

Exploring Careers: Nikos Gurfield



You might ask what is a County Veterinarian that runs a vector disease diagnostic laboratory doing in the ACVP? The bottom line is that pathology training and board certification open up many doors to you, many of which you can't see until you are there.

Like many vets, I wanted to be a vet since I was very young, but the draw to becoming a veterinary pathologist didn't hit me until senior year pathology rotations in vet school. In fact, before then, I couldn't fathom why any of my friends were pathologists and I most definitely did NOT enjoy my pathology courses. But that changed senior year when I took the pathology rotation-I loved it! Pathology was the perfect nexus for joining my interests in science, research, epidemiology, and public health and I knew that I would eventually become a pathologist; plus, it sounded cool. Rather than jump into a residency program, though, I spent a few years in private practice trying to use what I semi-learned in vet school. To my surprise, I greatly enjoyed practicing in a tiny, funky, all -animal-and-people-types practice on the central coast of CA where I saw animals ranging from ostriches to wolves and did everything from internal medicine to surgery, reception, billing, clean kennels, nursing care, emergencies, and house-calls. I also dealt with people ranging from sweet pet owners who brought me cookies to over-the-top Sylvester Stallone wannabes who didn't pay their bills. These experiences taught me how veterinary medicine is practiced in the "real-world" and have served me well for the rest of my career. Much to the dismay of my boss, I left this practice when I received a grant from the French government to research cat-scratch disease in France for 8 months. I had applied for this grant with my mentor Dr. Bruno Chomel at UC Davis in collaboration with Dr. Henri-Jean Boulouis at the renowned Ecole nationale veterinaire d'Alfort outside of Paris, France. Rhone-Merieux (now Merial) also graciously supported this work. The project was a success: we determined the prevalence of Bartonella organisms infecting French cats and discovered co-infections by multiple Bartonella species. More importantly, though, I also found a great hole-in-the wall French restaurant around the corner from my flat, watched racy movies (at least by U.S. standards) with fellow Parisians in the park, and skied in the Alps, only, I didn't publish on those. Upon conclusion of the project, I figured that I should continue on with my pathology path and enrolled in the NC State anatomic pathology residency program. I thank my mentors at NC State for providing great opportunities to learn and it was quite by accident that at the end of my residency that I found that the only County-run veterinary diagnostic laboratory in the U.S. was hiring another pathologist. The laboratory had started in 1933 in San Diego and had gradually evolved from a poultry and livestock diagnostic laboratory into a diverse lab with strong ties to public health and forensics. My initial plan to stay 2 years, pass board exams and then move on, didn't quite materialize as I am still here, 14 years later, and am now the County Veterinarian and head of the lab. In addition to running the lab, which has moved away from traditional pathology and is now focused on zoonotic vector borne diseases, my roles in the County have included designing and constructing a new 25,000 sq ft laboratory (including BSL3 laboratories), coordinating disaster responses, serving on bioterrorism surveillance teams, studying vector population dynamics, doing public outreach, organizing CE courses, providing rabies consultations, managing staff and budgets, promulgating One Health, learning the politics, limitations and strengths of government, and a host of other duties that don't fit the under a 10X objective or get cut up on the gross floor.

Training in pathology, though, provided me with a strong foundation which I draw upon when making decisions to improve public health. In meetings time and time again, I find that my understanding of diseases and diagnostics allows me to share valuable information and insight with my colleagues, be they epidemiologists, vector ecologists or department directors, which allow us to create better programs for the public. Critical thinking and seeking to understand the pathogenesis of diseases, from the molecular level through to the influences of society and the environment, is how a pathologist thinks and is critical to improving the health of our communities.

