taupō. (The geographic limitation is because of a restraint of trade agreement as part of the sale.)

While still not awash with dermatologists, New Zealand has gone from zero to a handful. (While not a specialist dermatologist, Duncan Graham

also continues to offer dermatology referral services in Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch and Dunedin.)

The ADC was the first privately owned facility to be approved by the American College of Veterinary Dermatology (ACVD) to provide a residency programme. It is currently training 10 residents, and more than 20 have completed the programme.

Private practice offering residencies is a newer trend, says Griffin. "You need to have things advanced enough in private practice to be able to satisfy all the requirements. You can't just say, 'I'm going to train somebody'."

Sorting out a tailored programme for Orbell required a bit of thinking and planning. It took nearly a year to submit and adjust the plan and to gain approval from the college. Bell and Simpson are Australian trained; Orbell is the first to undertake a residency in New Zealand and will be New Zealand's first dermatologist to be board certified through the ACVD.

Bell is excited that the ADC is offering residency training. "I think it's excellent.



I was a sole practitioner with very low infrastructure and not in a position to support a resident. I'm quite delighted that they have managed to do this."

Orbell's three-and-a-half-year programme is taking quite an alternative track, with time spent in Auckland, Hamilton and Palmerston North, Sydney and San Diego. Her supervisors Mona Boord and Craig Griffin are both from the ADC's San Diego clinic, and come to New Zealand four times a year.

In addition, Orbell spends one week each month in Sydney (working with Beth McDonald, Diplomate ACVD) and three months during her first year in San Diego.

Orbell sees cases in Auckland, Hamilton and Palmerston North when her supervisors aren't here. Dermatology being what it is, she takes photos, and telephones and emails Boord, Griffin and McDonald.

"They supervise me remotely. I'm really lucky, and the clients are getting a really good service because they're getting three specialists and me reviewing the cases."

Massey has been very supportive, she says, and that's to be expected. After all, it's a win-win for the university.

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"This is the first time there has been a dermatologist service at Massey. I think the university can see that it's a good business to have at Massey, and a really important service that we need to offer. Also, it gives our students – both the vets and the vet tech students – exposure to dermatology practised at a specialist level."

The plan is to train Orbell as the first resident, then she will supervise the next. The goal is to have Massey

staffed full time with a dermatologist and, assuming the business demand exists, keep the Auckland and Hamilton practices running. Providing a full-service dermatology programme at Massey includes a research component.

"One of the big differences is that we want to have a relationship with academics," says Griffin. "We're already talking to nutritionist Nick Cave about combined research projects. We want to be active in advancing the field. [The ADC] does a tremendous amount of clinical research and [we expect] the opportunity to do that here to be really good."

In the meantime, there's a lot of studying to be done.

"I've been a vet since 2001, so it's been quite different for me to come back into a resident role," says Orbell. "I'm learning so much, and it's really invigorated how I see my career. I love my job at Massey. It's been my favourite place to work."

"This opportunity has fallen into my lap, and I'm still kind of shocked that it's even happened. The fact that I can be an American-boarded dermatologist and largely remain in New Zealand is amazing." *(vs)*